

Practice Makes Perfect:

4 Keys to Exhibit Prototyping Success

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Practice Makes Perfect



4 KEYS TO EXHIBIT PROTOTYPING SUCCESS

If you've ever cut out a piece of cardboard the size of an exhibit graphic panel, and taped it to a wall to see if it's at a readable height, that's prototyping. Creating a beta version of a digital interactive and inviting children to play with it is prototyping too.

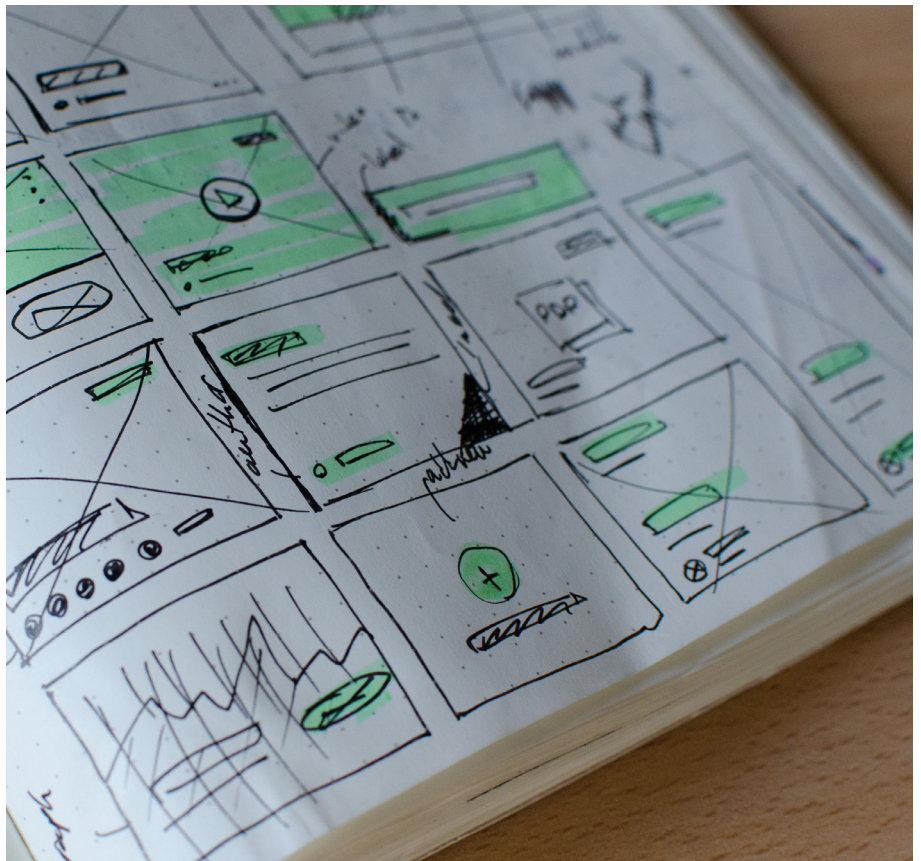
Prototyping museum exhibits during the design effort can include many things, from sharing surveys with prospective museum visitors to constructing mockups confirming durability, and from testing the tone of exhibit writing with a friend to setting up video projectors and complex AV systems. But the purpose is always the same: to test ideas during the design process so that modifications can be made that will improve the final product.

Although prototyping can be done anywhere, from the design team's conference room to the fabrication shop, the ideal location is within the museum environment. This allows the exhibit development team to observe and ask questions of real visitors, young and old, and of many different interests and abilities.

As Elizabeth Merritt, AAM's Vice President for Strategic Foresight and Founding Director of the Center for the Future of Museums, shared in her 2017 Trendswatch article, *Failing Toward Success: the Ascendancy of Agile Design*, museums that create and test prototypes aren't just testing the functionality of their designs. They are also engaging their audiences in ways that can "humanize the museum and make the audience feel invested in the outcome."

She also suggests that “in times of change and uncertainty, rapid prototyping and iterative design — trying small, fast experiments, testing their successes, and adjusting accordingly — entails less risk in the long run than investing huge amounts of resources implementing one, theoretically perfect plan.”

Incorporating prototyping into your exhibition design process should be intentional and planned — not an after-thought hoping to correct questionable design decisions, but one that tests ideas along the way, fostering the best and most effective design solutions. Here are four tips for making your exhibit prototyping efforts a success.





No. 1 | Show Me the Money!

Prototyping costs should be planned for and worked into the project budget. If done well, the practice truly is an investment, because it can weed out unnecessary or ineffective exhibits, and help to prevent expensive errors in the final exhibit design; thereby saving thousands of dollars.

There's a myth that prototyping can reek havoc on a project schedule, stealing time from the design process. But as well known museum-veteran Kathleen McLean suggests, "prototyping IS design." In her paper, *Museum Exhibit Prototyping as a Method of Community Conversation and Participation*, McClean also argues that, in fact, prototyping can streamline design by facilitating quick decision-making.

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No. 3 | Support Group

Exhibit prototyping can bring an element of uncertainty to design, where ideas may need to be scrapped, or where a concept may need to go in a completely different direction. This uncertainty can sometimes discourage project leaders or team members to embrace prototyping as a valuable design tool.

If you're planning to incorporate prototyping into your exhibit design tasks, make sure that you've got the full backing and support of the project team and organizational leaders. It's important that they truly believe in the value of the process and results. And assure them that prototyping is easy to integrate into the development process.

No. 4 | Who, What, When, Where, Why?

There's no purpose in prototyping exhibits if there's no goal or expectation of the results. Prototyping is analogous to the scientific method, where you ask a question, do some research, develop a hypothesis, conduct an experiment, and then either accept or reject the results. If rejected, the process is repeated. With exhibit prototyping, you need to clearly define the problem, rather than just checking off a box on your exhibit design to-do list.

Start prototyping by asking a number of questions, such as: What needs to be answered? (i.e. proof of concept, functionality, ergonomics, safety, durability, etc.) What type of prototype is needed? (i.e. physical, digital, questionnaire/survey, etc.) Who should participate? (i.e. children of a certain age, general visitors, people in groups, etc.)



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One final tip is that it's critical in prototyping to leave room for adaptation and discovery. Some of the greatest lessons emerge when you have open-ended questions, and your prototyping testers – whether they're museum visitors or members of your design staff – identify and highlight issues about which you would've never thought to ask targeted questions.

Designer and inventor-extraordinaire, Richard Buckminster Fuller, once said, "There is no such thing as a failed experiment; only experiments with unexpected outcomes." That is the true spirit of exhibit prototyping: trying things, learning from their imperfection, and making improvements. Whether you're a member of a museum's in-house exhibit development and education team, or an employee in a design firm, prototyping should be part of your creative process. ●



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