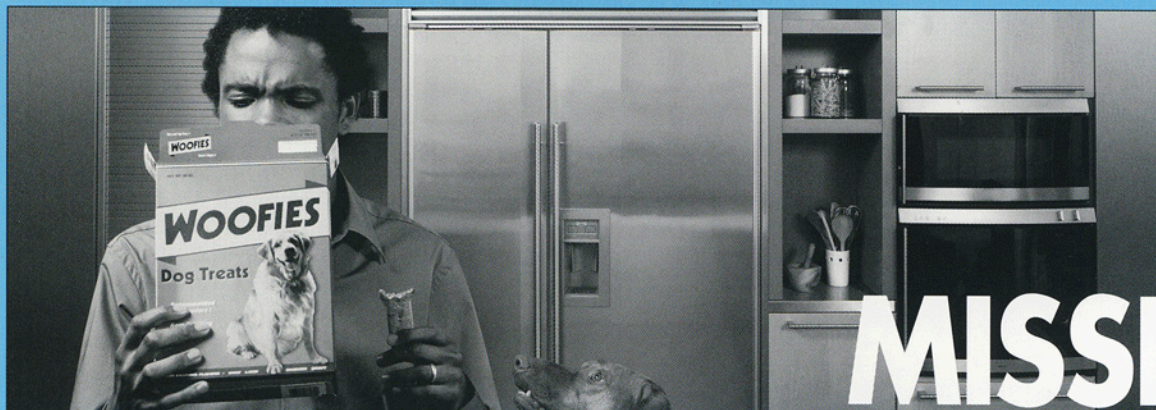




# Dimensions

Bimonthly News Journal of the Association of Science-Technology Centers

July/August 2005



**MISSION  
BASED,**

## *Market Savvy*

**Beyond the Battlefield:**

Finding Common Ground for  
Developers and Marketers

**The Science of Marketing  
and the Marketing of Science**

**How Far Do They Travel?**

Implications of Zip Code Attendance

**Marketing and Exhibits:**

Partners in Audience Research

**Marketing's Ally:**

Measuring the Impact of Public Relations





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Bimonthly News Journal of the Association of Science-Technology Centers

## IN THIS ISSUE

July/August 2005

When we market science centers, what are we selling? A fun day for the family? Startling and weird phenomena? Meaningful encounters with principles that affect people's lives? An introduction to the scientific method itself? For nonprofit museums, marketing is more complex than the classic "four P's" of product, place (i.e., distribution), promotion, and price. We look to develop long-term relationships with current and potential audiences and funders, and that means addressing the expectations and needs of widely varying groups.

Today's museum marketing professionals, in tandem with evaluators, have increasingly sophisticated tools to do just that. Yet in how many institutions is their knowledge shared consistently, and early on, with planners? At a recent AAM conference, a show of hands at a session on "hot topics in exhibit development" revealed many designers and builders, program staff, and administrators, but no one from marketing. That may have been due to a competing session down the hall, but it was also indicative of a cultural gap. If science centers are to remain successful, both planners and promoters must be aware of, and take into account, each other's primary duties, concerns, and challenges. In this issue, we learn how some institutions are bridging that gap.

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Cover: Two examples from Exploratorium marketing campaigns illustrate the challenge of conveying content to the public through images. Photos by Mike Martin (top), for "For the Curious Ones," and Amy Snyder (lower left), for *Turbulent Landscapes*. / © Exploratorium.

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# The Science of Marketing and the Marketing of Science

By Kathleen McLean

In his 2000 book *Nobrow: The Culture of Marketing—The Marketing of Culture*, John Seabrook argues that we live in a time where marketing and culture have converged, where advertising is the content and marketing is the message, and where, if something is popular, it is unquestionably worthy of praise.

Seabrook, who covers technology and culture for the high-brow magazine *The New Yorker*, dates this transition to the early 1990s, a time when “the old cultural arbiters, whose job was to decide what was ‘good’ in the sense of ‘valuable,’ were being replaced by a new type of arbiter, whose skill was to define ‘good’ in terms of ‘popular.’” This change, he says, “made itself felt in virtually every museum, library, university, publishing house, magazine, newspaper, and TV station in the country.”

