

Shaping the Visitor Experience to Inspire Healthy Oceans

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Good morning. This morning I'm going to talk about an exhibition we developed to encourage our visitors, who we knew were feeling overwhelmed by the topic of climate change, to engage in conservation action.

The exhibition, *Hot Pink Flamingos: Stories of Hope in a Changing Sea*, opened in the spring of 2010. We supported the exhibition with related programs, an expanded website and social media efforts. We also provided additional training for our Aquarium floor staff and volunteers to help them answer climate change-related questions.

The exhibition's main message was "Flamingos, penguins, sea turtles and corals need us to slow climate change. We can solve the climate crisis by making small changes on our own and big changes together."

The exhibition's primary goals were to display compelling animals to drive attendance, tell stories about climate change and the ocean, and show that our actions can make a difference.

Our exhibition development strategy, based on what we've learned in informal learning environments, is designed to move people from engagement to empowerment. We work to inspire with live animals, to engage by presenting a variety of unique experiences—because no one thing engages everyone—and to empower visitors by suggesting meaningful actions, sharing examples of successful actions and modeling appropriate behaviors.

For the past 24 years, we've surveyed our visitors every month, engaged in regional and national market research and completed more than 75 unique exhibit evaluations. We tried to apply that research to this exhibition. Our visitors told us that while they wouldn't necessarily come to the Aquarium to see an exhibition on climate change, they would see it while they were at the Aquarium.

In the summative evaluation, funded in part by NOAA, we confirmed that 84% of our visitors did see the exhibition, and they spent about the same amount of time in this exhibition as they've spent in our other exhibitions.

Our prior research revealed that most Americans believe climate change is happening and are concerned about it—but they don't really know what to do. When we asked about the Aquarium's role in advocating behavioral changes to address climate change, about two-thirds of visitors thought it made sense for the Aquarium to take on this role. The remaining one-third expressed mixed feelings, and many felt climate change issues were too political for the Aquarium.

We recognized that the controversial nature of the topic presented a barrier for most visitors. However, we felt that in general, aquariums are uniquely positioned to speak about the impacts of climate change on the ocean, and we elected to add this exhibition to our ongoing conservation programming.

Since we knew visitors regarded our topic as inherently depressing or discouraging, we decided to focus on live animals whenever possible, and to try to convey a sense of hope by showing many examples of positive actions we humans are already taking.

Our challenge was to talk about climate change by talking around climate change. Our Public Relations, Marketing and Development departments felt they couldn't base their campaigns on messages people would rather avoid.

Balancing our need to attract attendance with our responsibility to share the sober effects of carbon pollution on the ocean was, and remains, an institution-wide challenge.

The exhibition itself was divided into nine sections, and each was introduced with a lightly humorous or slightly ironic title poster. In this case, Hokusai's *Great Wave off Kanagawa* introduces the *Acid Ocean* theme of the gallery. The smaller label asked, in English and Spanish, "We're changing ocean chemistry—can corals and other sea life adapt?"

"Is my cheeseburger causing global warming?" The exhibit development team worried that a heavy-handed presentation of conservation content might put us at odds with our visitors' desire for a carefree visit. Most zoo and aquarium visitors rate their desire to learn new information much lower than their desire to observe living animals or spend time with family and friends.

We presented live flamingos, corals, jellies, sea turtles, penguins and a variety of interactive exhibits designed to avoid the "gloom and doom" aspect of the topic.

We tried to create beautiful exhibits to frame sober stories of how sea level rise, changing temperatures and dwindling food supplies are impacting the ocean and ocean animals—in this case, how ocean acidification might affect living corals.

Our mantra with special exhibitions has always been, "It's the animals, Stupid." However, in the case of *Hot Pink Flamingos*, we couldn't exhibit the animals with the best conservation stories.

The animals we could exhibit were constrained by floor loading, ceiling height and other physical limitations of our galleries. Unable to link the abstract issues of climate change to specific animals, we were unable to overcome our visitors' predisposition to avoid the topic.

We also felt obligated to tell stories about important issues even though they weren't anchored by live animals. Climate change is important! The ocean is in trouble! We must tell people . . . and we forgot for a moment we're not our audience. We became subject-matter specialists, passionate about our topic, willing to flood the walls with facts and related data. We became advocates rather than objective editors, interpreters and entertainers.

