

Chapter 5 Exhibits

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- Poster presentations
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- Building blocks of an exhibit
- How much will it cost?
- Show me the data!

Exhibits consist of a collection of materials arranged for public viewing. They are a way to show your data to a variety of audiences in a (usually) informal setting. Exhibits offer an opportunity to go beyond the more traditional methods of communication. They can be categorized into two types: there is the **event exhibit** at a public *occasion* such as a local river festival, county fair, or sidewalk day on Main Street. A special type of event exhibit is the poster presentation, which you might offer at an environmental conference. The other type is the **on-site exhibit**, set up at a public *place* such as a library, storefront window, boat ramp or waterfront picnic area. Both types are excellent “entry points” for targeted audiences and the general public to learn about your organization’s work.

The nature of the medium is that there will be competition for the audience’s attention. Your event exhibit is one offering among many booths and activities. On-site exhibits are found at locations the potential audience is just passing through, while on an errand or an outing. This suggests two guiding principles for exhibit design:

- They must be attractive enough at first glance to draw people nearer for a closer look. Use a large, dramatic photo, or a large-type, intriguing headline to pull people in. Pleasing or disturbing photos can work equally well: an image of a canoe race or a solitary angler in a pristine stretch of river, a pollution plume, dead fish—all will attract attention. A headline can be newsy: “Cleanest Water Around” or challenging: “It’s 1999. Would you let your kids swim in the river?”—as long as it makes people want to know more.
- They are not suited for lengthy explanation, debates, or in-depth education. Exhibits *are* a good way to plant a seed, to introduce a concept. For example, acquaint people with nonpoint pollution, using a headline like “When it rains, it’s poor,” and displaying a simple chart of average bacteria levels during wet weather vs. dry weather. Too much detail may result in visitors feeling overwhelmed. They may respond by simply walking away, having learned nothing.

But if they return home remembering that single noteworthy thought (rain + runoff = polluted river), the exhibit will have done its work. Long after all the other attractions and events of the day have been forgotten, the mental connection will pay dividends.

Event exhibits

Handout examples

- a brief report.
- your latest newsletter
- a brochure.
- sign-up sheets for your mailing list.
- business cards with your web site.

Event exhibits commonly include a table with stand-up poster board displays, handout materials, and perhaps samples or other objects to view or handle (water samples, macroinvertebrates, aquatic plants, etc.) Ideally, someone from your organization is present to welcome interested visitors and answer questions. The exhibit itself should be a simple, self-contained story line; details and background information are provided by the person staffing it and by any handouts that are distributed.

Who will be there?

If it's a general public event such as a community fair, the audience is likely to be quite diverse; of any age, educational level, political orientation and background. These events are meant to be festive, and your exhibit's tone should match: interesting, but light, friendly, non-confrontational. If the event is more political in nature, or otherwise more narrowly focused—a rally at the state house or earth day celebration—the audience will likely be more homogeneous and more predisposed to relatively hard-hitting messages. How do you deal with different audiences at different events? Make the exhibit itself general in tone and content. Then tailor the message for each audience through commentary supplied by the staff person and handouts you provide.

Event attendees are primarily browsing, so your exhibit should capture attention as well as inform, like a highway billboard. To get their attention, be sure the exhibit has one clear theme. Use the theme in banner-sized lettering at the top of the exhibit. People will see your bold message as they approach the display. When they stop, they'll see more of the presented information. Even those who do not stop will at least learn something about your organization.

Poster presentations

Poster presentations bend some of the rules of event exhibits. They are likely to have a targeted, probably somewhat knowledgeable audience: people who are at a conference to learn. Posters possess some of the properties of public presentation (see Chapter 6). Typically, someone gives a short

Tips to find locations for on-site exhibits

- Keep an eye out for similar displays in banks, libraries, etc.
- Find out who's in charge.
- Ask if they will display your exhibit.
- Use your connections.
- Ask your members who work there to make the request.

talk at your booth in an exhibit hall—either a scheduled talk listed in the conference agenda, or an impromptu talk to one or more interested browsers. Either way, the audience is free to walk away, so entertainment value and brevity are still important. The talk can get fairly detailed and technical, but the exhibit itself, which will remain on display after the talk is over, should be self-explanatory. Written reports that are too complicated to distribute at event exhibits may be an appropriate handout for poster presentations.

