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DIGITAL EXHIBITIONS

CONCEPTS AND PRACTICES

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CONTENTS

Note from the Authors

This technical leaflet provides broad guidance for the creation of digital exhibitions, defines the relationship between digital exhibitions and digital collections, and identifies strategies for harnessing technology to effectively highlight materials and convey the story being told through the exhibition. We have strived to minimize references to specific technologies and tools, choosing instead to focus on guiding principles of design and implementation. By concentrating firmly on the exhibit itself, and not just the technologies employed, we have prioritized content over the mechanics of creation within a specific toolset.

Introduction

Digital exhibitions are useful tools for increasing exposure to manuscript and archival collections. Visitors are able to explore and utilize collections no matter how far, or close, they may be to the holding institution. Unlike digital collections, which provide access to digital and digitized content, digital exhibitions add context and interpretation through a curated exhibit and carefully crafted narrative text.

As institutions look toward providing increased access to digitized and born-digital content, a well-planned and cohesive digital exhibition strategy is essential to enhance access to these materials. Throughout this document, parallels are made to the creation of physical and digital exhibitions. After all, these essentially have the same purpose – to expose collections to greater audiences and showcase specific collection items. However, the differing distribution methods – exhibit case and web-based platform – cause exhibition curators and designers to reconsider the audience, goals, and expectations for each medium.

This leaflet addresses these considerations and more, with the ultimate goal of encouraging readers to consider or reconsider their approach to digital exhibitions. Are they simply a digital representation of a physical exhibition with little variance from its physical counterpart? Or does the digital exhibition provide more content and context due to the lack of physical limitations?

Given the lack of standards and best practices in the creation and maintenance of digital exhibitions, it can be difficult for exhibition curators to develop a single digital exhibition or a sustainable digital exhibition program. Each institution should develop a set of responsible, sustainable practices that is in-line with institutional goals and resources. This leaflet is divided into three main sections: Planning and Development; Design and Implementation; and Assessment. In each of these sections, we identify strategies and raise questions for institutions to consider.

Planning and Development

The first stage in digital exhibit creation is planning. First, consider if initial planning is at the program-level or the exhibition-level. While it is useful to have an overall program-level plan for digital exhibitions, reality often dictates that planning start at the exhibition-level (sometimes repeatedly) prior to program-level planning taking place.

For program-level planning, consider the following:

- How many digital exhibitions are expected to be developed per year? How often will new exhibitions be launched?
- Will all digital exhibitions be based on in-person or physical exhibitions, or will some exhibitions be exclusively online? If exclusively online, how many per year?
- What resources does my institution have to support the creation and maintenance of digital exhibitions?
- How long will the digital exhibitions remain accessible?
- Should a style guide be created for digital exhibitions, including discussion of institutional branding, consistent navigational elements, exhibition length, etc.
- Is there a preservation plan for digital exhibitions? Should there be one? If so, what steps should be taken during exhibition design and implementation to facilitate long-term preservation?

These questions are often the same questions pondered at the start of an exhibition program utilizing exhibit cases. After all, the essential difference between the physical, in-person exhibition and a digital exhibition is the delivery mechanism and expanded toolset afforded by online resources.

For exhibition-level planning, many of the same questions apply as to program-level planning:

- What is the timeline for the design and implementation of the digital exhibition, including digitization of materials featured in the exhibition?
- Is this digital exhibition a companion to an in-person, physical exhibition? If so, is it exactly the same, or will there be additional content? If there is additional content, where is that content held?
- How long will the digital exhibition be accessible?
- What resources are available to support the creation and maintenance of this exhibition?

Planning on the exhibit-level often incorporates four aspects: theme development; material selection; assessment of technical capabilities and identification of a platform; and metadata creation. Each of these areas is discussed in more depth in the individual sections that follow.

Theme Development

The concept of the digital exhibition often begins with the identification of subject matter to be addressed, or a theme. Kalftovic (2002, p. 12) notes that the most common exhibition idea is the themed exhibition. A *themed exhibition* is centered on and designed to develop a particular concept. Exhibitions may be themed around notable events, anniversaries, specific collections or formats, work done by a parent organization, items perceived as collection treasures, or the communication of a particular message. In many instances, collections serve as the basis for the development of an exhibition topic and theme.