As an example, Seabrook cites the changes that took place a decade ago at his own employer. The impetus for transformation at *The New Yorker* was a drop in ad revenues; the result was a more populist product—and increasing staff tensions:

*The reason why The New Yorker no longer made money was the subject of much debate.... The editors and writers tended to blame it on the ad sales people, who worked on a different floor, for not being smart enough to translate what we meant by quality into what the advertisers meant. But the real problem was that the culture of the writers and the culture of the ad people were too disconnected from each other to have much in common.*

I mention this because a comparable change occurred in science centers in the 1990s, opening rifts among

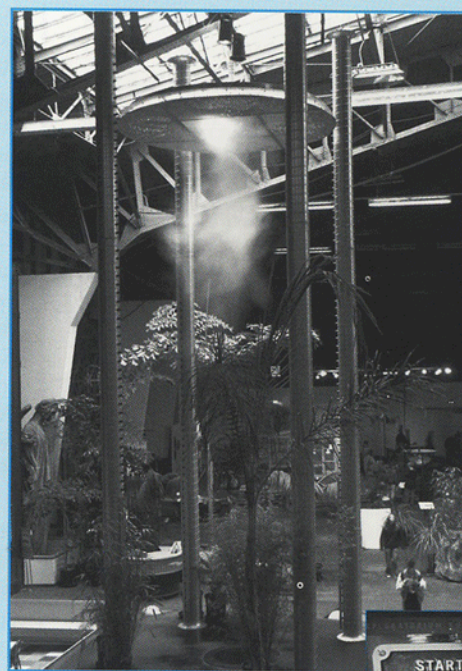
functional groups that are still difficult to cross. Content and exhibits staff felt their projects were compromised by the pressure to create “products” with the singular goal of being popular and widely “consumed.” Marketing staff complained that their hands were tied by the serious or content-heavy exhibitions they were responsible for promoting.

In recent years, this tension seems to me to have become more pronounced. One argument expressed by exhibits staff is that museums spend too much energy and money on promoting exhibitions as if they were a form of mass media. Indeed, many of the campaigns I see appear to take an apologetic approach, along the lines of “Science really isn’t that bad (or difficult). In fact, it’s downright fun (or weird, or simple)!”

Not that there’s anything wrong with fun or weirdness, but I do think this approach may reflect a more sinister assumption—that in order to be popular, exhibitions must reside within a narrow stratum of cultural norms. If that seems hyperbolic, consider some recent “science” exhibitions: *Monster Trucks* and *Theme Park* are two that come to mind. Although science centers exist within the same kind of culture that John Seabrook describes, I don’t think we have to succumb to the marketplace in the same ways that the for-profits do.

## Tales from the trenches

When I joined the Exploratorium in 1994, as director of the Center for Public Exhibition and Public Pro-



**In *Turbulent Landscapes*, exhibits like the Mesocyclone were meant to suggest the beauty and complexity of the natural world. Photo by Amy Snyder/© Exploratorium. Inset: The exhibition poster suggested a different type of experience.**



grams, the museum was already enmeshed in what I call the “marketing wars.” The conflict had begun in earnest during promotion of a 1992 ASTC traveling exhibition, *Psychology: Understanding Ourselves, Understanding Each Other*, developed by the American Psychological Association (APA) and the Ontario Science Centre.

The Exploratorium’s advertising agency, working with the museum’s first-ever director of marketing, wanted to change the name of the exhibition; they thought it was too dry and academic. When that was not possible, they designed a clever campaign featuring a flying brain diving toward Earth. The APA team was

horrified—they felt the image played into stereotypes they were trying to dispel—but the ad ran.

*Psychology* turned out to be a “blockbuster,” attracting large audiences. But because staff never systematically reflected on why it was successful and no one assessed what effect marketing had on that success, an opportunity to compare notes and reach mutual understanding was lost. The chief outcome was that exhibits staff became leery of participating in future marketing endeavors.

### “Turbulent” times

My personal introduction to the tension between marketing and exhibits came during the first National Science Foundation project I directed at the Exploratorium.

Our hope for *A Garden of Complexity* was, in the words of the grant proposal, that “the exhibits and their garden environment will weave together to create a contemplative space where visitors can develop and practice the skill of peering deeply into nature—a skill that underlies all of science....” Individual exhibits, all considered artworks, were located within a designed environment of live bamboo and river rocks. The ambience was gardenlike (or as gardenlike as we could make it in our cacophonous environment).

Ad agency and marketing staff didn’t like the garden metaphor. They

thought it wouldn’t attract visitors in the numbers we wanted. Exhibits staff pointed out that San Francisco’s annual three-day garden show attracted visitors in the tens of thousands.

After weeks of negotiations, both groups agreed on a new name for the exhibition: *Turbulent Landscapes*. The campaign featured images of push-button, lever-pulling ignition devices; it won several advertising awards.

But visitors to the exhibition seemed confused. Unable to find the exhibit “where you push the button for the tornado” or “pull the lever for the avalanche,” many complained to program staff. The exhibition was nevertheless considered successful and is still traveling today.

