The Exhibit Medium*

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Man is constantly trying to break down the barrier which separates him from his fellows by endeavoring to improve his means of communication with them. None of the means so far devised is perfect. The first pictograms were an attempt to supplement the grunts and gestures which must have chiefly served primitive man to convey his simple ideas of food, shelter, mating, and combat with which his life was chiefly concerned. As life became more complex, so the auditory and visual symbols of expression assumed greater exactness, richness, and complexity. As a result the problem for the health educator today is to find a way to break through this welter of words written and spoken, pictures still and moving in black and white and color, fortified for their dissemination by powerful broadcasting stations, national hookups, Kleig lights, million-dollar stars, double features, and block bookings, not to mention high speed presses and mass circulation.

Although these media are also available to us to some extent the exhibit medium offers an effective and under certain circumstances a preferable method, for health education.

The Language of Exhibits

Exhibits may be compared to language. Things exhibited are nouns.

Color is an adjective; motion, the verb. Just as the selection and arrangement of our parts of speech determine the sureness with which we transmit an idea, so the selection and arrangement of our exhibit elements will determine the clarity and dramatic emphasis with which we tell our story through that medium. If I say to you the word “boy” this creates an image in your mind. If I say “black boy” the image takes on character. When I say “fat black boy” the image becomes still more specific. If this image is now put into motion with the words “fat black boy running” it becomes more interesting. So one adds adjectives, verbs, adverbs, and other words and phrases to the single concept “boy” to create a specific picture or arouse an emotion. Within certain limits this picture or emotion will be uniform for the whole audience. So, as one achieves lucidity and force of expression in language through adherence to the rules of composition one achieves similar results in exhibits through adherence to the rules of exhibit technic.

Our knowledge of these rules is still rudimentary, nevertheless there are some general principles which it is important to have in mind. First, it must be accepted that the exhibit medium in spite of its many values has certain distinct limitations. The exhibit as we know it today is not usually adapted to telling a comprehensive and detailed story. It can,
however, point out and drive home a few salient facts. In any one exhibit these facts should be limited in number and be related, because unity is a principle to be followed in any method of idea communication. The excellence of an exhibit is frequently determined by what is left out rather than by what goes into it. Exhibits also can well make use of the teaching principle of proceeding from the known to the unknown. Similarly simple ideas will be grasped more clearly by more people than complex ideas will be. In this connection it is well to remember that an idea which seems simple to the expert may be incomprehensible to the average man. Such an idea for instance as an adjusted death rate though elementary to the vital statistician is not understood by the layman or for that matter by many health workers or physicians. One of the first steps therefore in planning an exhibit is to form a clear concept of the audience to be reached. Many a candidate has lost the farmers vote because he talked in language which only the city bred could understand. It is obviously more difficult to make an exhibit for a group which is diverse as to education, culture, occupation, and age level than it is to make one for a homogeneous group such as a class of farm-bred school children. It should be noted, however, that the exhibit may by its manner of presentation automatically select from a miscellaneous audience the particular group it is desired to impress.

Having the group clearly in mind, the next step is to be sure one is certain of the purpose of the exhibit. Too often exhibits occur merely because some energetic soul has said, “Let’s have an exhibit.” When an audience is to be assembled as for instance in a convention, county fair, or town meeting, and it is desired to implant in the minds of that audience a few simple ideas, then one should consider the exhibit as a most useful tool. Only under unusual circumstances such as a World’s Fair should one depend on assembling an audience for the single purpose of looking at an exhibit, or attempt to use the exhibit as the sole instrument of education, particularly where the message is of necessity complicated or lengthy. Being aware then of the occasion and circumstances of the showing and having in mind the audience to be reached, the next step is to put down on paper for your own guidance and the guidance of those with whom you will collaborate, the purpose of the exhibit. For instance, “The purpose of this exhibit is to convince my Board of Directors, particularly that skeptical and wealthy Mrs. Jones, that we are spending our present budget very economically and that we should have twice as much money next year to meet our responsibility”; or “The purpose of this exhibit is to induce the farm mothers to bring their babies into town for the free clinic on Thursday mornings.”

Setting down the purpose in black and white aids immeasurably in selecting the facts for presentation. Taking the last statement as an example, these facts might be:

1. The clinic is held in the basement of the Court House Annex. (There is no need to tell them in the exhibit how to get there or where to park their cars.)
2. The clinic is held every Thursday morning. (No need to say why it has to be held on Thursday mornings or that next spring it may be changed to Wednesday afternoons.)
3. That services are free and confidential.
4. That a regular check-up of a healthy baby may save expensive doctor bills (or some other one argument that has proved to be most generally appealing).

