The Making of Exhibitions: Curators and Other Key Factors

Hung-Hsiang Chiu, Tse-Ping Dong and Yen-Chun Jim Wu

Abstract — In recent years, the MICE industries have seen a rapid growth and reached a production value of USD1.2 trillion across the globe each year. In Taiwan, a total of 64,685 arts exhibitions and cultural activities were conducted in 2014. Every input of 1 dollar is likely to generate peripheral effects ranging from NTD7-10 (Bureau of Foreign Trade, 2008), while the increase of every 1000 m2 of exhibition space creates nearly 100 job opportunities (AEO, 2005), thereby raking in immense economic benefits to the host country or city. This demonstrates a positive relationship between the widespread development of exhibitions and business opportunities brought forth by them.

This study employs literature review and in-depth interviews to explore the role taken by the curator in MICE industries and how a curator achieves success. We expect to build a success-guaranteed model for curation. Results indicate that a distinct theme with clear-cut storylines, a curator’s strong grasp of audience behavior and ability to use social media, are three predominant factors to the success of an exhibition. Previews, interactive installations and streamlined representations are also helpful in creating delightful atmosphere at the venue. An exhibition is able to stimulate the development of related industries, bring in considerable economic benefits, and raise a firm’s brand awareness.

Uses of technology will be a leading force in future exhibitions as smart devices helps to highlight the exhibition theme and contents through interactivity. A simple-content exhibition invites viewers to experience the environment, whereas a knowledge-based exhibition utilizes mobile gadgets or technologies such as beacon, QR code, IR (Infrared) or AR (augmented reality) to help the viewer acquire more information. The core of success lies in storytelling and how a curator reveals the theme of exhibition. Application of technology might render more possibilities for storytelling, yet it is the curator’s representation that determines the outcome of an exhibition.

Keywords—Exhibition, Curator, Key success factors, Uses of technology

I. INTRODUCTION

According to the Global Competitiveness in MICE Industries Report 2013 released by the Ministry of Economics, MICE activities are effective stimuli to energize a vast variety of industries. Every input of NTD 1 is estimated to bring forth profits of NTD 7-10 generated by peripheral economic activities, whilst the increase of every 1000 m2 of exhibition space creates nearly 100 job opportunities (AEO, 2005). This explains why a majority of countries today strive to push forward their MICE industries as a way to enhance national competitiveness (Ministry of Economic Affairs, 2014), hoping to gain opportunities to host meetings or exhibitions for expectedly considerable economic benefits (Chou, 2012).

With the rise of cultural and creative industries in recent years, the exhibition as a form of art display has also evolved toward diversity and complexity. Under such circumstances, a curator, aside from attempting to maintain high-quality presentations of the exhibition, should pay special attention to expenditure control in the process of organizing an exhibit, thereby keeping a nuanced balance between costs and effectiveness of the exhibition and rendering a satisfactory exhibition where the audience feel to be an integral part of the exhibition they are attending (Huang, 2013). Hence today’s curators or curatorial teams have to learn smart maneuvers in actively organizing an exhibition or arranging for a loan exhibition or a renewal at the end of loan period, so as to augment the exhibit’s influence and create new values (Lin, 2013). The Taipei World Design Expo 2011 drew attention from the entire world, and now Taipei City has been appointed as the World Design Capital 2016. This provides a superb opportunity for curators and their execution teams to seriously consider how to provide a first-rate exhibition that allows a deeper experience of the exhibition for the audience from around the world.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

An exhibition is aimed at helping the spectators see the world in a more systemic, understandable way with the aid of the curator. Hence a curator is likened to a bridge that connects the audience and the exhibition they are watching. More than that, she/he should put forward innovative views and in doing so, provide additional values for the exhibits in display so the audience can resonate with the exhibition (Chen et al., 2014). The first section of this paper addresses the relationship between the curator and the audience, and the second section explores the exhibition model and key factors to the success of an exhibition.

A. Relationship between the curator and audiences

Principles that can be employed to create an effective way of communication are as follows: 1) audience’s active participation in the exhibition; 2) the messages conveyed by the curator are comprehensible to the spectators; 3) the messages imparted by this exhibit should be deemed as interesting by the audience; 4) the curator and visitors should have the “same language” for a dialogue (Blythe, 1999). As the exhibition has become a common channel of marketing, and the demand of exhibitions has seen a rise in the past years, a lot more
exhibition organizers have entered the MICE industry. Thus the role of the curator has been shifted from a researcher to an active practitioner who brings meanings and value into art creation, or even a coordinator that helps to connect the client (government agencies, a firm or an art institution), the artist, and the audience (Farquharson, 2003; O’neill, 2007).