### Does it have to be fun?

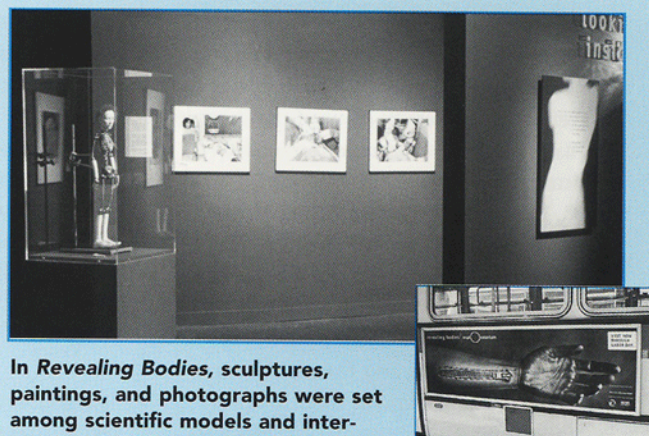
The idea for the 1999 exhibition *Frogs!* came from a visit I made to a similar exhibition at the Shedd Aquarium in Chicago. Summative evaluation at the Shedd had found that the strong conservation message seemed to encourage an appreciation of frog diversity, and that the presence of live frogs engaged visitors in looking closely, talking to strangers, and noticing differences and similarities.

People stood in long lines to get in.

*Frogs!* was an unusual topic for the Exploratorium. Staff would be experimenting for the first time with an exhibition that could both promote a message of conservation and attract a potentially different audience. We wanted visitors to understand that frogs, with their sensitivity to environmental degradation,

serve as an indicator species—the canaries in our coal mines, as it were—and that human perturbations of the natural environment might not be life-sustaining over the long run. Although we had no hard data to support our hunches, we felt that in the San Francisco Bay Area an environmental exhibition would interest a broad audience.

As it happened, we had a new ad agency and a new marketing director for this exhibition. Concerned that the conservation message would turn people off, they developed a light-hearted campaign. Ads and posters featured



**In *Revealing Bodies*, sculptures, paintings, and photographs were set among scientific models and interactive exhibits.** Photo by Amy Snyder/

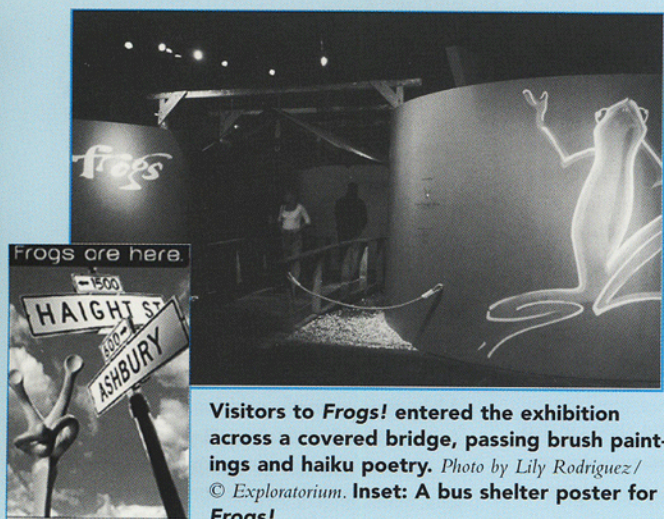
© Exploratorium. Inset: The “zipper arm” bus poster for the exhibition.

frogs reading the newspaper, knitting, and flashing the peace sign at the corner of Haight and Ashbury streets.

This approach, too, won awards. Assured by some colleagues that the images were clever, I still worried that the ads might undermine our message. After all, if frogs could survive on the streets of San Francisco, they could probably survive a little pollution in their natural habitats. But again, because of time and budget constraints, we did not conduct a follow-up study.