An *idea exhibition* is organized around the exploration of an idea, with collections playing a supportive role in the experience. Idea exhibitions engage in popular topics or issues and are developed to communicate a powerful message or story while delivering multiple perspec-

tives (Molineux, 2014). Whether the exhibition is designed to highlight a specific collection, commemorate an event, or present an idea by threading together material from multiple collections, it must be built upon a solid theme in order to have an impact upon viewers. As Ham (1992, p. 236) states, "Exhibits that are designed first to communicate a theme, and then to look attractive, will be more effective than those that are designed solely to look good."

Often the terms theme and topic are mistakenly used interchangeably. A topic is the subject matter of an exhibition, whereas a theme is the principal message about a topic that is communicated to an audience throughout an exhibition. Ham (1992, p. 38) writes, "The theme always answers the question, "so what?" with respect to the topic." Themes should be specific, convey a single idea (though subthemes may be included in the exhibition in support of the overarching theme), and communicate the overall purpose of the exhibition. As a rule of thumb, viewers should be able to summarize an effective exhibition in one sentence.

Exhibition objectives are equally as important as themes. Like themes, objectives help organize and present content in a streamlined and impactful way. Objectives may fall into three categories: learning objectives, emotional objectives, and behavioral objectives (Toxey/McMillan, 2009, p. 10). Learning objectives correspond to what you want the viewer to know after viewing the exhibition. What knowledge will visitors have gained after interacting with the information presented in the exhibition? Emotional objectives relate to how you want a viewer to respond to a cause or idea presented in the exhibition. What reaction do you seek to elicit from the viewer and why? Behavioral objectives are closely tied to emotional objectives and relate to how you want viewers to utilize the presented information. Simply put, what do you want the viewer to do? Ideally aim for three to five objectives, so as not to dilute the intended effect of the exhibition.

The learning, emotional, or behavioral objectives of the exhibition, along with the design of your exhibition will vary depending upon the content of the exhibit. Kalfatovic (2002, p. 3) outlines five types of exhibition effects to be considered when designing an exhibit:

- Aesthetic: organized around the beauty of objects
- Emotive: designed to elicit an emotion in the viewer
- Evocative: designed to create a specific atmosphere
- Didactic: designed to teach the viewer about a specific topic

- Entertaining: designed for the amusement or enjoyment of the viewer

When determining your exhibition theme and objectives, consider your collection strengths, organizational mission, and targeted audience. Your primary audience will inform everything in your exhibition from content selection, informational depth, and language style to exhibition length and the amount of descriptive text and metadata attached to each item. Organizational mission and goals are also especially important to keep in mind as you identify your objectives and what the intended effects of your exhibition will be.

All of these factors considered together will help you determine how much and what kind of content you need to communicate effectively the purpose and theme of your exhibition. For instance, an exhibition intended to showcase select materials for an audience of potential donors will dramatically differ in length and style from a collection-level exhibition designed to teach a general research audience about the life and work of a particular records creator. How long your exhibition is will be entirely dependent on your overall purpose and objectives. Bear in mind, however, that showcasing a single item is a digital exhibit and not a digital exhibition. While the terms exhibit and exhibition are often used interchangeably, a single item displayed for its own intrinsic, evidential, or aesthetic value is different than a curated selection of content united by a theme.

To summarize, an effective exhibition has a focused theme and clear, mission-driven objectives, and is designed to produce specific effects based on those objectives.

Materials Selection

The selection of materials to be included in the exhibition depends upon the theme and purpose defined in the exhibition plan. Consider the intended effect (e.g. aesthetic, emotive, didactic, etc.) and objectives of your exhibition as you make your selection. Other factors for consideration are impact potential, usage level, uniqueness, availability of existing metadata, diversity, and usage rights. Usage rights, discussed in more detail below, are especially important, as presenting content in a digital environment loosens a repository's control over how materials are reproduced and utilized.

Your exhibition strategy may be to reuse or repurpose existing digital content or to create entirely new digital content. If you plan to create new digital content, consider the format and physical condition of the item as well as any technological issues related to digitization of special or delicate formats. As you select content, determine whether items are in suitable enough shape to withstand handling and maneuvering for digital capture. Furthermore, choose materials for which you have the appropriate digitization equipment. Attempting to digitize special or delicate formats without appropriate equipment (for example, using a flat-bed scanner to capture content from a book with a fragile spine) could be detrimental to an item's physical safety.

- Will scans be created solely for use in this exhibition, or do you anticipate other future applications?

