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Exhibits in Libraries and Archives: The Nuts and Bolts

Bill Stolz

Wright State University - Main Campus, bill.stolz@wright.edu

PRESERVATION PERSPECTIVES:
EXHIBITS IN LIBRARIES AND ARCHIVES
THE NUTS AND BOLTS

Work area with dry mount press and mat cutter

BY BILL STOLZ
ARCHIVIST, WRIGHT STATE UNIVERSITY

You have an exhibit theme, photographs selected, and an opening date, now you just need to plan and build the actual exhibit. This can be a daunting challenge for the first-time exhibit builder, but there is hope. With a little patience, proper equipment, and supplies, an exhibit can take shape and provide another avenue to promote your collections.

First, think about the scope of your exhibit (number of images, text panels, and/or objects) and the space available. Exhibit spaces come in all shapes and sizes, including traditional display cases, traveling fabric tabletop displays, and retractable banners.

Here in the Archives at Wright State, most of the exhibits are temporary and utilize photographic reproductions mounted on foam core. While this may seem laborious, the result is a durable reproduction that can be used time and time again. The mounted prints also make for quick set-up and takedown.

Now a few tips for planning the exhibit:
- Always consider your audience. What story do you hope to tell and will the potential audience understand and be interested in the display?
- Select the photographs, documents, and other items to display, and pick more than you will need. (It is easier to reduce than to try to find another image to fill any empty spot.)
- Map or sketch what you envision the exhibit to look like. This will help decide what works together and how items fit within the space.
- Use a variety of sizes, big and small, for the prints.
- Think about photo finish: glossy, matte, or luster. We print our photos with a luster (semi-gloss) finish.
- Do not forget a title. Think of something catchy, if possible, to bring the audience over to the exhibit.

Exhibit on a 6-panel fabric tabletop

If your repository is serious about creating professional looking and durable exhibits, the following tools and supplies are vital:
- Computer, scanner, and printer to create photographic reprints
- Measuring tape and/or rulers
- Dry mount or heat press
- Foam core board or heavy card stock
- Adhesive sheets/mounting tissue to mount prints to foam board
- Mat cutter
- Velcro to attach the exhibit pieces to the fabric exhibit boards
- Risers/easels of various shapes and sizes

Many of the supplies, items like foam board, card stock, and Velcro, can be purchased locally or online. There are several reputable archival and library vendors, such as Gaylord Archival or Hollinger Metal Edge, that sell everything from foam board to exhibit cases.

Look to your organization or community for assistance and partnerships. Many libraries and universities have marketing/PR departments that use many of the tools listed above. Is there a Makerspace in your library or community? Makerspaces are popping up in public libraries, schools, technology centers, and communities, and these spaces typically have equipment like poster printers, vinyl cutters, heat presses, and more. Check out the Kenton County Public Library STREAM Center and the Warren County Public Library Idea Lab to see what they have.

Installation of exhibit in secure exhibit case

Just as important as the photos and objects is the text describing the exhibit. When writing the text, remember your audience. Who do you expect to view the exhibit (adults, children, alumni)? And what do you want them to take away? This is where you supplement your story with information about the images and documents. The goals are to educate the audience and to propel them to want to learn more through the resources available in your library. Captions should be short, precise, and provide details (names, dates, location, and so on).

Exhibits do not end once they are taken down. The images can be reused in other exhibits and serve as wonderful tools for outreach visits (think show and tell!). I have incorporated many of our exhibit prints into my presentations when I visit the local elementary and middle schools. These visuals provide students with the opportunity to see and touch the photographs and documents from the collection, and they often believe they are handling the real thing!

Finally, check with state and national organizations for educational opportunities on exhibit preparation and label writing. Both the Kentucky Council on Archives and the Kentucky Museum & Heritage Alliance provide networking and professional development opportunities. National organizations like the American Association for State and Local History and the Society of American Archivists sponsor annual conferences, workshops, webinars, and publications. The online resource Connecting to Collections Care provides webinars, resource guides, and a forum for smaller cultural institutions.

While creating exhibits can be stressful, they are very rewarding tools to promote your collections, celebrate local events or people, and connect the community to history.

Exhibit pieces mounted on foam core attached to fabric backing with Velcro

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