Curators are generally equipped with cross-disciplinary capabilities and hybrid identities, while the definition for a curator seems to be rather flexible, as long as she/he can proffer a viewpoint that seems attractive enough for the audience (Sasaki, 2011; translated by Kuo, W. C., 2012). The primary objective of an exhibition is to be a platform of communication, which exudes a captivating atmosphere, provides the spectators with a most inviting sensory experience that resorts to their perceptions with compelling yet nuanced presentations, elicits affective responses from and commonly shared opinions in them, thereby achieving the aim of selling, persuasion, entertainment, or inspiration among the targeted audience. Thus it is of major importance for a curator, who acts as the bridge that connects the curatorial team, client, artist, and spectators and should be responsible for the success of the exhibition, to know how to present an exhibit that resonates with diverse audiences with the most intelligible language in a coherent fashion (Chen, 2014).

B. Exhibition models

Explicit arrangements of an exhibition planning is one of the determining factors to the success of it. Indeed all exhibitions, regardless of its nature or theme, are a high-priced investment for any institutions. It requires utmost caution to curate an art show. Everything from the constitution of the curatorial team, formulation of the project, through procedural control and expense allocation, to the final presentation of the exhibition needs to be carefully thought over and arranged. The validation of exhibition models helps to increase the efficiency of planning and execution of art exhibition, as task allocation and delineation of roles and responsibilities amongst the team members are more thoroughly accomplished. Here we attempt to categorize the exhibition models into four types based on the attributes of the exhibition organizer (a person or team) (Kamien, 2001) (shown as Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Exhibition model</th>
<th>Organizer</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Developer model</td>
<td>Experienced educational promotions specialist as the primary curator of the exhibition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Team approach model</td>
<td>Collaborated efforts by and shared responsibilities of the curator(s), designer(s), and educational promotions specialist(s).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Curatorial model</td>
<td>Curator as the person who takes charge of the exhibition.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Broker model</td>
<td>This model generally applies to a well-executed exhibition, in which a broker acts as the mediator, aided by the exhibit space designer(s) and educational promotions specialist(s) in the hope that the influence of the exhibition can be lengthened via a travelling exhibition or loan exhibition.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Source: Information gleaned from “An advocate for everything: Exploring exhibit development models” and compiled by this study.

Chen et al. (2014) stated that exhibition models can be split up into two phases: Phase I starts with conceptual formation surrounding the curation of exhibition, during which the curator tries to pinpoint the major notions this exhibition want to convey and put forward a perspective that both fascinates and engages the audience, while phase II deals with the realization of concepts, during which process abstract ideas are concretely presented in the exhibition venue awaiting prospective visitors to appreciate. The second phase can further be divided into three steps, namely deciding on exhibit’s style and other details, exhibition design, and lastly decoration and installations.

Liu (2015) posited that the implementation process of an exhibition can be classified as four stages: 1). Formulation: At this stage, the curator shall set up concrete goals and provide strategic planning and feasibility analysis, while trying to specify details regarding the scheduled start and finish dates, exhibit location, budget, and collaborative units; 2). Promotion: This refers to the curatorial team’s efforts to disseminate news and information regarding the upcoming exhibition; 3). Operations & execution of the exhibition: This can be roughly divided up into two parts, namely, 1). The technical and procedural matters of the exhibition, and 2). Any promotion activities that are aimed at spreading the news about the event or exhibitors in hopes of soliciting potential patrons to the exhibition. 4). Post-exhibition evaluation: Asking opinions of participants (exhibitors and visitor for example) about aspects of the exhibition, such as venue planning and operations, and conducting internal meetings for discussion are two best ways to obtain valuable opinions for future improvement. Table 2 is a compilation of the above-said phases regarding exhibition planning.

C. Key factors to the success of an exhibition

Huang (2006) advised that the contributing factors to the success of an exhibition may include the following: 1). A well-organized exhibition that is able to arouse people’s interest; 2). A successful exhibition curation can strengthen the spectators’ knowledge base, sharpen their aesthetical comprehension and deepen their absorption of the intrinsic beauty of the real world; 3). A systematic-approach series exhibition is endowed with a coherent style that enhances the satisfaction of individual audience members in seeking knowledge and sentimental catharsis; 4). A thematic exhibition that aims for the targeted patrons may further develop potential audiences; 5). An exhibition is the best possible platform where knowledge is being shaped and exchanged; 6). An exhibition aptly imparts inspiration and exudes futuristic flavors and will never grow stale.

