

## 10. Newseum: Culture and Scope at an Exhibition

**00:01 Cathy Trost:** We're a storytelling Institution, our project is stories. We put some fantasy things with them, including objects from history, but a great story is much harder to create than most people would think.

[music]

**00:17 Kendall Lott:** The institution is the Newseum, the project, an exhibition. I recently caught up with project leaders for the exhibit The Boomer List.

**00:26 Patty Rhule:** The exhibit highlights 19 Baby Boomers, one of the largest and most influential generations ever in the arts, in sports, in politics, in advocacy, in all areas, that kind of tries to bring to life that influence.

[music]

**00:43 S?:** From the Washington DC chapter of Project Management Institute, this is PM Point of View, the podcast that looks at project management from all the angles. Here's your host, Kendall Lott.

**00:53 KL:** I went to the Newseum to find out how an exhibit is like a project. That was the point of view I considered, but what I learned was how organizational culture affects the style of project management and indeed the shape of the project itself. Maybe because they come from a journalistic background, the Newseum has an exciting management dynamic. It's reminiscent of a newsroom, at least those you see on TV, fast-paced and collegial. In a communal atmosphere like the Newseum, project ownership is a team affair.

**01:20 Scott Williams:** It really truly is a leadership team, from development, PR and marketing, exhibits, broadcasts, technology. We really do sit in a room and talk this stuff out.

**01:34 CT:** We have a series of pretty formulaic movements that we do in this dance, that are gonna be sketched out on any kind of Excel spreadsheet, but the life and the vitality that is invested in each of those pieces of the timetable is, I think, what we do uniquely.

**01:55 KL:** My first stop was the office of Cathy Trost, senior vice president of exhibits and programs. I was told that if there were in fact a project manager around here, it would be her.

**02:04 CT:** Well, I would say that project management is spot-on in terms of what we do, but that it's a team sport. I think to some degree everyone project manages here their projects, but they all build toward a big whole. We'll build a critical date schedule that will look at deliverables all along the way. And I sort of liken our team to something edible moving through the belly of a snake, [laughter] because each part of the team is working collaboratively, but they're in the spotlight at different times.

## 10. Culture and Scope at an Exhibition

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**02:38 KL:** No exhibits can go up without some outlay of dollars. That seems pretty fundamental. So, before I went further I thought I would visit Emily Nicholson, the campaign director. Winding my way to the upper floor of offices, I found her ready to tell me how the money and the initial stakeholder management works.

**02:54 Emily Nicholson:** We start by meeting with the exhibits team regularly, and they often throw ideas that they're having for exhibits that are even a year, two, three years down the line. Our role is we always look at, is a donor interested? And then our other aspect that we look at is, would our members be interested? I can tell you, with Boomers, it was a little unique because we immediately thought of AARP, and we had some contacts there, and there really wasn't a long list of other people we would have gone to, so it's just a really wonderful fit for us and for them, and they were able to make that exhibit possible with a gift of \$250,000.

[music]

**03:39 KL:** Okay, so now they have something to work with. What next? Patty Rhule, senior manager of exhibit development explained.

**03:46 PR:** Everything starts out with a script. Obviously, first there's an exhibit concept. And then we say, okay, here's what the concept is. And then it all starts with a script. It's kind of like Hollywood.

**03:54 KL:** What was the concept here?

**03:56 PR:** I think the concept was the last of the Baby Boomers turned 50. Then it became clear that AARP had a relationship with the photographer Timothy Greenfield-Sanders, he's quite an acclaimed photographer. And so that seemed like a really great opportunity for us. We love photography, we want to be a world-class showcase for photography. Mr. Greenfield-Sanders pretty much had an idea of who he was going to photograph for his project, so that was pretty much being presented to us, so we just had to figure out, how are we going to exhibit the photos, what information were we going to include with the photos, excerpts from his interviews, and then how do we bring the new Newseum element of headlines of history to this? And we had multiple meetings, brainstorming meetings about what would people be interested in terms of this exhibit. The baby boomer moments, the Great Moments of our times, Vietnam, the '60s, the Kennedy assassinations, moments both good and bad, and health, arts would be a really great way to latch on to that story.

**04:57 KL:** Now, how much of that was triggered by AARP themselves, about the position that they wanted to see on this? Do you get requirements from them?

**05:04 PR:** We met with them and we brainstormed with them but we kind of presented to them, "Here's what our thinking is," and they were like, "Great, sounds good."

**05:11 KL:** Is that what constitutes exhibit development, then, in your space?

## 10. Culture and Scope at an Exhibition

**05:15 PR:** That's my part of it. Exhibit development is Carrie Christoffersen, who you'll speak with later. She's in charge of artifacts.

**05:22 KL:** Curation.

**05:22 PR:** Curatorial team. They're the visual folks who are working on getting images, photos, making sure they bring together the concept.