- Will high-quality preservation scans of materials for the exhibition be included as part of an overall collection-level digitization strategy?

- Will high-quality scans be made available for download by viewers?

- Are there any rights considerations for digitized content? Are there permissions that need to be secured for specific items prior to inclusion in the digital exhibition?

Whatever your exhibition theme or purpose may be, remember that "a stunning and dramatic object can, even in an online exhibition, leave vivid impressions on the viewer" (Kalfatovic, 2002, p. 27). That said, be cautious in your approach to selecting content, bearing in mind the physical safety of items you wish to digitize, the amount of time and effort it will take to describe those items once digitized, and, perhaps most importantly, whether you and/or your audience has permission to reproduce and use the selected content in a digital environment.

Technical Capabilities and Platform

Before beginning any digital project, it is essential to take stock of available technology to determine whether you have sufficient support for the creation and delivery of your digital exhibition. Technology resources may include digitization equipment, photo editing software, digi-

tal asset management systems, archives information management applications, web publishing platforms, and the personnel to operate and manage these technologies. Determining your organization's level of technical capability may be as simple as making a list of technology resources or as complex as conducting a technology needs assessment. Whatever the level of detail, an evaluation of your organization's technology resources and digital preparedness can be a useful tool for initiating a larger conversation about your organization's actual and preferred level of technical capability, and may be applied to digital projects other than the creation and maintenance of digital exhibitions.

A critical first step in your exhibition planning is to determine whether a delivery infrastructure is already in place to facilitate access to the digital exhibition. The available platform(s) may impact the design and content of your exhibition. Design your exhibition with your platform's capabilities in mind. For organizations without an established delivery infrastructure, consider a platform that is consistent with your organization's policies, budget, IT infrastructure, and available technical expertise. Speak with administration before using ready-made hosted web applications for creating digital exhibitions, as your organization may have policies in place regarding where its digital content may be deposited.

If your exhibition strategy includes the digitization of materials, take note of the formats you can reasonably accommodate with in-house equipment. Allow this knowledge to guide your content selection, especially if outsourcing digitization for fragile or special formats is not an option due to budgetary or time constraints.

Determining technical capabilities and platform prior to beginning a digital project will assist you in structuring your project timeline and budget, as well as help you select materials for digitization that can be easily accommodated by your available equipment. Identifying any technical limitations at the outset of your project will mitigate the likelihood of having to alter your exhibition plans mid-process.

Metadata Management

Metadata in a digital exhibition consists of object-level metadata for digital objects as well as descriptive text within the exhibition itself. Ideally, object- or item-level metadata will already exist for previously digitized items. For those items requiring new metadata, plan for at least a

core metadata record for each item with the prospect of creating full records when time allows.

The types of metadata schemes used to describe and manage digital content vary among organizations. There are three main types of metadata: descriptive metadata, structural metadata, and administrative metadata. Descriptive metadata describes a resource for discovery and identification purposes. Structural metadata describes types, versions, relationships, and other characteristics of digital materials. Administrative metadata provides information to help manage a resource and has several subsets, including rights management and preservation metadata. This leaflet does not focus on metadata generated in the capture, management, or preservation of digital content. Rather, it focuses on descriptive metadata, which is the primary type of metadata you will attach to each object in your exhibition.

Simply put, descriptive metadata is essential for telling the viewer what he or she is looking at! Descriptive text within the exhibition itself may situate an item within the overall theme and explain why that item is contextually important, but it does not provide the viewer with item-specific details. Such details are essential for helping a viewer comprehend the discrete physical item he or she is viewing in digital format. At a minimum, a viewer should be able to identify an item's title, creator, creation date, format, dimensions (if applicable), and repository/collection where the item is located.

Usage rights is a critical metadata field, as this information lets the viewer know how content presented in your exhibition may be reproduced and utilized. Usage rights should reflect your institution's reproduction policy and any copyright restrictions on your content. You may also wish to include a preferred citation for materials that can be reproduced and used by your audience in order to properly credit your repository and enhance exposure to your resources.

If you have staff and time resources at your disposal, the addition of individual descriptions, format specific metadata, and subject headings to the metadata records will enhance the user experience. For organizations that have produced multiple exhibitions, using a platform that supports searching across metadata fields will improve discovery and enable viewers to draw connections between exhibitions and other digital content within your platform.