Chung (2015) sort through the bulk of the current literature before putting forward eight dimensions with regard to the success of an exhibition: the content of exhibition, expression and interpretation, marketing strategies, sales activities, information collection, the host’s ability to organize and prepare for the exhibition, resources management, and social circumstances, along with 34 indicators prophesying the success of exhibition. The present study compiles all dimensions and indicators as shown in Table 2.
III. RESEARCH METHODS

The current paper employs literature review and in-depth interviews before launching an analysis using the FTCC Model. For starters, we examined the existing literature to identify the relation between exhibitions and audience experience. Then we proceeded with in-depth interviews as a way to explore the correlation between curation and the final execution of an exhibition. We adopted the FTCC Model to discover the interconnectedness of all the factors involved in the process from curation to final presentation of art displays, and distinguish the importance of the curator’s role from all other factors. We provide concluding results and suggestions based on this paper as a whole for future research. Research methods are depicted as follows. 

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Key factors</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The content of exhibition</td>
<td>Contains educational value; contains academic value; imparts inspiring messages to the audience.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Expression and interpretation</td>
<td>Innovative and creative representations; audience comprehension; the opinions of the sponsors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing strategies</td>
<td>Brand awareness; marketing and advertising; diversified distribution channels; virtual social media marketing; digital curation technologies.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sales activities</td>
<td>A test of the concept of new product or service; Development of potential clients; New product or new market; obtaining orders from new clients.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information collection</td>
<td>Collection of information; collection of updated knowledge; performing market analysis.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The host’s ability to organize and prepare for the exhibit</td>
<td>Exhibition planning and management; docent’s professional service; efficiency in coping with unexpected incidents; reflections after exhibition.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources management</td>
<td>Facilities of the exhibition; management of software context; Interior planning of exhibition space; cost control; sponsor involvement.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social circumstances</td>
<td>The theme meets the audience’s expectation; number of visitors; overall proceeds; aid from the government; choice of the venue; transportation; exchange of ideas.</td>
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Source: Compiled from Chung’s “A Study of Key Successful Factors on Curation”.

A. Research Subjects

We took interviews with curators and organizers using purposive sampling. In other words, this study selected the people and events that are deemed conspicuous in the exhibition industry so as to obtain the information we needed (translated by Kao, Lin & Wang, 2001). We decided on the six participants after taking the following three factors into account: 1). With over five years of service; 2). We specifically chose those who have had curation experience or worked as a project manager who has seen through the whole process of an exhibition; 3). We made a point of selecting the three fields of juristic persons, curators, and professional exhibition organizers (PEO) to maintain a diversity of sources of information. The six interviewed respondents are shown in Table 3.

B. The Significance and Application of FTCC Model

The model of FTC (Art = Form + Theme + Context) proffered by Sandell (2006) has been widely employed for analysis by researchers in art education and other relevant fields over the past years. Huang (2013) further proposed an exemplary model called FTCC as a benchmark by which to examine the four dimensions of the Form, Theme, Context, and Cost relating to an exhibition. Not only does this model take the factor of “cost” into consideration, but it has incorporated the dimension of theoretic analysis as well.

### Table III
**LIST OF INTERVIEWED RESPONDENTS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Major exhibitions that the respondents once assumed responsibility</th>
<th>Role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A Curator</td>
<td>Shanghai World Expo 2010 (Aurora Pavilion)</td>
<td>Thematic interpreter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B Curator</td>
<td>Shanghai World Expo 2010 (China Aviation Pavilion)</td>
<td>Multimedia consultant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C Curator</td>
<td>The Aesthetics of Organic Lifestyle of Taiwan’s Indigenous Peoples Exhibition (in 2012)</td>
<td>Curator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D Curator</td>
<td>Discovering Technology Treasures (in 2014 &amp; 2015)</td>
<td>Co-curator</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Compiled by this study.

This study performed an analysis on the content of these interviews based on FTCC Model and Byrnes’s (2003) views on cost control relevant to arts management.