**05:31 KL:** But you're responding to them, aren't you? You give those...

**05:33 PR:** We're all working together.

**05:34 KL:** Working together?

**05:34 PR:** We're constantly talking to each other, we're constantly communicating, we're talking to the designers who are gonna make it look fabulous. We're talking with the folks in broadcast because they have an interactive part of this, where people will be able to go and swipe through behind-the-scenes photos.

**05:51 KL:** Just as Patty suggested, I went to see Carrie Christoffersen, curator of collections. As she describes it, she's responsible for the physical as well as the intellectual care and feeding of the artifact collections. From the project management point of view, this is the scope development or scope elaboration part of the project.

**06:08 Carrie Christoffersen:** All of us have some capacity for curating the exhibit, 'cause we don't have a real traditional museum structure here. We don't have a curator of early 20th century radio, and we don't have a curator of mid-century newspapers.

**06:27 KL:** Is that a function of size or a function of design?

**06:29 CC:** I think it's design.

**06:31 KL:** You don't want it that way.

**06:32 CC:** Yeah, I think that we want everybody to have a real voice and feel like... You can get to the point where you get a little too siloed in that kind of structure. You've got your little fiefdom and you're gonna hold it close. It can be a little bit more difficult. And partly is just a function of being a news museum. We have an archivist who's specifically dedicated to the print news collection, so we'd start talking with her. There's our registrar, who sort of is the nuts and bolts caretaker of the collection but also has a great awareness of what's in the collection, and what's significant, and what could relate. She starts thinking about protest buttons and that kind of thing, 'cause there's these sort of touchstones for this generation that we know exist, that we know we're going to explore, but we go beyond that.

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**07:28 KL:** What in this particular exhibit, The Boomer List, did you see yourself as curating the intellectual. Where did you come forward with a piece of that?

## 10. Culture and Scope at an Exhibition

**07:37 CC:** We knew that we wanted to, in addition to the amazing images that the photographer was bringing, we wanted to have this great timeline, so we're working together with the writing research group to figure out not just what the critical moments are in this span of history that we're covering, but what the critical objects and print news pieces are. Sometimes for us what we have the most of can help define what was most significant. You know what I mean? Everybody and their brother kept the JFK assassination newspaper, right? And probably half of them have donated them to us, so we know, just by the sheer nature of the way that collection exist, that that's a significant moment.

[music]

**08:26 CC:** We started with a longer span of history than we actually ended up with. We started out taking it to present day. Yeah, we were looking initially at going...

**08:36 KL:** I mean, we Boomers are still alive. [chuckle]

**08:37 CC:** Right, exactly. Both physically and conceptually it was beginning to be untenable. And then we all sort of got this brainstorm that... Could we just go until the last boomer was 18, until they essentially reached adulthood, until they came of age, so then it would be this timeline that covered the period in which the Boomers are coming of age, and that really sat well with everybody.

**09:03 KL:** Do people debate similarly on other types of projects or exhibits?

**09:06 CC:** Oh sure, yeah.

**09:08 KL:** In terms of...

**09:09 CC:** Of their own personal, sort of what they... Yeah. Maybe less so, this one had just some fun moments 'cause I just think it was a fun...

**09:17 KL:** What's another fun moment?

**09:19 CC:** There's gonna be this scent station.

**09:23 KL:** More scope.

**09:25 CC:** So you get to smell the sort of scents of the Boomer generation. And there was a lot of fun discussion about what could and should and couldn't or shouldn't be included as those scent possibilities. We knew then that we also needed this opportunity for people to talk back, 'cause we were having all these exciting discussions.

**09:48 KL:** And yet again, more scope.

**09:50 CC:** So we leave into the exhibition that opportunity. There will be a chance for people to write on a post-it note, what's your major Boomer moment or what's your major Boomer thing that isn't in this timeline?

## 10. Culture and Scope at an Exhibition

**10:03 KL:** How this project team worked triggered how they anticipated the user engagement, and it changed the form of the project. In a city world-renowned for its free museums, this is so important for the museum, this customer focus. Attracting paying customers is a challenge. The project manager arrives at risk management.

**10:23 SW:** Risk, as in any business, I'm gonna say here it's the same. The risk would be we build and nobody comes.

**10:34 KL:** That's Scott Williams, senior vice president of marketing and sales. Before coming to the Newseum, Scott was head of the marketing for Elvis Presley enterprises, I'm talking about Graceland. This is a guy who understands getting paying costumers in the door.

**10:46 SW:** You know, let's say we think we know what people wanna see and we put it on.

**10:52 KL:** How do you mitigate that?

**10:53 SW:** We stay very much on top of our business, and we know how many people are coming every single day, and we know where they're from, we know how it compares to last year, we know how it compares to our expectation, then we stay flexible.

