



Working with Designers

Robin Dallaway, designer of 'Buzz', the newsletter for Worcestershire's Museums and Heritage Group, has been working with local museums for many years. Here he offers some thoughts about commissioning design for your institution.

As most museums staff will by now be aware, the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) is rolling out its Accreditation Scheme for Museums in the UK. It offers the accreditation by assessing institutions against their Accreditation Standard. It seeks to raise the standards of museum services and even for museums not yet seeking accreditation it offers a useful set of guidelines. The standard requires displays to be laid out and interpreted to a reasonably high standard and describes references and criteria that should be considered when planning interpretive and display design work. This is a useful starting point when considering a new project.

Good design is effective. Professionally, well designed graphic items make for a better visitor experience, can enhance understanding, can justify external funding and create further interest and funding opportunities, so it is well worth doing. Here are some points which may be worth considering before embarking on a project.

Many museums will have limited financial resources and will be approaching external bodies for funding. Funders, from local authorities to the Heritage Lottery Fund are demanding higher standards, again making it imperative for the design process to be well considered. Involving a designer at an early stage can be helpful. They may have suggestions about using your precious resources to maximum effect and perhaps have ideas about how the overall scheme might work, prior to the preparation of a brief.

Finding a sympathetic designer is, of course, the first step. Find out the names of designers whose work you have seen and liked. Other museums will have experience, and may be able to suggest particular designers. These referrals can be a good way of finding someone suitable. Ask to see a designer's portfolio and look for examples of previous interpretive work.

It may seem obvious, but consideration of the overall message to be conveyed is vital at an early stage. This objective should be clearly described at the initial stages and referred to frequently as the project progresses. It is important to know what we want to say. And once we have decided, we need to consider how best to say it and perhaps how it can be broken down into digestible parts. It is also important at this early stage to consider the 'end-user', their ages, interests and expectations, their reasons for being in the museum along with any disabilities they may have.



Whether the project involves interpretive graphic panels, brochures detailing collections, events and opening times, or flyers and leaflets, the construction of a good brief is essential. Be clear and concise about your aims and objectives. There is no standard format for the brief; it may outline a scheme and request the designer to devise ideas for the specific project format, or it may contain firm ideas about the format and require the designer to work on the contents.

The content of the scheme also needs to be considered carefully. Interpretive graphic projects will typically comprise of text, photographs and perhaps illustrations. Again, talk to your designer. They may have advice about what combination and format may be best for your institution, which type of interpretive tool will be most effective. When preparing the project content, try to keep the copy brief, simple, readable and engaging. Don't worry about making it short; visitors will not stand and read volumes of text and it will also compromise the impact of the scheme. If necessary refer them to other sources of information or perhaps offer a take-away leaflet. It is generally best to supply your copy to your designer as a text file, created in a text editing such as Microsoft Word. These files are generally small enough to e-mail.

Talk to your designer about the photographs to be used. It will necessary to provide them in the appropriate form for the project in hand; digital pictures will need to be of the correct resolution (usually 300dpi at the size to be used for print work), hard copy photographs will need to be scanned. A problem that we encounter frequently is the supply of photographs in digital form which are too small in size, often from low resolution digital cameras. Generate good photographs and keep them in a resource library; they can often be re-used in other projects and for press promotion. Your designer may also be an illustrator and photographer, or will be able to commission them should they be required.

Good design can make your museum a better place to visit an effective and enjoyable learning experience.

Consult a designer today! Good luck!

The MLA Accreditation Standard can be read at the MLA web-site:

http://www.mla.gov.uk/resources/assets//A/accreditation_standard_pdf_5640.pdf

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