Design and Implementation

Digital exhibitions require thought and care in the development and implementation of their designs. Well-executed digital exhibitions can be powerful tools in promoting institutions and their collections. Consideration of layout and placement of the exhibit as a whole, and not just on an item-by-item basis, results in a better experience for visitors. Factors such as overall layout, device compatibility, clear navigation options, attractive color and font choices, and a balanced appearance are valued by visitors and encourage exploration not only of the exhibit itself, but also of additional areas of the website. These factors are not always consciously noticed by visitors, but the absence of these qualities is noticed and can shorten the time visitors spend in the exhibition despite the presence of engaging content.

Layout

Thoughtful design and layout of a digital exhibition are critical to its success. With rapid changes in technology and the variety of devices and software in use, consider an exhibition layout focused on content rather than specific technologies. This approach, referred to as progressive enhancement, is a "Zen approach to web design: Control what you can up until the point at which you must relinquish control and let go." (Gustafson, 2016). Progressive enhancement is ultimately about delivering content without technological restrictions or barriers. To apply this concept, look for features and tools that will complement the exhibition content without compromising the user experience.

In keeping with these concepts, consider the following:

- What are the goals of the exhibition layout?
- How do you envision visitors moving through the exhibition?
- Do you have an exhibition template that will be used?
- What variations to the template will be applied within the exhibition to accommodate specific types of materials or subtopics?
- Does your exhibition design incorporate institutional branding, if a template is not available?

- How will potential researchers contact the institution to inquire about specific digital objects within the exhibition and how will they identify those objects in a request?

Regularly reviewing the goals of the exhibition to ensure that they are being met is essential. Check in often during the design and layout process and modify these goals as needed.

Navigation

Users can discover and explore digital exhibitions in many ways. Exhibition creators can drive navigation to a limited extent through layout, if that is desired. However, some users will follow their own path and should be allowed to do so if that is their preference. For example, a well-known international home furnishings store controls how customers move through their store via a series of well-defined paths winding through the showroom. However, there are 'hidden shortcuts' that frequent and savvy customers often take to efficiently get to what they want, thereby allowing customers the ability to control their own destiny within the retail space.

Similarly, digital exhibitions should follow that same model – have a clear path for controlled, systematic exploration, while still allowing for independent exploration of the exhibition content. The allowance for independent exploration is also a critical component based on the web discoverability of the exhibition, where an external link may not deposit visitors at the entrance to the exhibition, but rather to a page deep within the exhibition. The assumption that all users of your exhibition will begin at the initial landing page is not realistic and does not take into account the many ways users find web-based content. Clear navigation to assist those users in finding their way to the start of the exhibition is critical.

Navigational elements within the exhibition should be clear cues as to how to enter, move within, and exit an exhibition. Consider the following: how will movement within the exhibit be driven – by a series of "next" and "previous" cues, by a navigational menu, or other method? Where will navigational elements be placed within the template – at the top, bottom, side, or other location? How will visitors go back to a previous section from within the exhibit? If users decide to use the back and forward buttons on their web browser, will those browser buttons be an effective navigation alternative?

As is the case with other elements of the exhibit, reviewing and optimally revising navigational pathways during design will ensure that the final product satisfies the needs of its audience.

Accessibility

Accessibility can be defined in many ways. When considering accessibility, be sure your definition is clear to all partners in the project, including administration. Does accessibility mean compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act or similar legislation? Does accessibility mean open availability to a large audience? Is there a local, institutional definition of accessibility for digital projects that should be employed? Is it a combination of several definitions? Strive to make your content accessible to audiences with a range of visual, hearing, motor, and cognitive abilities. Taking a more inclusive approach bolsters your impact while also providing added benefits such as increased visibility to search engines and being device-agnostic.

Some specific points to consider related to accessibility:

- Minimize contrast levels and provide alternative cues when color is used to convey information
- Allow for text to be resized without loss of content or usability
- Include image and multimedia captions, transcripts, and alt text
- Use a navigation structure that is keyboard accessible and allows users to control the timing of their visit

The [Web Consortium Accessibility Guidelines](#) (WCAG) are technical accessibility standards for international web content from the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) (ISO/IEC 40500). These principles can assist in planning and implementing your exhibit in an accessible manner, and a number of guideline, techniques, and educational documents are freely available from WAI as well.

