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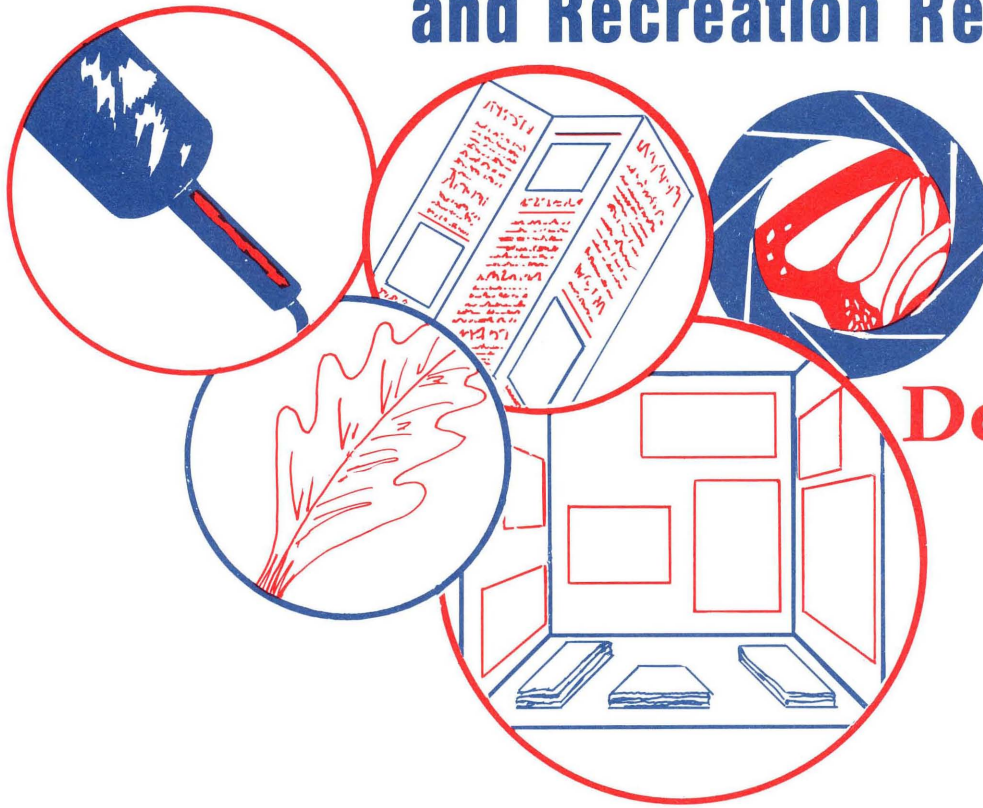
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Marketing Your Community Park and Recreation Resources – Developing Exhibits
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Marketing Your Community Park and Recreation Resources



Developing Exhibits

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So you want to produce an exhibit for your organization! Great! But before you start, there are some things you need to know. First, you need to know what an exhibit is. You see exhibits all the time. They can be found in places such as shopping malls, fairs, airports, schools, museums, and parks. Yet, if you were asked to describe an exhibit would you say:

- a glass case with objects inside it?
- a collection of objects with labels attached?
- photographs displayed on a board?
- a group of objects displayed with enough written information to be a book?
- a sign with only words on it?

If you were to say that an exhibit is one of the above, you are only partially right. An exhibit is much more than just a display. An exhibit tells a story in addition to displaying objects. It is three-dimensional and provides both depth and perspective to the objects it uses. Exhibits are very versatile in the number of ways they can tell a story. They can be designed to be handled, smelled or listened to, as well as read. Finally, just as a good story has *one* major plot, or theme, so does a good exhibit. The theme of an exhibit is the *one* point, or message, that you want to get across to your audience.

There are many different types of exhibits. They can range from a simple aquarium to a complex model. Yet, all exhibits can be classified into five broad categories:

- 1) Flatwork – A flatwork exhibit is a two-dimensional flat panel that uses both labeling and illustrations and/or photographs to tell a story. The photographs are used to approximate 3-dimensionality.
- 2) Object exhibits – This type of exhibit uses original objects or replicas to tell a story. One advantage of this type of exhibit is that the objects can be protected while on display.
- 3) Dioramas – Through the use of models and curved, painted backgrounds to add a sense of depth, dioramas are used to illustrate events, natural scenery or facilities.
- 4) Models – Models are used to represent objects that are too large or too small to be shown in their original size. A model is usually used to show equipment, architectural features, or topographical features.
- 5) Natural exhibits – A natural exhibit uses live plants or animals. Examples are aquariums and terrariums.