On-site exhibits



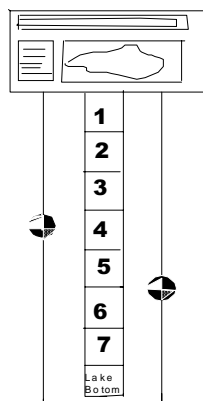
On-site exhibits often consist of a large display board with maps, data graphs, explanatory text, and sometimes a pocket for take-home brochures and background pieces. These exhibits can be placed in high traffic areas where the public visits a lake, river or ocean: a kiosk at a boat ramp, a visitor's center, etc. Other locations include libraries, town commons, storefronts, real estate offices or bank lobbies.

The main difference between this and the event exhibit is that on-site displays are designed to be viewed and understood without the benefit of an interpreter.

Example 5-1: An on-site exhibit.
(From Signs, Trails and Wayside Exhibits, Trapp et al, 1992)

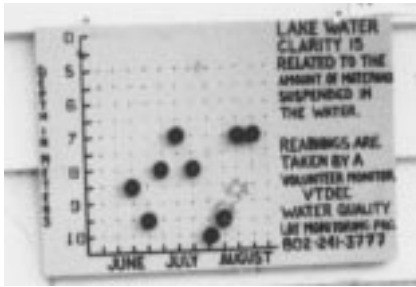
Who will be there?

The venue will determine, to some extent, the type of audience. If at a library or town common, the audience will be as general as you ever get. If you've been given some space in an outdoor gear store or you're setting up at a kiosk at a boat put-in, you can expect the viewer will have some personal interest in the resource; you may wish to focus the exhibit on impacts to the fishery, how bacteria levels affect boating, or the like. But in either situation, the audience interface is happenstance; people haven't come there to see or linger over your data. Be brief.



Example 5-2: Secchi disk readings display.

Exhibits at access sites perform the "inform" function well, especially if your samples were taken nearby. They are good places to post data updates after each sample event. Example 5-2 shows just such an exhibit, designed by the Minnesota Citizen Lake Monitoring Program for weekly Secchi disk readings. The top of the display is a poster containing a map of the lake with sampling sites, and year-to-date Secchi disk data. The bottom part shows Secchi data in more tangible



Example 5-3: Another Secchi disk on-site display.

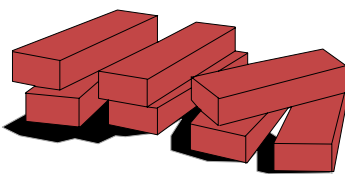
fashion. Bobbers are attached to two fishing lines that extend from the board to the ground. The bobbers represent this week's transparency at the two sites.

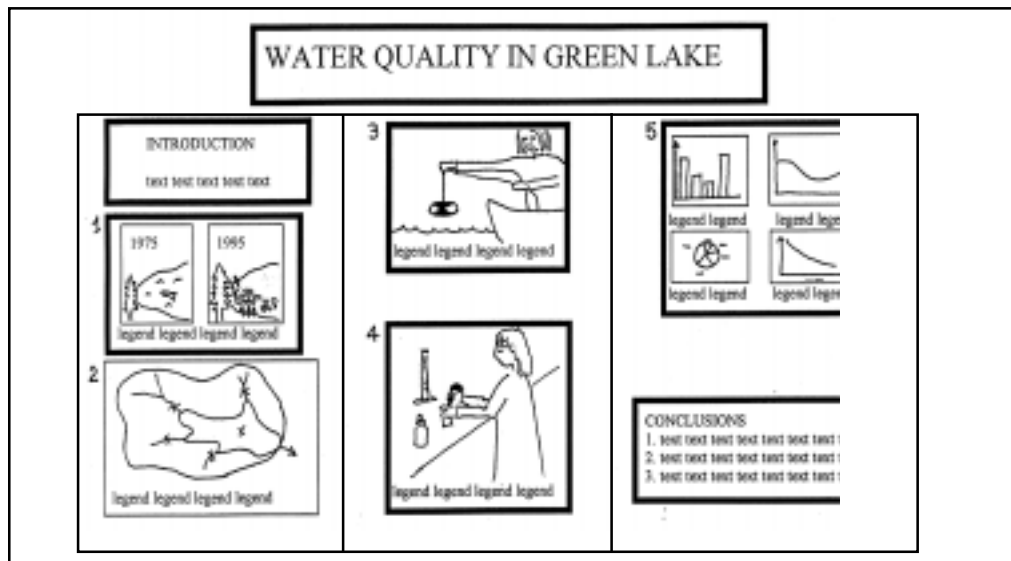
A similar *al fresco* approach was taken by the Vermont Lakes Monitoring Program (see Example 5-3). They constructed a Secchi graph using a peg board and wooden dowels that were screwed into the peg board, one for each weekly reading. The series tracks transparency over the season in a sturdy display placed atop a sign at the boat ramp. One suggested enhancement to this arrangement would be to pre-paint the dowels white and black in a Secchi pattern and paint a wavy blue line at the top of the graph. This would create a visual impression of Secchi disks suspended from the lake surface.

