PARTNERING

MAXIMIZING THE IMAX:

MUSEUM EXHIBITS WITH

GIANT SCREEN FILMS

BY MARY KORENIC
PAIRING MUSEUM EXHIBITS WITH GIANT SCREEN FILMS ENRICHES LEARNING FOR ALL AUDIENCES. PAIRING THE VISUAL, EXPERIENTIAL QUALITY OF A FILM WITH THE FACTUAL, INTERACTIVE QUALITY OF PERMANENT MUSEUM EXHIBITS MAXIMIZES THE LEARNING POTENTIAL OF BOTH.

Giant screen films have excellent audience appeal by their ability to create excitement, interest and curiosity about a subject. The Giant Screen Theater Association (GSTA) Symposium Advance Speaker papers, printed in the Informal Science Review (1999) provide evidence and reports that giant screen films excite and motivate. Because of their ability to immerse learners in an experience of sight and sound, giant screen films are excellent tools impacting attitudinal learning among audiences.

The positive affect of giant screen films is evident when listening to viewers as they exit theaters. Visitors often comment, “I want to know about that place,” or “I want to know more about that subject. Where can I find out more?” These types of questions are indicative of how effective the film was in preparing visitors to be receptive for additional learning related to the film topic.

Although audiences of giant screen films especially like the experiential quality of film, films tend to be light in content (Flagg 1999). An opportunity to provide content information exists. Giant screen theaters associated with informal learning institutions such as museums, zoos or science centers are full of cognitive learning opportunities.

Museums often excel in providing firsthand experience of actual objects and real phenomenon. Museums also provide forums for socialization. Museums serve these visitor needs by providing programs which are engaging, interactive, object focused, and provide a format for visitors who want to learn more about a concept or theme.
Many giant screen theaters are associated with museums. Pairing the attitudinal experience created by a giant screen film with the cognitive experience provided by museum exhibits results in a combined learning experience that has a large, positive learning impact on the visitor.

Programming in museums serves as a bridge connecting giant screen films with exhibits. Programming can go in two directions. It can consist of a variety of activities and formats that builds upon the affective experience initiated by the giant screen film. Programming also can encourage visitors to see a film by providing content information based on exhibits.

Use museum exhibits to show connections to the place, topic or concept of the film. Museums may choose to show or build new exhibits to match the topic of the giant screen film shown in the institutional theater. The Reuben Fleet Science Center, San Diego, California, for example, schedules temporary exhibits to coincide with films. For instance, Lynne Kennedy at the Fleet Center explained that the mystery theme was explored by pairing a temporary exhibit, Whodunit: The Science of Solving Crime with the film, Mysteries of Egypt. The Memphis Museum System, Tennessee, has an exhibit gallery which changes with each new film. Barbara Moses of the Museum System said that the Imax discovery room can be used exclusively to relate to films and changes about every three and one half months. The 1,700-square-foot special exhibit gallery holds exhibits, hands-on activities and programs especially designed to match the theme of the associated film. The Fort Worth Museum of Science and History, Texas, linked the film, Ring of Fire, with a temporary exhibit, Powers of Nature, produced by the Franklin Institute, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. “The exhibit really honed in on the big idea of

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tectonics and earthquakes, which was a great pairing for Ring of Fire,” says Colleen Blair of the Fort Worth Museum.

Less common are museums that develop programming to link existing permanent exhibits with a giant screen film. The programming helps visitors see connections between exhibits and the film by providing additional content information through activities.

An example of this less common use of linking permanent exhibits with films is the Milwaukee Public Museum permanent exhibits and The Greatest Places. The Milwaukee Public Museum (MPM), Wisconsin, is a museum of human and natural history. It is composed of four exhibit floors arranged by geographic area and topic and is most notably known for its diorama technique of exhibits. The Greatest Places features seven places, Namib Desert, Okavango Delta, Madagascar, Amazon, Iguazu Falls, Greenland and the Tibetan Plateau. Multiple-format programs were
developed by MPM staff to connect the film and permanent exhibits. One example was called the Stop Spot and took place in existing exhibit galleries. Stop Spots were carts containing touchable objects and were accompanied by a volunteer who was familiar with the objects and their meaning. The volunteers used the objects as a starting point to spur discussion about the exhibit and the film.

Seven Stop Spot carts were developed, each corresponding with a specific place featured in *The Greatest Places*. For example, one Stop Spot Cart was placed near the permanent Amazon exhibit. Visitors enjoyed being able to interpret objects they were seeing in the exhibit, recognizing them from seeing similar objects in the context of the film. This recognition gave them confidence and interest to further explore other objects of the Amazon.

The format proved to be a popular one. It was adapted to help link exhibits with other giant screen films. For example, *Special Effects*, which gave a behind-the-scenes look at Hollywood, did not have as direct a link with existing exhibits. However, a Stop Spot cart was developed to explore the behind-the-scenes look at how museum dioramas are assembled by artists. Visitors were able to see connections between the two different kinds of media (film and diorama), the attention to detail by craftsman, the concern with reality, and some of the “tricks of the
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trade” to simulate reality. After seeing the film and participating in the Stop Spot program, visitors were able to view museum dioramas from a new perspective.