The framework and guidelines of these in-depth interviews are established on the author’s self-directed questionnaire contained in “A Study on Consumer Behavior in MICE Industry: A Case from Taiwan’s Cultural and Creative Commerce-oriented Exhibitions,” while leveraging the concepts from FTCC Model, the planning procedures of curating exhibitions, and the key factors for a successful exhibition curation.

C. Guidelines for conducting the interviews

This study presents a number of problems comprising the four respects of FTCC: Form, Theme, Context, and Cost, which are combined with a detailed scrutiny of key factors for the success of curating an exhibition and current cases (derived from these six interviews). Hence we made it clear at the beginning that all respondents should cite examples from their past experience in curating exhibitions. The guidelines are constituted with five points, namely 1). Factors for an exhibition’s success: sharing with us real-life examples in recent failures or successes of exhibit execution; 2). The form of exhibition: what kind of exhibition experiences you would appreciate the most, future trend impacting exhibitions, and how that trend will influence the visitors’ behavior or satisfaction; and 3). Theme of exhibit: how to disseminate information about the upcoming exhibition among the public and how to help visitors better understand exhibition’s themes or purpose.
IV. RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Interview with A (a curator)

(1) Background: Interviewee A is a partner in a firm that engages in events planning, planning and execution of exhibitions as well as business shows in Taiwan, Japan, mainland China, and as far as Europe.

(2) Responses: How to achieve success when you curate an art show? I will explain this with the example of the Snoopy Exhibit 2015. This exhibit had a clearly defined collection of items and was effectively advertised; thereby winning popularity as expected. It is undeniably true when an exhibition contains too many elements, the targeted audience will not get a proper impression of that exhibit and marketing strategies often fail to catch people’s attention. It is also worth mentioning that Taiwan’s spectators seem to be only interested in taking pictures when they attend an exhibit, which is a pity. That’s why we need a consistent storyline to entice the audience to immerse in the exhibit.

A good exhibition conveys the core spirit of the exhibit’s theme to the audience and elicits affective responses in them. Meanwhile, up-to-date technologies such as QR code, IR or AR are regarded as effective ways to help viewers acquire more information. The application of technology might very well affect the behavior of visitors, yet has little influence over their satisfaction level. In short, exhibition presentation is what holds sway over audience satisfaction.

B. Interview with B (a professional exhibition organizer)

(1) Background: Interviewee B acts as the chairperson of a company that sets up subsidiary companies or service centers around Taiwan, Singapore, Germany, and mainland China (Shanghai). The company has made cooperative efforts with its partners from the above countries and thereby formed an alliance in executing exhibitions such as those in the China Aviation Pavilion and African Joint Pavilion at Shanghai World Expo 2010.

(2) Responses: I suggest that curators first uncovers what the exhibit intends to convey and sizes up targeted audiences before launching into thematic interpretation. This is the first step toward success. Other things like space atmosphere and service are mostly decided by thematic interpretation (for example, pavilion planning and interactive experience). If the exhibited collection is of rare or high-quality artworks, an organizer needn’t spend too much money in planning the exhibition. When organizing an exhibition, the curator must bear in mind what the type of exhibition this is. For instance, an exposition should not place priority over business transactions, a special exhibition shall make effort to maximize the stream of visitors, and the success of a popular science exhibition relies on the provision of information.

C. Interview with C (a curator)

(1) Background: Interviewee C is the general manager of a firm that specializes in exhibition planning, corporate identity design, packaging design, and graphic design and has developed and retained a wide range of clients from public and private sectors such as the National Palace Museum, the Ministry of Culture, the Tourism Bureau, and Hotel Royal (in Ilan), Mitsui Food & Beverage Enterprise Group, and Cloud Gate. Interviewee C was awarded with grand prize of Grand Prix Savignac at the International Poster Salon, Paris and received an award from the DFA Grand Award.

(2) Responses: As a clearly-defined theme leads the audience in the right direction and helps them better appreciate the core spirit of the exhibition she/he is attending, good atmosphere of the venue that can be created through sounds or lighting is vital to present the real value of the exhibition. Put differently, the concrete arrangements and structure of the exhibit is rational, whilst the atmosphere that oozes out of it seems to speak directly to the heart of the audience so they will soon have a sensory experience when entering an exhibit space. In this regard, the heart-warming atmosphere is crucial in conveying invisible messages to audiences when they are becoming more receptive in such an atmosphere.