Also consider whether the exhibition is compatible with accessibility aids, such as screen readers. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Are there modifications within the design that may facilitate the use of accessibility aids?

- What institutional resources are available to provide support to ensure the accessibility of websites?

- Does technology support exist within your institution to provide captioning services or provide specific guidance and consulting to ensure accessibility for web-based content?

For example, screen readers move through web pages in a linear fashion, responding to punctuation, acronyms and images in specific ways. Consider how these devices generally respond to web page elements and how they might apply to the presentation of your exhibition, making modifications as desired. Ensure that the definition of accessibility is clearly defined in the exhibition plan and reflected in the objectives.

Color Palettes

Color considerations for web design are more limited than those for print design, and your chosen platform may further restrict your options for color customization. Selecting hexadecimal web colors and avoiding fluorescents, busy patterns, and backgrounds is essential to ensure readability of text and enhance visitor experiences. To achieve a unified appearance across the exhibit, choose one color palette for the entire exhibit and stick to it, while adding some neutral colors for balance.

Several online color selection tools are available to assist in the creation of a pleasing color palette for your exhibition, and many platforms include themes with pre-set color palettes. Using available options, experiment with the best fit for your content to find a complement that doesn't distract. Some strategies for avoiding common color palette pitfalls include:

- Complementary colors will probably clash too much for a pleasing foreground/background combination

- Combining colors that are neither opposite one another, nor close enough to be next to each other on the color wheel will also result in a color clashing appearance

Keep in mind that color can hold different connotations for different audiences and even different individuals based on context, culture, and personal experience. Depending on the audience's device and display settings, users may see the same colors differently as well.

Page Design and Image Considerations

Page design is of utmost importance, as humans relate emotionally to design just as much as they do to content. A good exhibition page design is both pleasing to the eye and easy to navigate, engineered with the vision of the page in mind. Symmetrical pages are the simplest to design, but they run the risk of becoming flat or boring if the design is too even. The *golden ratio*, a widely-used 1:1.61 ratio found in nature and applied in many mathematical and visual fields, is often used in web design to create a balanced feel. Use it to determine how large different areas of your page should be, such as the relationship between the content and the sidebar, or to place elements within the page.

One simple way to divide up the page, based on the golden ratio, is to draw three equidistant lines horizontally and vertically to create a six-celled grid, then place the elements of your layout using these lines as guides. While placement of page elements is important, page designs should ultimately always be responsive rather than fixed (more on this later).

Creating spatial tension is another way to help your page design feel balanced and appear attractive to the audience. Rather than focusing on the center of the page, create a sense of direction by using unequal margins, incorporating white space of various sizes, and paying attention to the edges of your pages. Whether you employ a traditional or trendy approach to lay out your page, the key to designing your exhibition is to achieve enough contrast to create interest, but not so much that it causes confusion.

A balanced text-to-image ratio keeps the audience engaged without overwhelming them. Line height for text is a good first consideration; make sure your lines are spaced correctly. From there, consider paragraphs and other blocks of content, using increasingly larger spaces for

each concept. Vertical spacing should be close enough between paragraphs and related concepts to achieve unity, but not so close as to be difficult to read. Paragraphs should appear separate, yet related.

Your use of images will play a big part in your exhibition design, so be conscious of how image formats and sizes affect display. Compressed file types are preferred, as their smaller file sizes will load faster on the page, but don't apply so much compression that image quality is visibly reduced when viewed at the desired size. Appropriate image dimensions are large enough to allow users to see enough detail, yet not so large that the rest of the page is difficult to view or text is obscured. Consider allowing users to click on thumbnails to view larger versions of images.

The length of each page depends on your individual exhibition aesthetic. Today's users are often used to clicking or swiping through several pages, as well as scrolling down one continuous page. Use headings to structure your page if you have a large amount of text, making sure that each heading appears less important than the one above it. Use consistent hierarchy for headings in different sections of the exhibition to guide audiences through the content and clearly communicate to them which information is most important.

If you have a large exhibition or an exhibition with multiple sections, you may decide to change the layout quite a bit from page-to-page. Perhaps you want to alert the viewer that they've entered a new phase of the exhibition, or have so many pages that too much consistency would cause boredom. Ultimately these choices will depend on your content, your platform's capabilities, and your audience.