Basic Exhibit Principles

To create effective exhibits, follow these eight principles:

- 1) Stick to one theme.
- 2) Be targeted towards a specific audience.
- 3) Be brief.
- 4) Be simple to read and understand.
- 5) Be legible.
- 6) Grab people's attention.
- 7) Unite all objects, text, and other materials to present one story.
- 8) Be easy to follow, or flow, from point to point and from beginning to end.

How do you design an exhibit to meet all these principles? The answer is in good planning! Producing an exhibit can be divided into four stages:

- 1) The Planning Stage
- 2) The Design Stage
- 3) The Construction Stage
- 4) The Evaluation Stage

This bulletin will take you through these stages to help you produce an effective exhibit.

Step 1 — The Planning Stage

There are seven things to consider when planning an exhibit:

1) Do you really want an exhibit?

Is using an exhibit the best way to present your message to your audience? Exhibits have the following advantages:

- a) Using an exhibit allows you to use original objects and to protect them while they are on display.
- b) Visitors can move through your exhibit at their own pace.
- c) Any object can be enlarged or reduced.
- d) They are always available to people when in place.
- e) They can free staff for other programs and activities.
- f) They can bring the out-of-doors inside and save natural objects from abuse.

They also have the following disadvantages:

- a) Exhibits are impersonal. They eliminate personal interaction with staff and cannot answer questions.
- b) Exhibits are not good for relating long or complicated messages.
- c) Exhibits have no souvenir value. People cannot take them home.

2) What is your theme going to be?

The exhibit theme is the main point you want your audience to remember. To develop your theme, start out with a general topic and narrow it down to one main point that you want to get across. Then, take this

main point and state it in a sentence. Be sure that it is stated clearly and concisely. Example: You run a camp in Northern Michigan. You have decided to develop an exhibit for a camping exposition. What would your theme be? If you said, "my camp," you are wrong. Why? Because your camp is the topic of your exhibit. The theme would be what you want to tell people *about* your camp. If you wanted to tell people that your camp has a unique combination of modern bath facilities and secluded camp sites, your theme might be:

"Joe's campground offers both the luxury of modern bath facilities and the privacy of secluded campsites."

Everything in your exhibit would relate to this theme.

3) What are your objectives for your exhibit?

Purposes and objectives are statements of the impact you want to have on viewers of your exhibit. Purposes are general statements of direction while objectives are the specific things you want your audience to know or feel or do.

Example:

You want to do an exhibit on good deer hunting areas in Michigan. You decide to stress those areas that do not get a lot of hunter use.

Theme:

"There are a lot of good deer hunting areas that are not getting much use by hunters."

Purpose:

"To make hunters aware of these little used good hunting areas."

Objective:

"Increase the number of hunters using these little used areas by 10%."

Purposes and objectives are the guidelines along which you will develop your message. To work for you, they need to be stated as precisely as possible.

4) Who is your audience?

The next step is to decide who you want to reach with your message. Who do you want your audience to be? Knowing your audience is as important as deciding that you want to produce an exhibit. Knowing the characteristics of your potential audience will help you determine what concepts to cover, the terminology to use, and appropriate exhibit design. Important characteristics are:

1) Social/economic background: urban? rural? interests? families? activities?

2) Familiarity with your message: beginners? amateurs? repeat users? locals?

3) Age and education: preschoolers? adolescents? mature adults? amount of education? educational specialty?

