



Simple 8-Step **GUIDE TO MORE** Exhibit *Engagement*

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From Storytelling to ‘Story-Sharing’: your 8-step guide to more engaging exhibits

By Stevie Bales, Experiential Graphic Designer



About Stevie

Hiya! I'm Stevie Bales, a trained designer and lover of all things 'experiential'. As an Experiential Graphic Designer, I love to plan, strategize, and design these 'experiences' for others. Exhibits, Wayfinding Signage, and Self-Guided tours are my specialty.

When not behind a screen, you will find me absorbing the nearest museum, traveling across the world or down the street, pretending to be a Settler of Catan, or trying new craft beer (sometimes with cheese!). I also play role-playing board games, stop at visitor centers on the way in and out, as well as drink wine with pasta or steak (but not pizza, that's weird).

About the Guide

So why did I take the time to make this awesome goodie for you? Well because I know a powerful message is only as good as the way it is told. To take it from storytelling to 'story sharing' takes some effort and a few key steps to get their. I want you to know how, plan and simple. I genuinely believe that any exhibit can be made into a powerful tool just by following a few key tactics. Here they are for you to use.

So what are you waiting for? You know you want, no *need*, to start right now. So close out the email client, step away from the phone, and get ready to go!



How to make Engagement

What makes you connect with something? No really, what makes you connect with your phone? A website? A book? There are two major factors to consider when wanting to create more engagement: Emotional Connectivity and Solid Storytelling. Humans are naturally emotional creatures, it's literally half of what makes us human. We need to feel empathy, sympathy, and genuine understanding from others. When we tap into those things in our visitors, we immediately capture their attention. The second is Storytelling, which our brains are naturally hardwired for. If you make solid stories you will keep your visitors entertained while also teaching, telling, and sharing. They will remember you better for the stories you tell. The next 8-steps are all geared to make your exhibits more emotionally connected as well as tell better stories, thus making your visitors more engaged.

The 8-Steps

1. Define solid goals and make your design based on them.

What do you want your visitors to gain from viewing your exhibit? Whether to learn, understand, or be primed to purchase from you, this goal should inform the design of the entire exhibit. Use your current visitor data to understand what goals your organization should set. Don't have visitor data? Then look to similar organizations as yours.



Idea:

What is the most asked question of your organization? Use that as a starting point for developing your exhibit. Your goal is now to inform your visitors of that very answer using only the exhibit design.

2. Motivate your audience by being specific to them.

Who do you serve? What are they interested in? These questions and others will help you be specific to your audience. You should develop your goals, ideas, content, and design to match what they would expect to see. If you aren't certain of what they may want, just ask! A simple survey can go a long, long way in understanding your visitors.

Example:

Like with most visitor-serving organizations, Balsam Mountain Trust had lots of inquiring questions from its patrons. Most wanted to know more about the local research and have easier access to the data. With that in mind, BMT set forth expanding their nature center with input directly from the community. This community led mindset has led to increased engagement, and the new nature center isn't even open yet.



3. Create flow in your exhibit.

You want an exhibit that makes sense to those who see it and experience it. Keeping a flowing narrative will help your visitor understand and connect with your content. Linear is the obvious choice when telling a story, but remember it isn't the only way! Find interesting ways to communicate your ideas and people will be more likely to return.

Idea:

Besides linear messages, you can also try organizing from various viewpoints, by object on display, and even by theme. Which ever you choose make sure the message is clear is what happens in the beginning, middle, and end. Proper storytelling structure is still VERY important.

4. Create an immersive story.

Start with a specific idea, as we want to avoid information overload. Keep your story simple and skimmable to the eye. Remember you audience as you develop content and design, what will they most connect with? Show some empathy and design an exhibit that really proves you understand your visitors. Maybe even pull at a few heart strings.



Activity:

Get out a sheet of paper and in the middle write down the exhibit *MAIN IDEA* in a circle. Now link that circle to several smaller ones around it. In them, write down the 3-5 sub-ideas that make up the main idea. Do this again to see what micro-ideas make up the main idea. These are now your skimmable themes to use throughout the exhibit.

5. Patterns lead to memorable.

Develop 2-5 patterns, visual or written, that repeat throughout the exhibit. Patterns help people remember things and before you know it your guests will be able to guess what they see next. Although this may sound like a bad thing, remember, we all want to feel 'right' sometimes. Not to mention their eyes will immediately jump to the same locations each time, you can start to inform them easier by knowing exactly where they will look.

6. Create interactives to keep visitors engaged.

Using both digital and manual interaction, you can create a cause for engagement. Use workbooks, digital technology, and even gamification methods to create an exhibit that encourages play and exploration, even adults like to play. Disperse these interaction zones throughout your exhibit for maximum effect and prevent sensory overload.

Side-Note:

Interaction does NOT have to be expensive. I've personally talked to lots of clients that avoid this step because they "have no budget". If you can't afford a bespoke mobile application built for multiple digital platforms, you could opt to build a webapp. This is simply a website built for use on a mobile device and can do all the same things as a traditional. If you can't afford digital tech, you can use manual interactions. Things like coloring sheets, activity workbooks, and even props can give your visitors something tangible to experience.

7. Embrace technology.

I'll say again and again, technology is NOT the enemy. If used correctly technology can create an exhibit that is memorable and smarter than others. It gives you visitors the ability to explore much further than traditional methods in a much shorter time span. Technology does not always have to be expensive either. Touch screens and bespoke apps can sometimes require a small fortune to build, but websites, exploration computers, and even simple machines can be built in house, for less than the cost of more traditional materials to replace it.

Activity:

Make a list of the types of technology you'd like to include in your exhibit. Compare that list to your budget and highlight the ones that are the most important. Now look around your own organization for people who might already know how to implement such things. Hire out a designer to get the best end results, but a DIY built job can often have similar results.



8. Use themes within your exhibit to break up the content.

Especially if you find yourself with a longer or bigger exhibit, you want to find the smaller themes within your larger idea. Sometimes referred to as 'stories within stories', layering your content with themes can aid in explaining your message. These smaller stories can also create perfect point to incorporate interaction and technology.

Final Thoughts

Now that you've completed **From Storytelling to 'Story-Sharing': your 8-step guide to more engaging exhibits** you should begin to implement these tactics into your exhibits and watch as visitors are more engaged and excited to see it. Although this list is short, the thinking and planning it requires isn't easy, so I want to take a second to congratulate you on your efforts.

As you know, this is just the beginning. I love helping organizations just like yours shape environments that orient, educate, and delight their visitors. I'd love to help you create the perfect exhibit. I'd love to hear from you. Ask me questions, get in touch, tell me how this went. You can get in touch with me at design@steviebales.com or reply directly to any Design School email. I can't wait to hear from you and help you on your journey to perfectly engaging exhibits.

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