Building blocks of an exhibit

Structure: Table-top posters and exhibits are designed to stand on their own as well as set up and break down easily. Tri-fold foam core boards are a great choice for this type of display because they are light and fold compactly—an important consideration when your display has to be carried for great distances. The weight of the display is also a consideration if your exhibit will be used outside. These light boards will likely topple over when the wind gusts. For exhibits that are used primarily outside, heavier materials such as cork-board or plywood can be substituted. An alternative is blocks or strips of 2x4 lumber with narrow and deep grooves routed into them. Sliding the bottom edges of your lightweight display into these blocks will help it stand up outside. Pre-hinged window shutter sets can be covered with felt or other materials to form a sturdy tabletop display.

Basic materials: Readily available materials such as construction paper, glue and tape, photos (enlarged by a photo shop, color photocopy machine, or by using your computer, scanner, and color printer), and blocks of text are inexpensive elements to build your display. Felt is useful as a cover for table-top displays. Using felt and Velcro allows you to rearrange, add, and remove items on a display so that it can be easily changed or updated (See Example 5-4 for sample layout). Reducing magazine and newspaper headlines and articles with a photocopier and adding them to the display is a great way to show the importance of the organization's work and issues affecting the watershed. Include a loose-leaf notebook or scrapbook with any additional pictures, press clippings, or information that you would like visitors to see.





Example 5-4: Typical format for trifold exhibit.

Exhibit Design Tips:

James Fazio and Douglas Gilbert, authors of *Public Relations and Communications for Natural Resource Managers*, identify the ABC's of good exhibits as:

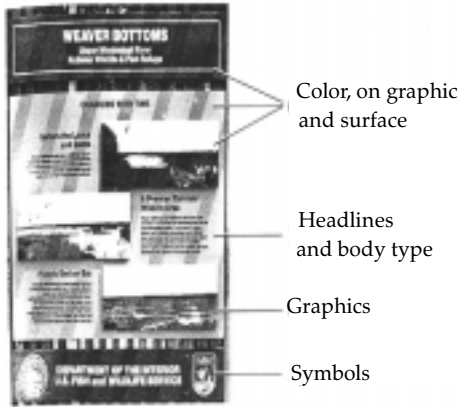
- **Attractive:** Good exhibits are visually well-balanced and eye-pleasing in their layout and color. They call attention to information without overwhelming viewers.
- **Brief:** The best exhibits are well-organized and simple, containing five or fewer main ideas and only enough text to develop the theme. Text blocks should be no more than 25 words with phrase or title blocks the most effective.
- **Clear:** The theme of the exhibit is so conspicuous it can be recognized and understood in only a second or two.

To the above we would add:

- Use colors to categorize information and help build your theme.
- Don't use all capital letters—they're hard to read and seem to "shout" at people.
- Each graphic should have a 1 or 2 sentence heading reinforcing the "take-home message."

How much will it cost?

Costs for an exhibit can run as low as \$20—or as much as several thousand dollars. A lot depends on whether you construct the display boards yourself or purchase professional displays. Office supply stores sell cardboard trifold



boards for as little as \$10. These are fine for quick, no-frills one-time use. Covered with felt, they will look nicer and can be reused a few times, although durability is limited. If your organization presents at a lot of events, consider investing in a professional display which folds into its own case; prices range from \$1000-2000. While the price might seem high, consider that it takes a good deal of time to construct, maintain, and repeatedly setup and break down a display. What seems like an expensive purchase might prove well worth the investment. Remember that an exhibit is an excellent opportunity for public outreach—a great case for a smart investment.

Example 5-5: Sample exhibit layout.

(From Signs, Trails and Wayside Exhibits, Trapp et al, 1992)

Once the display board has been procured, production costs are relatively minor. Expenses will include film, photo developing and enlarging, foam core board on which to mount the photos and text, and such art supplies as glue sticks and razor knives.

Show me the data!

Data can take many forms in an exhibit: words, graphs, maps, photos, and physical materials such as rocks, plants, and other props. Exhibits should be limited to one easily remembered theme, but you can get that point across more effectively by mixing several media. Here are some examples of “multimedia” exhibits that communicate simple concepts:



“We are fertilizing our lakes—and choking them in the process.” Show this with a picture of someone fertilizing a lakeside lawn, a graph of nutrient data, and perhaps a jar of commercial fertilizer, representing the amount typically added to an acre of lake water in a year’s time.