D. Interview with D (a professional exhibition organizer)

(1) Background: Interviewee D assumes the position of associate general manager in a company that is grounded in Taiwan while working with multi-national teams on projects such as the design of exhibition space and enterprise museums.

(2) Responses: Both thematic coherence and getting a grasp of the targeted audience are vital to the success of an exhibition. A curator must know what group of audience this exhibit aims to target, before she/he starts to consider details like the atmosphere, the location, or how to get there by vehicles. The other way round, if the curator doesn’t narrow down the intended audience, she/he will find it very difficult to focus on a specific theme, let alone move forward with the exhibition. Moreover, by putting himself in the intended audience’s position, a curator is more likely to think of more adapted representations or experience activities, thereby leading audiences to better understand exhibit themes.

For future exhibitions, interactive technology may be the most powerful weapon available to increase the satisfaction of exhibition-goers, since interactive tools are able to make art displays more comprehensible to participants so they will become active learners in an exhibition tour.

Storytelling is the most recommended way to lead the audience into the context of an exhibition. The story should be told in the most economical way for spectators to remember. Knowledge-based exhibitions are suggested to have diagrams or charts as supplementary to the main collection.

G. Analysis and conclusion

(1) Key factors to the success of an exhibition: The key factors contributing to the wide popularity of exhibitions are as follows: an explicit theme, appropriate thematic interpretations, a grasp of the audience’s behavior patterns, being intelligible to the audience, provision of interactive activities to engage audience members, location and atmosphere (created by space design), reasonable price, navigation services, publicity generated with the media (which ignites the public’s enthusiasm and triggers word-of-mouth effect), connectivity with various industries and groups to augment the intended audience’s base, rich experience in curating, and wise allotment of expenditures.

(2) Robust economic impacts: Exhibitions can benefit the client’s business by highlighting the characteristics of the product and creating marketing buzz to attract more buyers,
thereby strengthening consumers’ identification with the product and widening economic effects in a vast range of fields, from transport, souvenirs, decoration industry, through advertising and public relations, to venue management and tourism industry. An exhibition is presumably able to facilitate the development of local industries in both tangible (tickets, beverages, gifts and giveaways, or shooting pictures) and intangible (brand awareness) ways. They can employ strategic alliance, sublicensing, or exchange of sponsorship to create long-term benefits. 

(3) Exhibition experience: Exhibition experience concerns people’s affective response. People obtain sensory experience via perception and sensation. Currently the type of exhibition that resorts to the visitor’s sensation is very popular among audiences, as individual audience members can have their respective experience, interpret thematic clues, and obtain knowledge with their own perceptive faculties and comprehension.

(4) Future trend for exhibitions: application of technology: Uses of technology will be a leading force in future exhibitions as smart devices helps to highlight the exhibition theme and contents through interactiveness. What really matters is exhibit representations, as it requires the curator’s creativity and adroitness in utilizing technologies. Application of technology has an impact on audience’s behaviors, but has little, if any, influence on audience satisfaction. Exhibition theme should be placed on top of all priorities, as it influences consumer satisfaction the most.

V. Conclusion

Our research results indicate that the focal factors to the success of an exhibition are an explicit theme and thematic interpretation mostly via storytelling. Other important factors that make an exhibition enjoyable include good location and atmosphere, a grasp of the behavioral patterns of the audience, comprehensible presentation of the exhibition, skills to ignite audiences’ enthusiasm, marketing strategy via social networks, connectivity to a wide range of industries and groups for better market values, as well as rich curatorial experience, wise allotment of expenditures, advertising/promotion via media, navigation service, and reasonable ticket price.

Uses of technology will be a leading force in future exhibitions as smart devices helps to highlight the exhibition theme and contents through interactiveness. What really counts is exhibit representations, as it demands the curator’s creativity and adroitness in utilizing technologies. Application of technology has an impact on audience’s behavior, but has little influence on audience satisfaction because satisfaction comes from appreciation of the exhibit itself rather than cutting-edge technology. A simple-content exhibition invites the viewer to experience the environment, whereas a knowledge-based exhibition utilizes mobile gadgets or technology such as beacon, QR code, IR (Infrared) or AR (augmented reality) to help the viewer acquire more information. The core spirit of an exhibit lies in storytelling and how a curator reveals exhibition theme. Application of technology might render more possibilities for storytelling, but what matters is how a curator chooses to tell a story that resonates with the audience’s experience in real life.

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