**11:11 KL:** Scope adjusted to costumers, not to the sponsor, during the project development. Interesting.

**11:17 SW:** If we need to try to figure it out, "Hey, we might need to shift some of our marketing and advertising dollars to now, that we were planning on using in fourth quarter, because clearly we haven't done a good job of getting the word out about this particular exhibit."

[music]

**11:38 KL:** How did you do project release? What happens to your role in marketing around this project?

**11:45 SW:** The advertising part has already happened, the ads are placed, so that'll start running. The PR part, though, we'll have a big kick off event here, and we want to get lots of people, lots of press, to the launch event, whatever it is. And then, if the exhibits team needs some more data or research, then our team will interview people as they come in and find out what they thought about the exhibit.

[music]

**12:13 KL:** Each exhibit at the Newseum involves an extensive list of stakeholders. As Patty pointed out, there's a diverse and demanding group of people that they must satisfy.

**12:23 PR:** We have a lot of stakeholders here, because...

**12:25 KL:** Right, that's what it sounds like.

## 10. Culture and Scope at an Exhibition

[chuckle]

**12:27 PR:** Yeah. We have a lot of stakeholders, our partner, development wants to exhibit to be good, marketing wants the exhibit to be good so they can sell it, visitor services wants to be able to explain the exhibit to people who come by because they're the people who are making the one-to-one comment. As a result, there's a lot of constant comment and interactive...

**12:44 KL:** To produce the quality you want.

**12:46 PR:** Mm-hmm.

**12:48 KL:** But ultimately, it comes down to the people who give the money to keep things moving. Emily, the campaign director, has her own criteria of success and a repeatable process in place.

**12:57 EN:** I think the biggest measurement of success is repeat donors that we have. One of the other things that we really focus on are grant reports that we make to donors, where we let them know, "Your exhibit that you made possible was featured in the New York Times and the Washington Post and 37 other news articles, and it was tweeted so many times, and..."

**13:21 KL:** So you track all that?

**13:23 EN:** We do.

[music]

**13:27 KL:** I noticed at the beginning you used some project management terms, and you're the only person in my discussions with your organization that have used those, that would talk about critical path and critical path on schedules. Did you have training in it? Have you had people support this? Is it natural?

**13:39 CC:** Well, we have a couple people here who are trained project managers, and I've learned much from them. You have to do that. I mean, there's no way that we can be a calendared company with products that are launching, so to speak, at hard dates. [chuckle]

**13:53 KL:** Schedules don't change. The last schedule doesn't change.

**13:58 CC:** We never have missed an exhibit opening. You don't wanna go out and long lead, market an exhibit and then say, "Whoops, sorry, it's not gonna be open on time."

**14:07 KL:** What do you change to make sure that you hit your schedules? Usually something gives way, cost or scope or something else.

**14:12 CC:** Well, we say you can have it cheap, fast, or good, pick two. That's a common saying, right? What happens, we all work really, really hard. [laughter] That's just the truth of it, and would that not be true of almost any institution?

**14:28 KL:** Sure. What would help you do that better from a project manager perspective, anything? You feel you have it all, or there's some things you guys would like?

## 10. Culture and Scope at an Exhibition

**14:34 CC:** No, we know of very much that would help us is to have three to five-year exhibit calendars, so that we were really in control, or thought we were, of our destiny. [chuckle] But we are often only two years out at best. And we also wanna remain nimble and be opportunistic about potential partnerships and anniversaries and things that come up.

**14:54 KL:** Yeah. You guys are journalists, in the end. There's an element of that that seems to permeate your organization.

[music]

**15:05 PR:** Being a news museum, we tend to be very quick-footed. When James Foley, the journalist, was killed in Syria, we had an exhibit up the next day about that, 'cause, again, the risks of being a journalist is an important part of our mission, to explain that to people, so we had that up in the world news gallery the next day.

**15:27 KL:** I came away with the feeling that some of the key ingredients that keep the Newseum humming are agility, constant communication, and a shared passion for their mission. The organizational structure is flat and lean, which enables a degree of nimbleness. And, being journalists, they are expert communicators. But perhaps most important of all, they care. The level of dedication and heartfelt excitement they feel for their work is truly exceptional and inspiring.

**15:53 CT:** Journalism at its best is storytelling that changes people's lives. I think that's exactly what we do at the Newseum, is we do storytelling that, if it doesn't change people's lives, it certainly gives them new ways to think about issues in our world.

[music]

**16:13 KL:** Special thanks to all the people at the Newseum who helped make this podcast possible: Cathy Trost, Emily Nicholson, Patty Rhule, Carrie Christoffersen, and Scott Williams.

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**16:25 KL:** Our theme music was composed by Molly Flannery, used with permission, post-production performed at Empowered Strategies, and technical and web support provided by Potomac Management Resources. I'm your host, Kendall Lott, and until next time, keep it in scope and get it done.