The Griffith Observatory Exhibit Program:

Turning Visitors into Observers

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Introduction

For most Southern Californians and the many visitors who come to Los Angeles, the venerable Griffith Observatory is the shining cloud-building in the Hollywood Hills, once described by actor Gary Cooper as the "hottest monument of Los Angeles." It is also familiar to moviegoers in numerous films, most notably the famous James Dean flick, Rebel Without a Cause. Funding for construction of the Observatory was given to the city by Griffith, who wanted to create a "people's observatory." Since opening in 1935, the institution has been sharing the skies for free with anyone who wants to see them.

World-famous Griffith Observatory re-opened in November 2008, after a nearly five-year renovation and expansion project that restored the building, remade the planetarium, choked the public space, and created a new, permanent exhibit program. The theme of the exhibits is "Turning visitors into observers." The premier was to develop exhibits to engage visitors in observation, either directly or by encouraging them to consider the results of astronomical observation. The exhibits were designed to be large, unique, and very visual, so as to engage engagement, wonder, and inspiration. Writing the 40 series that accompanied the creation of exhibits focused on an intriguing and conversational tone, as if the exhibits themselves could answer the questions visitors might have about what they were seeing. The panels made exhibit one of imagery and very focused and meaningful written captions intended to connect with the Observatory's very broad, diverse audience. This poster presents images of a selection of the exhibits, discusses the approach we took in writing the exhibits, and presents some lessons learned that other institutions may find helpful.

An Introduction to the Griffith Observatory Exhibits

Each visitor to Griffith Observatory is cast in the role of observer. This is absolutely critical, and the step most often overlooked in the rush to design. Being clear-eyed about purpose and audience is a starting place for defining the mission of the exhibit program, one specific to your audience.

An Introduction to the Griffith Observatory Exhibits

As with any large exhibit project, there are a number of lessons that may be useful to other institutions.

Define a clear mission for the exhibit program, one specific to your audience. Determine what is important that no one participant's voice (writing style) be allowed to dominate the panels. Thus, the exhibition writer kept the language level and tone as even as possible through thematic and material reviews and the design of language and layout. Developing this poster presented in panel. The writer worked in residence with the exhibit design team for Los Angeles. After approval, customized designs were sent for fabrication.

Lessons Learned

As with any large exhibit project, there are a number of lessons that may be useful to other institutions.

Benchmark against other institutions. A sure way to avoid seeing what other programs have done. The Observatory benefited enormously from conversations with other institutions.

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