So far the task seems obvious. It is so logical in fact that I would not have dwelt on it except that I have noticed during an intensive experience with several hundred people who were connected with exhibit planning that
the usual tendency is to begin the other way around. Even before the story or purpose of the exhibit is decided on there seems to be an irresistible temptation to proceed at once to elaborate on or adapt this or that device or attention-getting gadget that has been observed somewhere else. This procedure is like writing the prescription before the diagnosis is made. It is comparable to taking a pill for a stomach ache without finding out what causes the stomach ache. One should guard against this patent medicine method of exhibit planning. Not until purpose and story have been determined is it time to design the exhibit. At this point it is desirable to seek help, employing an exhibit designer if possible. For a large exhibit such design service is essential if funds are to be spent most economically.

It is to be remembered that the exhibit is a distinct medium for the communication of ideas. It may draw on other media such as language and pictures, but if one depends on these aids chiefly it is a confession of failure. An exhibit is not merely an opportunity to show motion pictures or lantern slides to an audience which is standing up instead of sitting down. Though it may utilize charts and text it is not a magnified vertical textbook. An exhibit to be effective must have its own interest qualities, of design, color, movement, or a sense of motion. Among these, design is the most important. Design is to exhibits what rhetoric is to language. The problem of design covers the whole subject of the selection and arrangement of exhibit elements. In exhibit planning, design is unimportant as an end in itself. Design must be related to purpose. The selection and arrangement therefore of color, words, lettering, pictures, devices, light, and other elements should be determined by their relationship to the message of the exhibit and their value in achieving its purpose.

**USE OF COLOR**

Color is an inexpensive method of achieving effect. It can be secured by paint, ink, cloth, paper, or light. Color should be chosen for its psychological effect, not because someone thinks a certain color is pretty. Color can be used to produce contrast, harmony, emphasis, feeling, and a sense of motion. Juxtaposition of colors can produce striking results. There are few communities in which the health educator cannot find an artist or someone else trained in the use of color, who will be willing to advise him on this point. The local library can usually furnish a book or two on the subject. Among others, *The Study of Color* and *The Art of Color* by Michel Jacobs may be helpful.*

**USE OF MOTION**

Twenty-five years ago or more, our field was pleasantly stirred by Dr. C. St. Clair Drake, who as far as I know was the first person to introduce motion into health exhibits in this country. About the same time Dr. W. W. Peter employed moving health exhibits as well as many other ingenious devices in his mass health education program in China. The effect of this novelty on a hitherto motionless exhibit world was so startling that we still make a fetish of motion. Dr. Drake in fact maintained that motion was essential to attract attention even if it was nothing more than a flag fluttering in the breeze of an electric fan. Mr. Routzahn has since emphasized however that motion *per se* is not a criterion of effectiveness. He states that the motion must be related to the message. This is in accord with the principles of good functional design. Frequently design can impart a sense of motion and sometimes satisfactory results can be ob-

*Also The Colorist, by J. Arthur Hatt, and Color Dimension, by Faber Birren.*
tained by merely suggesting impending motion such as a sledge hammer about to strike an egg.

LIGHT
Every exhibit should be clearly illuminated, and this nearly always means special lighting for the exhibit. In very few locations can one depend on daylight or the ordinary room lighting. Shadows should be avoided unless, of course, they are deliberately included for effect. Material with a shiny surface should not be used as the background of an exhibit since it produces glare and confusing reflections. Emphasis on a particular point in an exhibit can be secured with a spotlight. Silhouette lighting is very effective. In this method an exact silhouette, in reduced scale of the object to be illuminated, is placed in front of the spotlight so that the edges of the light coincide exactly with the edges of the figure or object. Flashing lights should be used with restraint. These as well as moving devices and other embellishments must not be so “clever” that the visitor is intrigued with their cleverness rather than the message of the exhibit itself.

LETTERING AND TEXT
The rules for lettering and text on exhibits are few and definite.
They are:

1. Keep the amount of text to a minimum. If the exhibit can tell its story with no text at all so much the better.
2. Use short words that everybody understands.
3. Use short lines with not more than 6 or 7 words to a line at most.
4. In a running text use upper and lower case letters. Words with all capitals should be used only for short titles or as an element in design.
5. Text should be large enough to be easily read at the distance from which the visitor is expected to view the exhibit.
6. Use plain Caslon or Futura letters for the message you want to convey. Gothic, Old English, script and other unusual type faces can be used as an element in design or to produce a desired atmosphere.

VISITOR PARTICIPATION
Just as motion in exhibits has been emphasized in the past, so now the value of visitor participation in animating exhibits is stressed. I believe there is some psychological justification for emphasizing the value of such participation. Sometimes also it is cheaper to arrange for the visitor to animate the exhibit than to equip it with a motor. Common errors in the use of such devices are, however,

1. It is not clear to the visitor what he is supposed to do.
2. The machine is not designed to withstand a heavy visitor load or to prevent deliberate or unconscious abuse.
3. The visitor’s interest is so centered on what he is doing that he fails to see or remember the rest of the exhibit.