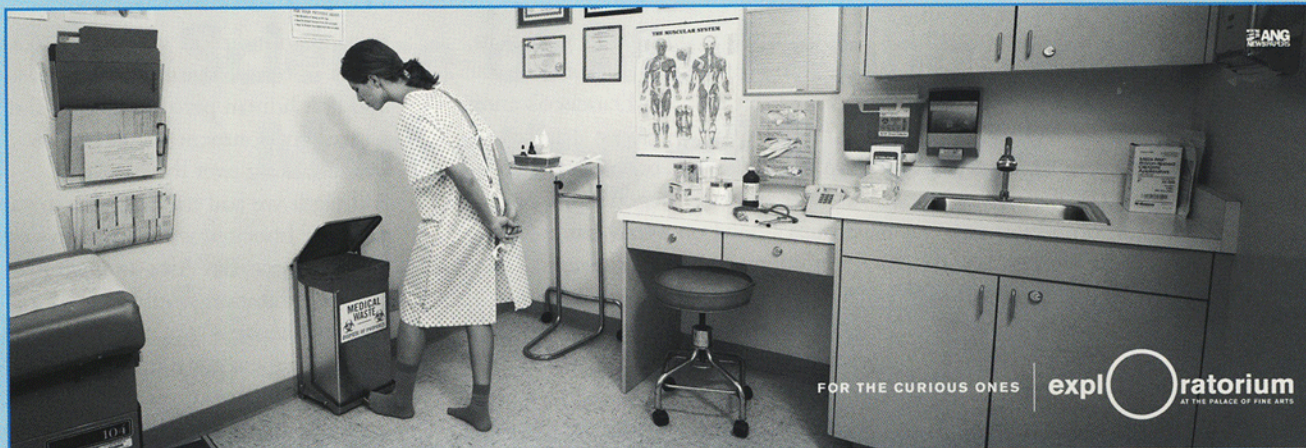
### Images of the body

In 2000, we opened one of the most experimental of our temporary exhibitions. *Revealing Bodies* combined strikingly different images of the human body from both scientific and artistic traditions, juxtaposing artworks and artifacts like an 18th-century wax



**Visitors to *Frogs!* entered the exhibition across a covered bridge, passing brush paintings and haiku poetry.** Photo by Lily Rodriguez/

© Exploratorium. Inset: A bus shelter poster for *Frogs!*



A poster from a current Exploratorium marketing campaign promotes the brand rather than a specific exhibition, demonstrating a close alignment with mission and the museum experience. Photo by Mike Martin/© Exploratorium

*Venus* from La Specola in Florence with a life-size model of the *Visible Human* digital project. The goal was to reflect the diversity of ways that people have imaged—and imagined—the human body over time.

The marketing campaign, which again garnered awards and collegial appreciation, featured bus ads showing a zipper running down a human forearm. Did visitors feel a disconnect between the ads and the actual experience? I don't know; there was no follow-up. But about two weeks into the campaign, I got an e-mail from the marketing director of a local art museum: Didn't we know that the Bay Area was experiencing a weird craze in which young teenage girls were slashing their forearms? She felt the ads played into, and perhaps even aggravated, the problem.

### Reaching across the divide

In late 2000, a fourth marketing director, Rosemary Prawdzik, joined the Exploratorium staff. Prawdzik expressed concern that with each new marketing campaign, we weren't building a message of who we were as an organization, but rather, in her words, "just promoting the new thing in town." She understood that people come to the Exploratorium because of its mission: "to create a culture of learning through innovative environments, programs, and tools that help

people nurture *their curiosity about the world around them* [author's emphasis]."

"The key to an integrated representation," says Prawdzik, "is bringing marketing and exhibition development together at the onset of a project, thus alleviating conflicts at the tail-end of the process."

Before launching a new advertising campaign, she recruited staff members from various disciplines to inform the ad agency working on the project and help them understand what makes the Exploratorium unique. The agency presented three concepts for staff review. This time, there was no conflict—everyone agreed unanimously.

"For the curious ones," hit the streets in 2001. By emphasizing a major aspect of the mission—curiosity—it promotes the brand overall, not just one exhibition. At the same time, it is designed so exhibitions and programs can be incorporated as examples of the brand. The campaign has been expanded since its introduction and now includes two television spots and four radio commercials.

The "For the curious ones" approach seems to me as clever and memorable as any of the previous campaigns. It even has won awards. And I think it is much more honest.

Let's face it: Despite the title of this article, marketing is *not* a science. Exhibition and marketing strategies

and decisions are based predominantly on opinions, hunches, best guesses, and personal taste. Yes, marketing, exhibits, and program staff need to collaborate much more throughout the planning and design process. But in order for that collaboration to be truly effective, we first must come to a shared sense of our visitors, and a shared understanding of how our missions and values might best provide real public service.

Whereas much of our culture, at least in the United States, defines itself in terms of the marketplace, science centers are founded on deeply held values aimed at real benefits for society. Our marketing and branding must create symbols that represent those benefits and communicate what we want the public to remember when they think about us over time.

We must recognize that science centers are not fundamentally in business to *sell* something. Our visitors are not consumers. They are creators of their own learning. They are our *partners*, who share a curiosity about the world and a hunger for meaningful experiences. ■

Formerly director of the Center for Public Exhibition and Public Programs at the Exploratorium, San Francisco, Kathleen McLean is currently principal of Independent Exhibitions, Berkeley, California. She can be reached at [kmclean@ind-x.org](mailto:kmclean@ind-x.org).