Provide opportunities in the museum galleries for visitors to talk with experts about the giant screen film topic.

After seeing a giant screen film, visitors want to talk about what they have seen. One opportunity is to provide experts for visitors. There are institutional theaters that invite experts who are featured in the film to come speak after a film or in a museum lecture hall about their film. A few institutional theaters use community experts in existing permanent galleries for limited time periods, having them interact with visitors.

As an example, VPM provided opportunities for visitors to hear firsthand accounts of what it was like to visit some of the greatest places in the world to coincide with The Greatest Places. The program was called Greatest Place Day. Community volunteers were stationed at 20 dioramas throughout MPM. Volunteers were former Peace Corps workers, adults who have taken trips to places around the world or who have lived in places around the world. Each volunteer had a table on which they placed objects they collected or used on their journey. The tables were placed next to the corresponding exhibit in the permanent galleries. Community volunteers shared information about people, environment, plants, animals and other personal stories about places. Volunteers used the nearby exhibits highlighting their place as a source of additional discussion.

Families, adults and scout groups who participated in this
out more about these places by directly interacting with the volunteers. Some visitors who had not seen The Greatest Places chose to do so after discussion with the volunteer presenters.

Provide opportunities in the museum galleries for visitors to talk with each other about the giant screen film. Watching a giant screen film with hundreds of other people is still a solitary experience. Each visitor views and experiences the film from his/her own perspective. Visitors often want to talk about the film, their reactions, what they saw and what they thought about what they saw. Museum exhibits can provide a forum for visitors to discuss with each other their feelings while simultaneously learning additional content.

As an example, MPM developed a program called Backpacks. Each family choosing to participate in this program during their museum visit was loaned a backpack containing five activities that correspond to MPM dioramas that relate to the places featured in The Greatest Places. In each backpack were five plastic envelopes, each containing an instruction card and objects. The card helped the visitors locate the place geographically in the world, locate the pace in the MPM galleries, understand the objects displayed in the diorama and follow instructions to use the object/activity in the packet. Families were observed talking with each other about what they saw in the film, how it related to what they saw in the exhibits and how it related to their personal experiences.

Provide visitors with a personal connection to the giant screen film. Films about far away places or unfamiliar topics are appealing for audiences. Whenever possible, helping audiences make a personal connection can make the experience even more meaningful. One way to make the connection is through programming. For example, MPM made the concept of The Greatest Places personally relevant to people in southeastern Wisconsin by offering a series of day trips. Trips featured great places in the state. Each day trip included a ticket to see the film, a tour of the exhibits highlighting the flora/fauna of the area that would
be visited in the state, bus transportation, lunch and museum guide. The program allowed visitors to discuss what makes some places great, what makes their own state great and which exhibits feature flora and fauna native to Wisconsin. The programming served as a bridge connecting exhibits, film and personal experiences.

Rob Lunde at Science World, Vancouver, Canada, noted a similar program which invited local geographers to a slide and lecture show about great places in British Columbia. The program was offered for school classes who viewed the slide/lecture program prior to seeing The Greatest Places.

Provide visitors with a tangible goal for them to reach and reward them for their pursuit. To help promote the film and promote visits to museum exhibits, MPM created a passport program. The program consisted of the public picking up a card which resembled a passport. On the inside of each passport were seven squares, each containing a program activity for visitors to complete that related to the film and museum exhibits. When a visitor completed an activity listed on their passport, they received a stamp from the program presenter. Upon completion of at least three programs, the visitors received a free gift related to the film theme.

The advantage of this program is that visitors were encouraged to return to MPM time and time again. Visitors were motivated to participate in additional programs, learn additional information and receive a gift to motivate their efforts.
Stack the deck.
Partnering programming in permanent exhibit galleries with the giant screen film helps teachers see curriculum linkages. As budgets are tighter and teachers are asked to justify excursions out of the school buildings, it becomes increasingly important for both museums and theaters to show how such a field trip is beneficial to school students.

By “stacking the deck,” that is, providing multiple activities in the museum’s permanent exhibits along with viewing the film, the school curriculum can be enriched.

MPM recommended a package for classroom educators to help teachers meet national geography standards. The package included viewing *The Greatest Places*, taking a guided tour of exhibits in the permanent galleries that directly relate to the film, receiving a specifically prepared teacher guide highlighting exhibits and their relationship to the film, and participating in a teacher overnight at the museum featuring the film and related gallery activities. Offering so many options for teachers encouraged them to bring their students to see the film and the exhibits.

“Teachers are more likely to book a film if there is a program associated with it,” says Lunde. To encourage more school group participation, Science World also developed a program linking

*Mysteries of Egypt* with objects in their collections. Students used observations and inference to determine the function of these mystery objects.

Pairing museum exhibits with giant screen films enriches learning for all audiences. Pairing the visual experiential quality of a film with the factual, interactive quality of permanent museum exhibits maximizes the learning potential of both.

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