As was noted under motion, the animation created by the visitor should implement the story which is being told.

TEN TYPICAL DEVICES
The most effective exhibit is one which is properly designed for its specific setting and purpose. There are, nevertheless, many stock devices some of which may be usefully incorporated under certain circumstances. Although some of these now seem trite from repeated use, they are still effective if skillfully employed. Here is a list of 10 such stock devices.

1. The question and answer device—This has been extensively used by the American Medical Association in many different forms. It is most useful where there are no other exhibits insistently demanding attention or when the visitor is not hurried.
2. Moving lights—These may take the form of a spot of light travelling a prescribed course, a line of light bulbs flashing, or a band of light growing longer and longer. This device is useful to show a route travelled, such as that of a train across the country, or a blood corpuscle through the body, or to carry the visitor’s attention from one point of the exhibit to another.
3. The pendulum, of which the balance and the swinging pointer are variations—This device can show relationship, comparison or relative values.

4. Big book with turning pages—This has been popular with exhibitors but is not always popular with the audiences. Most people would rather read a book sitting down and turn the pages for themselves when they are ready.

5. Moving signs—Useful when the location is such that the audience is likely to remain to look at them as in a railroad station. Often, however, moving signs are resorted to simply because the exhibitor is unwilling to reduce text matter and make desirable curtailments in the story.

6. The Peep Show—A box or other device into which only one person can look at a time. This is nearly always a sure-fire attraction and may be inexpensive. It is essential that the visitor be given something really interesting to look at and that he be not fooled lest the usefulness of the device be ruined for everyone.

7. The diorama—A good old standby since The Century of Progress, getting so common now that it is no longer effective unless very well made, well lighted and represents a scene which is interesting in itself particularly when in competition with other dioramas.

8. The short motion picture or “quickie”—Best used when visitor-operated and lasting not more than 30 seconds. Useful to highlight a process or incident. Pictures must have action and good photography.

9. Enlargement—A giant typewriter, adding machine, safety pin, flower, or blood corpuscle will attract attention—useful in emphasizing size, number and importance.

10. Photo montage—A collection of photographs usually highly enlarged, cut out and fitted together. Pictures must be selected with care, and fitted together with a skill which makes them seem to be assembled without plan. Useful in giving a feeling or general impression as for example, the moving photo montage used to introduce one of the popular news reels.

There are many other stock devices and anyone who is responsible for exhibit planning will find it useful to keep notes of those he sees together with his observations of their value in presenting different ideas.

Finally, it should be emphasized that the setting or surroundings of the exhibit are as important as the exhibit itself. If we have to use a room with windows, this can be overcome by building a false wall extending from 1 or 2 feet above the floor to within 2 to 3 feet of the ceiling, thus giving an unbroken surface and cutting off confusing cross-lights. Rooms that present a discouraging vista can be broken up with screens. The distracting background of a gold filagree decoration or a wallpaper of intricate pattern can be blotted out with cloth or paper hangings. In general, everything possible should be done to avoid visual conflict between the exhibit and its surroundings, and visual conflict between different exhibits.

In conclusion, let me recommend that you try out your exhibit on a test audience before you present it to the public, and do this if possible before it is too late to make changes. Many of us are so engrossed in the subject matter of the exhibit that we fail to realize that signs, symbols, and words may have a different meaning and implication for us from what they have for the audience. Dr. Gebhard, who has had much experience in the field of medical exhibits, gives me the German word “trugschluss,” which as near as I can translate it means false impression or misleading conclusion. After all our efforts we must be sure that our exhibit does not convey some other idea than the one we intended. For instance, at the Museum of Natural History in New York there is an exhibit which aims to show the value of inoculation against typhoid fever. The model represents soldiers in the Spanish American War which occurred before soldiers were inoculated. It shows that out of every 100 soldiers 14 were afflicted with typhoid for every one injured by gunfire. The reaction of an intelligent man who saw this exhibit recently was, “What safe wars they used to have.”

In summary then I would list these points for the guidance of health educators who are creating exhibits:
1. Have your audience clearly in mind.
2. Set down the purpose of the exhibit.
3. Select a minimum number of salient points to be presented.
4. Make a design with whatever help you can secure.
5. Incorporate such exhibit technics as you may have observed to be effective and which lend themselves to the telling of your story.
6. Incorporate motion or visitor participation if circumstances warrant, funds permit, and these clearly pertain to your message.
7. Tell your story in terms your audience cannot misunderstand, but do not talk down to your audience.
8. Test your plan before presenting it.
9. Experiment a little, judging results by visitor reaction rather than by subjective satisfaction.

REFERENCE