

Blockbuster exhibitions: a case study



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The contemporary blockbuster exhibit, which emerged in the museum world in the late twentieth century, has become increasingly popular among museums in the past few decades. Defined by Albert Elsen as a “ large-scale loan exhibition which people who normally don’t go to museums will stand in line for hours to see,” these exhibits produce mass interest and wide-ranging excitement. In my paper I tackle the issue of the blockbuster exhibit and debate the pros and cons of this type of display through an analysis of the exhibit, Harry Potter: The Exhibition on display at the Museum of Science in Boston, Massachusetts.

Does the display of such an exhibition harm the museum’s mission statement and core collection with its “ theme park” type of display and potential lack of relevance to the museum’s purpose? Does it take away from the scholarly principle of the museum? Do benefits to funding and attendance figures dictate the museum’s policies regarding the presentation of exhibitions? Through the careful study of blockbuster exhibits I determine if museums are influenced by corporate money that sponsor such exhibits and whether such partnerships weaken the reputation and integrity of the museum.

The Museum of Science (MOS), originally founded as the Boston Society of Natural History in 1830, is located in Boston, Massachusetts. In its mission statement, the MOS states that its larger purpose is to " play a leading role in transforming the nation’s relationship with science and technology. " The museum perceives its role as an educator and informal leader in the museum community that promotes science and advances young people’s comprehension of the subject matter. Its responsibilities are to use the

collection as a tool for learning and to enhance the knowledge of preK-12th grade students.

On view in the red wing from October 25, 2009 through February 21, 2010, is the Harry Potter exhibition, a 10, 000 square-foot exhibit that features 200 props and costumes from the Harry Potter movies. The objects in this collection are advertised by the museum as “ showcasing the supreme artistry and craftsmanship that went into the making of the ever popular film series. ” A July 22, 2009 press release from the MOS stressed the importance of the opening in Boston since the museum is the only New England location to host the exhibition.

Such advertisements are standard when promoting blockbuster exhibits; it urges the public to visit by stressing its importance as a once in a lifetime event. This tactic is used to ensure increased numbers of visitors to the exhibit. In line with most blockbusters, Harry Potter: The Exhibition sells special tickets, which are not included in the regular price of admission to the museum, for a specific hour on a specific day. This is to control the crowds and ensure that each visitor has space to view the items.

After visiting the exhibit one will be surprised to find no mention or relation to science or technology at all. The props and costumes that are on display aren't used to discuss the science behind making the movie, but rather are displayed as relics worn by famous characters and movie stars. Explanations from the set designers about why they chose a particular object are mentioned in the audio guide but nothing about the process or technique is described, as one reviewer noted: “ craft, and not much of that, is about as good as ‘ Potter’ gets from any sort of educational perspective.

With no science or technology present in the exhibition, it is hard to see how this fits into the museum's mission statement. The museum's sale of special tickets that space out the time in which each visitor can view the exhibit space doesn't seem to work at all. It is still overcrowded and hard to maneuver through the gallery. One lingers in line waiting behind five rows of people to see an object, and then when the object is in sight it can only be viewed for a brief moment, as the guests in line behind are anxious to take a look.

It's so crowded that it is almost impossible to see all of the artifacts exhibited, which thwarts the audience from engaging meaningfully with the objects on display. The exhibition as a whole feels like an advertisement for the film franchise. With videos throughout the exhibit drawing one in and showcasing the movies' appeal to the masses. It is no surprise then to learn that the exhibit was put together and funded in partnership with Warner Bros. Consumer Products (a merchandising organization and subsidiary of Warner Bros. Enterprises LLC. – the company who owns the Harry Potter movie franchise) and the Exhibitgroup/Giltspur (a “ experiential marketing agency” that creates “ branded entertainment experiences that surprise and delight audiences. ”) Using the museum as a tool for promoting the Potter series commercializes the museum and questions the integrity of any scholarly information that the museum is espousing. As a member of the American Association of Museums (AAM) the Museum of Science must follow a code of ethics.

That code states that the museum ensures that “ revenue-producing activities and activities that involve relationships with external entities are

compatible with the museum's mission and support its public trust responsibilities. " In an interview with the museum's vice president of education, Paul Fontaine, by The Boston Globe, Fontaine agreed that the exhibit is " weighted more towards artifacts from the film" than intellectual interpretation into the science of the material.

Though he did state that live presentations and lectures describing how the " movie magic" is made would supplement the exhibit (features that weren't available during my visit.) Since the exhibit is geared more towards the commercial aspect of the film and less towards the skill set used to make the movies, the museum goes against the code of ethics it agreed upon when joining the AAM. How can the integrity of the museum and its public trust stay intact when scholarship is replaced with sheer entertainment?

One cannot deny, though, that the entertainment factor of this exhibition is an exciting way to draw in a younger audience, one goal of the museum as stated on its website. In " encouraging young people of all backgrounds to explore and develop their interests in understanding the natural and human-made world," the museum hopes to insert a lifelong interest in science. Using the blockbuster exhibit to reel that crowd in can be seen as a tool to foster scholarship at a later date. Once in the museum, these new visitors will see the other collections that the museum has to offer.

Entry to the main collections are included in the price of the Harry Potter ticket and can be used at anytime within the next six months if a longer visit is too much to handle all at once. Partnering with corporations in the for-profit world does seem to be a logical tactic for museums looking to bolster funds in these economically trying times. Blockbusters are entities that

generate “buzz” for the museum and as a result “attract new visitors, who then go on to look at the rest of the museum.” That can then raise the profile of the museum within its community and help market its collection.

With the extra money generated by the sale of each special ticket, which costs \$26.00 for adults, \$23.00 for children, and \$5.00 for members, the museum can also improve its collection care and other services at its institution. But do the means justify the end? It seems like a double-edged sword. Museums need money to run their institutions but in presenting a show that is below the standards of the museum's mission, the public could then lose faith in that institution. One also has to question the motives behind the financier who put the show together.

This exhibition was created entirely by the Warner Bros. Consumer Products and Exhibitgroup/Giltspur with no changes made by the museum. The museum jeopardizes its mission by accepting an exhibition that is clearly an advertisement for that company. With an outside company holding the purse-strings, what is more important; that the corporation funding the exhibit is pleased with the outcome or that the public view a fair and balanced presentation? There must be that balance for museums to stay financially sound while maintaining their intellectual and cultural integrity.

Blockbuster exhibitions can be a positive resource for many museums to garner interest in their institution and generate income. Attracting new visitors to the museum is always positive as long as this leads to continued contact. What museums need to be careful of is keeping true to their mission in the process. Members and repeat visitors to the MOS go to the museum to enrich their minds and learn about technology and science, a service that is

promised by the museum. When one visits an exhibition with no relation to that topic a repeat visit may not happen.

The ability of the education and curatorial department to make their own decisions about what forms an exhibit should never be compromised. The exhibit Harry Potter: The Exhibition would have been a huge success for the museum pedagogically as well as financially if the methods behind computer generated imagery (CGI) or possible scientific inspirations for the film (as presented by a different Harry Potter exhibit produced by the National Library of Medicine) were discussed. Hopefully, when looking for their next blockbuster exhibit the MOS will focus on their mission and use the blockbuster in a positive way.