“Alien invaders!” Post such a headline above a display of aquatic plants taken from your lake. Ask the audience if they know which ones are invasive exotics, which are native plants. Accompany this with a map of the lake that shows distribution of different plant species. Show side-by-side photos of the lake 20 years ago (pre-invasion) and now. Have handouts available that provide background information on the problem of invasive species.



“How’s the water? Ask a bug.” Display graphs of your macroinvertebrate data, along with various props that help people understand water quality as seen through the lives of

a bug community. MassWWP loans to groups a 4-part “bugquarium” (see Example 5-6 and Appendix for details) that can be used in several ways:

- One compartment each holds pollution-intolerant, moderately tolerant, and tolerant species. The fourth contains a representative sample from your river. Ask the viewers to guess the water quality in that fourth compartment.
- Display different orders or families in the different compartments, as a taxonomy primer.
- Show fast water, slow water, pond species in different compartments; or headwater, middle reaches and main-stream reaches; or show samples from streams in the watershed, and ask the viewer to guess the locations and water quality.



Example 5-6: MassWWP loans this “Bugquarium” to groups, who use it to display live data: bugs that live in clean and polluted waters.



Here’s another simple but effective prop, which provides some educational context to macroinvertebrate data. Find a rock from the river that prominently shows the “embeddedness line”: how deeply the rock was buried in sediment (the exposed part of the rock will usually be darker, because of algae growth, while the buried side will look “clean”). Use this to discuss how silt can deprive bugs and fish eggs of well oxygenated, sheltered gravelly areas that are essential for survival. A complementary prop: fill two jam jars with substrate: one with pebbles and gravel, the other with sand and silt. Paste paper cutouts of different bug pictures on the jars (e.g. stoneflies, clinging mayflies on

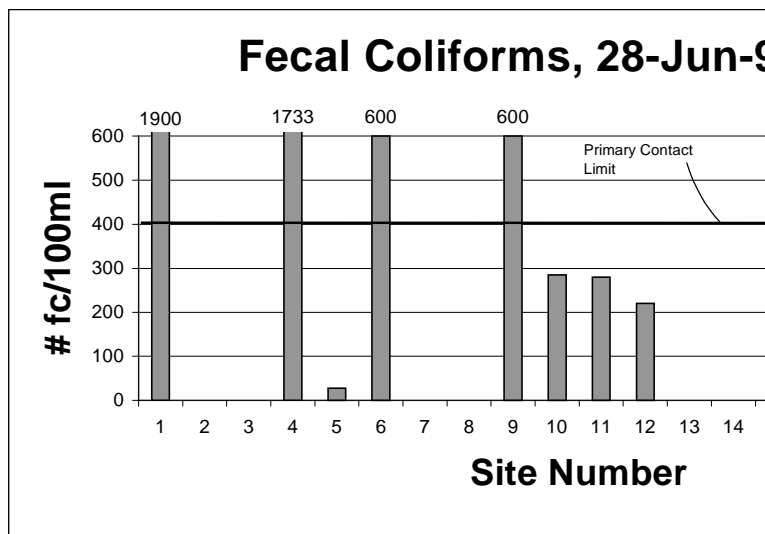
“gravel” jar, burrowing mayflies and tubifex worms on the “silt” jar). Hand these to your booth visitors while you discuss which types of bugs are likely to live in the two types of substrate, and why (see Example 8-17).



A final example of education with bugs: the University of New Hampshire Freshwater Biology Group/Lake Lay Monitoring Program designed a clever display that makes bug identification more fun. Visitors are invited to match the nymph-stage aquatic insect with its adult counterpart. The interactive exhibit employs simple battery-powered electrical wiring that lights up the display when the correct match is made.



“Is the river safe to swim in?” (See Example 5-7). Run this headline over a map of the river, with sample sites and results shown together on the map. In the example, all sites are high-use recreation/access areas, and are identified by their popular names as well as site numbers. “X” (superimposed over a swimmer icon) marks the spots that exceeded safe swimming levels.



Example 5-7: A graph from a report, above, altered for use in an exhibit, opposite.



In conclusion

Have some fun with data presentation! Complement traditional approaches (reports, press releases) with this entertaining way to introduce your organization *and* your data to residents and visitors in the watershed. Once you make an initial investment in display materials and a generic message (with stock photos and other accessories), you can easily modify an exhibit. Regularly update the display with current data, media clippings, recent photos and props to keep it new and fresh. Bring the watershed to the people with samples of rocks, bugs, and plants. The more hands-on your exhibit, the more engaged your audience becomes. Once you've created an exhibit, make sure it gets seen as often and by as many different people as possible. Make the effort to book it at a number of different locations and events, from school fairs to town squares. You will enlarge your pool of interested people, and broaden their understanding of your watershed.