We kept our panels focused on positive messages. In *World of Change* and *Hope Taking Root*, we presented compelling stories about people around the world who are reducing carbon pollution and adapting to change. But without live plants and animals, our stories became primarily photos and text. Unfortunately, graphic panels are always the least popular element in any exhibition. Putting a book on the wall is not effective.

In *Hope Electrified* we talked about successfully generating power with sun, wind and water. We even tried to lighten it up by talking about making power from cow manure. But visitors seemed to sense that our underlying message was just not fun.

We've had good success with exhibits that allow visitors to make comments or voice their concerns. At *Share Your Stories*, a paper-and-pen interactive, we asked visitors to read other people's stories, and then tell us how their choices have changed, or might change.

At the *Emotional Climate* electronic interactive, visitors rated their worry about climate change as one of six steps—from concerned to unconcerned—and then compared their responses to the responses of some of the 2.7 million visitors who also toured the exhibition.

The word "political" arose frequently during our interviews—and always in a negative way. At the extremes, one visitor made disparaging comments about others who didn't believe in climate change, while another visitor strongly questioned whether climate change was happening.

Unfortunately, climate change and politics seem to be synonymous in the minds of our visitors. Our interactive most directly associated with politics, *Speak Up*, where visitors could send an e-card to their senator, was the lowest-attended exhibit.

The most highly attended exhibit, after our live animals, was *Together We Can*. Visitors with children spent significantly more time at this exhibit than did visitors in adult-only groups. Electronic interactives that resemble games must always be designed with children in mind.

Almost one-half of our visitors engaged with this exhibit. They could select one of nine actions, like "Ditch the car" or "Skip a burger," and then take a photograph of their faces with a built-in camera. Our software morphed their faces onto cartoonlike characters that animated the actions they selected on a large video display. They could also send these cartoons of themselves to their own e-mail addresses.

In telephone interviews several months after their visit, 92% of our visitors who used the exhibit remembered it, and almost 75% of them remembered their promise—and most of the respondents were very satisfied with their videos.

Exhibitions are the heart of an institution, but even if they successfully ignite a sense of wonder in visitors, they often offer no clear path to reliably move those same visitors to conservation action. We've come to believe an expanded and coordinated campaign of activities, on site and beyond our doors, is more likely to achieve our goals. Onsite experiences that have proven to be very effective at communicating conservation messages are scripted programs delivered by live presenters. We offer several feeding shows, theatrical productions in our auditorium and on our exterior decks, as well as other less formal presentations.

In general, anytime a visitor interacts with a live staff member, they rate their overall Aquarium experience more positively. They stay on site longer, and they rate their value for admission more favorably.

A good example of an idea we carried beyond our doors is our *Seafood Watch* pocket guide. Originally developed for our exhibition *Fishing for Solutions*, the guide helps people select sustainable seafood, and its impact has expanded far beyond its original intention. Since 1999 we've distributed 40 million paper guides, and in the past year or so, a million smartphone downloads.

As expected, the animal exhibits were the most popular elements in *Hot Pink Flamingos*. Most visitors will begin their path to empowerment with the animals. In aquariums, we human animals are making important connections with other living creatures, and while it's difficult to quantify the experience that occurs, we're somehow opened by the experience.

Recent research suggests that parents are motivated to visit zoos and aquariums to promote family bonding and to instill a proper moral upbringing by encouraging respect and a sense of empathy for animals. Our hope to inspire visitors to a conservation ethic rests on this empathy.

We do not have the luxury of avoiding some topics that visitors would like us to avoid, but we can control the way we talk about them. Our strategy in *Hot Pink Flamingos*—to show the benefits of humans behaving well—gave visitors an opportunity to think about the mechanics of conservation behaviors, but it didn't give them the opportunity to connect emotionally to the stories of change.

Research suggests presenting facts and data is not an effective way to engage visitors in informal learning environments. Visitors require an engaging story. Our exhibits are stories. The only method we storytellers have to connect with our overwhelmed, polarized and slightly apathetic visitors is to become better at the craft of storytelling—to do that, we must listen to our audience.

They've told us they don't want to be depressed. They've told us they don't want to be preached to. They want to be entertained. Our task is to try to use their inherent interest in, connection with and empathy for ocean animals to shape emotional, spirited and persuasive stories that help them step outside their comfort zones and act for the health of the ocean.