Responsive Design

Responsive design is a technique that adapts web content to display on the wide range of devices available to today's users. Using a fluid, proportion-based grid system and flexible imaging display, responsive design improves content rendering during access. It is recommended to use an exhibition platform with support for responsive design in order to enable visitors to have the best experiences possible, regardless of the devices they are using.

In developing the exhibition, consider how many devices might be used to access the content. These devices may range from mobile phones to large computers incorporating a range of display sizes, resolutions, and input devices. Making sure your content is available across platforms and mediums is a critical accessibility issue. It is near impossible to tailor the design of an exhibition to one device type or screen size.

In implementing responsive design, keep your menu or primary navigation simple to accommodate small screens and make sure it jumps out on the page. Consider using only web-safe fonts to ensure they are compatible on all systems and devices. Likewise, avoid technologies that are only available for personal computers or specific operating systems. If including forms, be sure they are as simple as possible, as filling one out can be a daunting task on a small screen.

Whenever possible, incorporating principles of simplification and customization in your application of responsive design will ensure that your content fits the needs of your expected audience.

Labels and Metadata

The balance of text to images is essential to the presentation of your exhibition content. In particular, labels and metadata associated with images require some thought and consideration.

- What font and font size will be used for image labels?
- Will there be a size or character limit for the labels?
- How much metadata will you display for each individual item? The full metadata set, or a few core fields that are of main interest to your users?

These are just a few examples of potential labeling questions that must be answered during design to ensure that the exhibition effectively showcases its content and conveys its objectives to visitors.

Implementation and Launch

With the planning, selection, and design complete, the implementation of the exhibition is well underway. Prior to launch, be sure to go through the exhibit as if you were a visitor, but with a more critical eye. Recruiting colleagues with related backgrounds in museum studies, web design, or other allied fields can bring additional valuable feedback to the table, as many principles of digital exhibition design are drawn from these disciplines.

- Do the individual pages within the exhibition have the expected feel and appearance?
- Assess the appearance of the site on a variety of devices and screen sizes. Does the exhibition per form well on a variety of devices and screen sizes?
- Is navigation within the site clear and intuitive, within the abilities of the platform?
- Are the color palettes acceptable across devices, taking into consideration variations in color dis play between devices?
- Are metadata entries and labels within the exhibition complete, accurate, and assigned to the correct digital objects?

The above questions are just a few that might be reviewed prior to the launch of the exhibition. Consider developing an exhibition implementation checklist to ensure consistent practice across all exhibitions. This checklist may consist of elements to verify prior to launching a digital exhibition – similar to a punch list during a home renovation process.

Publicity Plan

One of the keys to a successful exhibition is the development of a publicity plan. The publicity plan is used to inform potential visitors of the exhibition and can be adjusted to allow for various levels of publicity based on the content and intended audience for the exhibition.

It is helpful to have a generic publicity kit available to use as a template for individual exhibitions. This kit often includes:

- Sample press releases

- Institutional media contacts

- Electronic distribution platforms (including social media)

- Timeline for production of associated materials requiring assistance of other areas (graphic design, catering, institutional communications office)

- Sample timeline for distribution of press releases, announcements, and advertising

This kit can be used as a starting point for creating the publicity plan for specific projects and serves as a resource directory.

When considering the publicity for a specific exhibition, think about the following:

- Does the exhibition have a relationship with another event or activity occurring at the same or similar time?

- Is there a specific constituent group to whom this exhibition will appeal to in particular?

- Will there be an in-person event associated with the exhibition?

- Is there an opportunity to develop relationships with potential donors through this exhibition?

Once the desired elements for the publicity plan are identified, create the publicity plan. The plan will include:

- Timeline for all actions associated with the publicity and associated events related to the exhibition

- Final press releases and messages to electronic distribution channels

- Contact information for all entities participating in the event(s) including specific communications office/media contacts, event and catering contacts, etc.

Many institutions have marketing and communications expertise that may be utilized for the promotion of larger exhibitions, but may also be a rich resource for institutional policies and

generating basic templates. Utilize these local resources to refine the messaging to be consistent with other institutional messaging.

The creation of the publicity plan for exhibitions is a key element to ensure the success of the exhibition. Partnering with institutional and local contacts and using electronic distribution platforms maximize the opportunities for discovery of the exhibition and the collections represented within it.

