



What is an interactive exhibit?

An interactive exhibit provides visitors with a hands-on, active experience. It can be anything from a mechanical puzzle or working model, to a computer or a replica object. It can be designed for children or adults, and can be intended for use by an individual or a group. The crucial point is that your visitors have control over the outcome of any activity, activating the exhibit through use of initiative, choice and experimentation to influence the end result.

Why use interactive exhibits?

An interactive exhibit is one of many methods of interpretation, and can engage visitors of all ages and abilities through activity, problem solving and often fun. Its primary function should be to support and complement wider interpretive themes, and to enhance visitors' understanding of museum collections by providing an alternative means of learning. Interactive exhibits can be used to

- demonstrate scientific principals or moving parts
(For example, an interactive model to demonstrate how cargo and ballast was balanced in a ship – Discovery Point, Dundee)
- encourage visitors to explore objects in greater or closer detail
(For example, a computer interactive to read, rotate and unwrap an Egyptian mummy – Hunterian Museum, Glasgow)
- show how objects function and bring them back to life, without exposing the original object to handling or wear
(For example, a computer interactive to demonstrate how an oil lamp works – Almond Valley Heritage Centre, Livingston)
- provide a more stimulating museum environment through variety of experience, and use of different senses and intellect.
(For example, a replica rotary quern to simulate the action of grinding corn – Kilmartin House, Argyll)

What makes a good interactive?

There are no guarantees in the development of interactive exhibits, but the rewards to visitors can be significant when it is done well.

An effective interactive will

- be mentally and/or physically stimulating
- encourage the use of physical skills and dexterity
- develop knowledge or understanding
- encourage team working, discussion or debate
- be easy to use and understand without relying on lengthy text
- hold visitors' attention
- inspire a sense of achievement
- be challenging, yet appropriate to the abilities of its target audience.

Developing an interactive exhibit

There are several steps to the development of an interactive exhibit.

1. Definition of concept

The decision to use an interactive exhibit should be made for the right reasons.

An interactive exhibit should fulfil an interpretive need, be integral to and enhance your overall interpretive message in some way. It should reinforce the key messages of the wider exhibition or museum display.

You will need to define whom your exhibit is intended for, and to think about your desired outcome. What do you want your visitors to gain from using your interactive in terms of understanding, enjoyment, physical activity or play, attitudes or feelings? Setting objectives such as these will help define the form and content of your interactive, as well as giving you a marker against which to evaluate success.

Top tip

Not all interpretive messages are best conveyed with interactive exhibits.

Allow the technology to follow the concept and don't force it.

Research what others have done before to get ideas about what works well.

2. Written brief

Creating an interactive exhibit potentially involves a whole variety of people, all bringing different knowledge and skills. These might include subject experts, educators, evaluators, writers, graphic designers, technicians and computer programmers, some or all of whom may need to be out-sourced. To ensure everyone is working towards the same concept and within agreed parameters, it is important to have a clear and detailed design brief. This should include

- background information about your organisation and project
- your key concept, interpretive objectives and intended outcomes
- financial and staffing resources
- expected shelf life of the product
- any known constraints.

3. Selection of work force

The design brief will form a working document against which to judge interest from designers, technicians, computer programmers, artists – whoever you need to employ to get the job done. Be realistic about what you can and cannot do yourself. For example, you may have subject expertise, but if you don't have experience of transferring that information into writing for a computer interactive then it may be a job best left to someone who does. The amount of time you have to input to a project may be another deciding factor.

Top tip

Recommendations or examples of previous work can be a useful guide, but always take up references.

4. Creating the interactive

Once your work force is in place, you will need to finalise the design brief, before the production process can begin. A written agreement between you and your contractors should also detail all aspects of the job, including a mutual agreement about who is expected to do what, a realistic timetable, and milestones against which to monitor progress. Refinements may be necessary during production so maintain frequent and open communication with your designer, but do not stray

too far from your original interpretive objectives.

Although some interactive exhibits are operated intuitively, many do still require some form of written direction or supportive text. Think how this will be integrated into the final exhibit, taking into account guidelines on writing interpretive text and issues of accessibility, and keep any text to a minimum. Diagrammatic directions are another option.

Top tip

Keep it simple! Allow designers to be creative, but not at the expense of your interpretive message.

5. Testing the product

Ideally, before your interactive exhibit is finalised and ready for display, you should allow time for testing, and possible modification, to ensure your interpretive objectives have been met. Working with visitors or focus groups, through the use of questioning and observation, you will need to consider

- How easy the interactive is to use.
- Is it clear what it's about? Do the design, labels or instructions encourage visitors to use the interactive as you intended?
- Do visitors leave understanding more?
- Does the interactive provide an enjoyable experience?
- Does the design encourage visitors to use the exhibit as intended? Is it physically safe and accessible to all users?

If you don't have time to test before putting an exhibit on display, make sure you do so as early as possible. Making changes, or finding faults, at this stage is potentially more frustrating for visitors, but can still ensure the longer term success of your exhibit.

Creating interactive exhibits need not be an expensive or difficult undertaking, and the end product can add significantly to your visitors' understanding and overall museum experience. What matters is the initial concept, knowing what

you want to do, why and for whom. Take time to get that right and the rest should follow.

For more information about interpretation and interpretive planning see the range of SMC factsheets and guidance notes, available on the SMC website www.scottishmuseums.org.uk

For more information about developing interpretive interactives, explore some of the publications listed below.

Further information

	Key subjects
Hands-on Exhibitions Tim Caulton Routledge ISBN 0-415-16522-9	Reasons for use Exhibit development
User Friendly – Hands on exhibits that work Jeff Kennedy Association of Science Technology Centers ISBN 0-944040-22-5	Practical design guide
Museum Practice 4 (Volume 2, Number 1) 1997 Museums Association	Features of good interactives Case studies
Museum Practice 7 (Volume 3, Number 1) 1998 Museums Association	Project development

Museum Practice 16 (Volume 6, Number 1) 2001 Museums Association	Case studies
Museum Practice, Spring 2003 Museums Association	Designers input

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