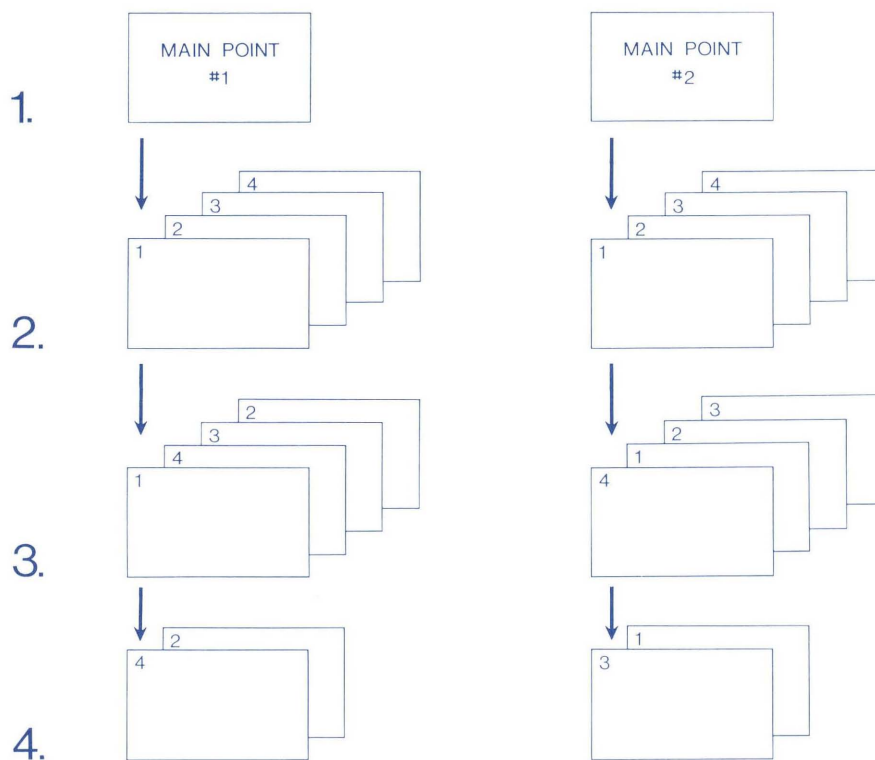


fig. A Diagram of how the Index Card System works

4) Physical condition: where is “eye level”? height of audience? range of head movement? wheelchairs? are people standing or sitting?

5) **What is the story you are trying to tell?**

Now you are ready to develop your message, or story. Your theme becomes the starting point for developing your storyline. Any information that is used in your story must be directly tied to your theme. Your objectives are guidelines for developing your story.

There are many ways to develop a story. One useful way is to use an index card system (fig. A). To do this requires four steps:

1) Decide on the major points that will clearly and quickly convey your theme and write each one out on a 3 x 5 index card. Keep the number to a minimum - under three!

2) For each main point, brainstorm secondary points that support or explain the main point and write out each secondary point on a 3 x 5 index card.

3) Organize and sequence each main point and its secondary points in a logical order.

4) Look through each group and remove any secondary point that does not relate in a clear and concise manner to the main point or to your goals and objectives; sort until there are only 1 or 2 cards left for each main point.

6) **What objects and labels should you use?**

The next step is to decide what objects you are going to use to tell your story. Examples of objects include photographs, historical artifacts, animals (live or mounted), and labels. The most important criterion for selecting objects is that they tell your story. Displaying 50 different rocks simply because you have them does not make an effective exhibit. Do you have the objects you need? Where can you get those you don't have?

A second step in selecting objects for your exhibit involves deciding what kind of words or labels you need to convey your message. A label is like a highway directional sign. It guides and directs a person through an exhibit.

There are three kinds of labels: the title, sub-titles, and story labels. Each one corresponds to a specific part of your story. The title is used to state the exhibit theme. Sub-title labels are used to relate the main points of the exhibit. The story labels are used to relate the secondary points.

Yet, just as it is possible to get lost on a highway without clear directions, so it is possible to get lost in the message of an exhibit if the labelling is not clearly understood. For labelling to be clear it must:

A. Be brief

On average, people spend between 30 and 40 seconds at an exhibit. If they are standing, it may be less. Here are tips for keeping your labels brief:

- 1) Do not overlabel your exhibit.
- 2) Keep the number of words per label to a minimum: Titles use 6 to 8 words, subtitles and story labels use less than 25 words.
- 3) Be sure to present your main point at the beginning of your label.
- 4) Make each line of text shorter than the line before it.

B. Be easy to understand. Do not use technical jargon or abstract vocabulary.

C. Be legible. Four factors can affect the legibility of your exhibit:

- 1) Lettering size: Calculate the viewing distance of the audience. For a viewing distance of 3 to 6 feet, the recommended lettering size would be:
Title 1 to 3 inches
Sub-titles – 1/2 inch, (minimum)
Story label – 1/4 inch, (minimum)
For a viewing distance over six feet, double the letter size for every three feet of increase. Do not use typewritten labels. Typewriter print is too small and will look ragged when enlarged.
- 2) Style of lettering: Ornamental or flowery lettering is difficult to read. The easiest style to read is sans serif or gothic. For examples of these and other letter styles see your local printer. Use both capital and lower case letters in your labels because they are much easier to read than all capital letters.
- 3) Lettering and label colors: Choose colors that relate to your theme (red for fire, browns for rustic). Use dark lettering on a light background. Avoid black and white lettering. If you need help or want more suggestions on how to choose colors, contact your local paint store for assistance. Many paint stores have an interior designer on staff to answer your questions.
- 4) Line spacing: Careful line spacing makes labels easier to read.

7) What materials and tools do you have available to build your exhibit?

You can make exhibits from anything. Your only limits are your imagination, your budget, and what you can scrounge! At this stage you need to assess what materials you need and what you have available to you.

Some of the more commonly used materials are plywood, particleboard, upson board, pegboard, masonite, plastics, fabrics, glass, metals, paint, various fastening devices, labeling supplies, and lettering kits.

Many of the tools you will need can be found right in your basement. Saws, hammers, screws, and glue are things that many people already have.

8) What is your budget?

This is the ultimate limiting factor. You need to have a clear picture of what you can spend so that you can choose between alternatives in exhibit design.