Assessment

Rather than waiting until after implementation to measure an exhibit's success, front-end evaluation of the exhibit's objectives should begin during the design phase. A small sample audience can help pinpoint any obstacles affecting accessibility or comprehension. You will want to know what your intended audience already knows about your topic, and how that will affect their perception of your exhibition. Be sure not to oversimplify your content or assume a baseline level of knowledge that may not exist. Mockups of content, navigation, page design, and other elements can also be tested at this stage. Additional assessment can occur during the implementation phase as well.

If at all possible, include those with physical and intellectual disabilities in your sample for assessment. Often these individuals will find more mistakes in your exhibit than able users, in addition to helping you pinpoint accessibility failure points.

Collect as many analytics as possible, especially data that helps determine how deeply audiences are engaging with the content. Use online tools or diagnostics included with the exhibition platform to track usage and audience statistics. These valuable reporting tools can be used to discover which exhibition sections and items are attracting the most attention, where users are located geographically, how users move through the exhibition, and other valuable data. Assessment methods may also include surveys, focus groups, and individual interviews with a sample audience. Surveys are easier to implement and allow data to be collected from a larger population, while focus groups and interviews result in more detailed and engaged feedback, though it tends to be more anecdotal.

Long-Term Preservation and Access

The long-term preservation and access of digital exhibitions should be addressed as part of broader digital access and digital preservation plans. Applying established practices to the access to and preservation of digital exhibitions brings a consistency of practice across all collection materials.

Consider the following questions:

- Is there value in providing long-term access to this exhibition?

- What criteria are in place for making the determination of long-term access to digital exhibitions?

- How will the digital exhibition be discoverable?

- What is the strategy to provide long-term access to the digital exhibition?

- Does the institution currently have the resources available to provide long-term access to the digital exhibition? Can these tools be utilized for the long-term access for the digital exhibition?

As with other materials covered within the scope of the digital preservation plan, digital exhibits should be clearly defined and a strategy determined for long-term preservation and access. Some specific points to consider include:

- Are digital exhibitions considered part of the institutional collections, or are they considered part of the administrative records of an organization and subject to local records management practices?

- What resources are available for the preservation of digital exhibitions?

- What technologies are employed as part of the exhibition that may require specific attention to ensure long-term access and may require migration to an alternate format prior to depositing into a long-term preservation system?

Also consider what administrative records related to the creation of the digital exhibition should be retained. Some points to consider include:

- Is there value in retaining the records generated in the conceptual and implementation phases of the exhibition? If so, how will those records be maintained?
- Is there a provision within current records management series for the retention of exhibition files? If not, consider creating a series for these records and establishing a retention period for these files.

The long-term preservation and access of digital exhibition files should follow established policies and procedures both in terms of local records management practices and access and preservation guidelines of similarly formatted materials within the collections.

Conclusion

The creation of a digital exhibition is far beyond the re-creation of a physical exhibition or the posting of digital content online. Plan your approach to each of the elements discussed in this leaflet before beginning a digital exhibition project or program. Though it may seem a bit counterintuitive, a deliberate and thoughtful method of design lends itself to optimal flexibility and creativity far more than an ad hoc approach. By keeping a firm grasp on the parameters of your exhibition, you can insure that your exhibition team is making the maximum impact in the timeliest manner, as well as making it easier to implement any necessary changes after the fact. Proper documentation of your efforts may also inform future exhibitions and assist in advocating for digital exhibition resources. What worked? What didn't work? What might you want to try differently next time?

While choice of platform or limited technical resources may restrict how deeply the exhibition can be customized, attention to the points raised in this leaflet can assist in choosing the best available options, themes, or templates. Though not all exhibitions will take the same linear approach described here, attention to the aforementioned considerations is important regardless. Material selection, platform selection, design, and implementation are critical factors for making any digital exhibit both polished and professional, but the topics outlined in

this leaflet are in no way an exhaustive list of considerations. The more questions you can ask of yourself and your exhibit team, the better.

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Grace Barth received her MLIS from the University of South Carolina and has been working with digital collections for almost a decade. Currently she is the Head of Digital Collections at James Madison University, where she leads the digitization, description, and preservation of unique materials held by the library, manages the repositories where that content resides, and ensures optimal patron access to digital collections. She also oversees the creation of digital exhibitions and works with library colleagues to respond to the changing paradigm of scholarly communication. Grace's background is in visual resources, with an emphasis on digitization, metadata, and open source software. Grace's research interests include digital exhibition tools and the evolving nature of digital scholarship.

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