14 Strategies for Developing Exhibits that Reflect Unique Communities

1. **Gauge your audience** – What do they already know about your community in general or about the specific community issue that will be the focus of the exhibit? What excites them? What predisposed ideas/biases/fears do they have? What don’t they know? What do they want to find out?

2. **Invite your community to the table** – Ask families/kids/community members to lead the way with the development process. Consult with them at multiple points during the planning process, not just at the beginning. Also, collaborate with other local organizations who may be content experts.

3. **Include front-line team members** – Your front-line team interacts with your visitors every day, and they hear what people want. Including front-line team members in the process as stakeholders will be valuable to developing relevant exhibits.

4. **Be willing to change course** – Be open to meeting the audience at their level and building upon their knowledge. Be flexible and allow time in the development process to be truly responsive to the needs of the community that arise.

5. **Use a familiar context** – Referring to things and situations in young people’s daily lives can support comfort and help them to relate to new ideas.

6. **Incorporate multiple perspectives** – Tell stories from different viewpoints, even if they are contradicting. Acknowledge that there are multiple ways of knowing/multiple truths. All are valid and important.

7. **Include personal stories** – Prominently feature the first-person stories of individuals who have lived in a community or through a particular time period, event, or experience. Allow them to share their own stories.

8. **Recreate experiences to support full immersion** – When possible, build all-encompassing environments, allow families to use replica tools and high-quality props, provide thoughtfully-selected costumes for dressing up, and incorporate the senses. Immersive experiences can foster empathy and support the powerful impact of the content.

9. **Use real/authentic artifacts, objects, and photos** – Real objects are powerful tools that encourage visitors to practice observation skills and form questions and opinions.

10. **Focus on relevant topics** – By not shying away from what audiences are thinking and talking about, the exhibits become more relatable and impactful. Be fearless! Provide ways to explore big, complex topics.
11. **Encourage playing and learning together** – Communities are collaborative settings; develop an exhibit that encourages collaboration. Encouraging children and caregivers to explore content with each other (and with museum staff) can lead to discovery moments and empowerment.

12. **Foster story sharing** – Provide opportunities for children and families to share their personal stories with each other. Intentionally and strategically prompt them to start conversations during their visit. If possible, find ways for them to add their stories to the exhibit. Finding personal connections will allow the content to be more meaningful and more memorable.

13. **Encourage engagement beyond the exhibit** – In addition to developing a meaningful experience in the museum, find ways for families to continue the learning after they visit. Suggest specific activities they can do at home or other places they can explore. Or, if there are ways to actively advocate for a cause, give them clear directions.

14. **Plan ways to measure success** – How will you evaluate the effectiveness of an exhibit that reflects your community? Consider ways to balance quantitative and qualitative results or feedback.

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