Step 2 — The Design Stage

Now that the planning stage is complete you are ready to design your exhibit. There are a number of things to be considered when deciding on a design:

- 1) Amount of available space
- 2) Type and size of exhibit
- 3) Arrangement of objects and labels

The arrangement of objects and labels is critical to the effectiveness of an exhibit. Arrangement is an important attention getter and will have an impact on exhibit unity and flow.

The exhibit title should be an effective attention getter. It should be the first thing someone sees in an exhibit. Catchy phrases and questions are good to use for titles because they grab people's attention by raising their curiosity. **Never use the name of your organization as the primary exhibit title.**

EXAMPLES:

“Come to where the air is clean and the lakes are blue!”

or

“Come to Michigan, it's all here waiting for you!”

or

“Fun in the sun with great people, too!”

Once you have the attention of your audience, you need to keep it. A good way to do that is through the use of action oriented words in subtitles and story labels. Action verbs and adjectives will help keep viewing minds and imaginations involved with the story. Another way to grab and keep attention with labels is through the use of bold faced lettering.

The arrangement of objects in the exhibit can help keep and focus attention. Emphasis can be placed on different objects through physical arrangement or use of lighting. Another way to use objects to draw attention is to show them as they would have been used by people.

Color is an effective attention getter. Here are some tips on choosing exhibit colors:

- Always make sure that color choices relate to your theme.
- Light colors make objects look bigger than they really are; dark colors make them look smaller.

- Reds, oranges, and yellow are good for adding a sense of warmth or activity to an object. Blues add a sense of coolness or passiveness.
- Use color intensity to get and direct people's attention. High intensity colors, such as red, catch people's eyes and pull them toward the color and the object or label.

Motion and sound can be used in exhibits to draw attention. Moving parts or unfamiliar or unexpected sounds can make your exhibit stand out. They can also fascinate people and hold their attention.

Blank space is another tool in exhibit design. The more blank space around labels and objects, the quicker and easier a person will be able to focus on them. If your exhibit is going to be competing with other exhibits, more blank space will likely attract more people to your exhibit. Using blank space also helps keep your story to the basic points you want to cover. A lot of blank space means that there are fewer labels or objects.

Objects and labels need to be arranged so that they convey a sense of unity to the viewer. Unity deals with the exhibit's tie or relationship to its theme. Do all materials contribute to the story? All materials used in the exhibit must also reflect the theme. For your exhibit to be effective it must present, and look like, one idea. If your story and materials do not reflect your theme, your audience will walk away without your message.

Finally, arrange exhibit material to facilitate smooth flow from beginning to end. Smooth flow means that one idea follows another in logical succession. After all, you are trying to tell a story. In addition, lay out all information presented in a clockwise pattern, moving from left to right. This is how most people in our society read and how other visual materials, like books, are laid out.

4) Maintenance needs

How will you keep it clean or replace damaged parts? Will you need any special cleaning products or other special supplies? Can you get them? If you cannot insure proper maintenance, you may want to reconsider your design.

Step 3 — The Construction Stage

Now that you have planned and designed your exhibit or exhibit series, it is time to lay it out to see if it is really what you want. This is known as making a mock-up. A mock-up is a blueprint of what your exhibit or series should look like. A mock-up is usually done on a large piece of poster board and includes the following:

- 1) A layout of your exhibit design, showing where your objects and labels will be placed.
- 2) Labels with the actual text to be used.

3) Actual colors to be used.

4) Actual dimensions of your exhibit.

The second step in exhibit construction is building a scale model to double check dimensions, layout and viewing distance. Use simple materials like index cards, straight pins, and toothpicks. Include cutout models of people to check your scale. By doing this, you will likely catch, and be able to correct, little problems in your design before you construct your exhibit. If you skip this stage, you may be unpleasantly surprised when you begin actual construction.

You have come to the end of the process. The final step is the actual construction. If you have followed all the steps listed above, you should have a terrific exhibit.

Step 4 — Evaluation

An exhibit is never really finished. As you begin to use your exhibit, observe your audience. Do people stop at your exhibit? How long do they stay? Do viewers do whatever it is you wanted them to according to your objectives? Talk to some viewers. See what they find interesting or confusing in your exhibit. Be willing to use this information to change your exhibit if there are problems. Finally, be willing to change it even if there are no problems. No single exhibit should be used forever.

Community Resources

An essential skill in developing exhibits is that of creative scrounging. Many things you need can be found in your home or neighborhood or community. This includes design and graphic assistance as well as donations of materials, both new and used. Use your imagination and planning, designing, and constructing your exhibit can become a true organization or community effort.

Conclusion

Good exhibits take a great deal of thought and planning. Don't forget the basic principles of exhibit design presented earlier in this bulletin. Your exhibit represents *you* to those who view it. Make it good and make it count!

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