From big ideas to few words

BY NEAL V. HITCH
Imperial Valley

S
ome people go to a museum to learn, some people go to have fun, some people are forced to go — like on a field trip — but very few people go to think about how an exhibit gets put together.

The Imperial Valley Desert Museum began the design of the permanent exhibit, Imperial County: Land of Extremes, on Aug. 1, with a four-long committee meeting consisting of teachers, archaeologists, artists, ELM staff, Native American consultants and museum staff.

The meeting consisted of big concepts and big ideas.

The next 16 months was constant work, a weekly conference call and a few trips between Ocotillo and San Francisco.

During the last week of November, the whole work was focused on rewriting the first completed coursework for the exhibits at the Desert Museum.

The exhibits were designed by Dean Weldon Exhibits in Norco.

Weldon Exhibits was chosen after a two-year search and site visits to five exhibit design companies.

Dean Weldon Exhibits has designed, fabricated and installed exhibits for the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C., and the San Diego Natural History Museum.

The design for the Imperial Valley Desert Museum exhibit has gone through several stages: concept design, schematic design, design development and final design.

In each stage there were many changes. Some were small, but some were monumental.

Many of the exhibits have progressed from the original concepts to a final design that incorporates the best expertise from archaeologists, educational and standards taught in the classroom.

It has been a balance of creating something interesting and something educational.

The challenge of words

The challenge of designing big ideas comes down to words. Working with researchers, archaeologists and Native American consultants we have spent months trying to write exhibit panels that will appeal to all the experts and will be interesting to visitors.

There is an enormous amount of fascinating information behind every aspect of our desert — and there’s not enough who have already lived to here.

Exhibit experts, however, conclude that the average visitor will only read the exhibit for five to 10-words on a small panel.

The solutions, however, is true. It has been proven over and over again.

There is even a book written about it, “Exhibit Labels” by Beverly Serrell.

It has been a huge challenge to take 10,000 years of history of Imperial County and distill it into a 50-word test panel for an exhibit. So how do we do it?

Visitor feedback

The goal of the Desert Museum is to be both educational and fun — which doesn’t work if only archaeologists with Ph.D.s can understand the panels.

Over the last several months we have been prototyping exhibits, and chances are that if you have come to the museum you have been asked to read a panel.

We have received about 200 different opinions.

Every comment we have gotten has been typed up, reviewed and measured. We have gone through an extensive process of testing the text format, because it is going to be something the casual visitor will both understand and find interesting.

This has been a tedious process. In the museum industry it is called prototyping and iteration, but those are just big words for saying “try it again.”

Here is the text of an original panel in the archaeology section, and the changes it has gone through:

First iteration

The arrival of the Spanish to California by the 1530s caused a dramatic change to the native Californians and their territories. Mission settlements were established by the 1770s and reservation systems were established by America as early as 1875. Today San Diego County has more reservations than any other county in the United States.

Second iteration

The Spanish arrived in 1530. By the 1770s, mission settlements were established and in 1875 the United States began the reservation system. Today San Diego County has more reservations than any other county in the United States.

Final panel

The Spanish arrived in 1530 and dramatically affected native Californians. By the 1770s, mission settlements were established, and in 1875 the United States implemented the reservation system.

Today, San Diego has more reservations than any other county in the U.S. The first try at this panel was too long, 34 words.

Visitor comments indicated confusion about the dates.

In the second iteration there was confusion about what happened when the Spanish arrived.

The final panel has tested very well. To many readers this may seem silly, but this process has been repeated at least 100.

It will result in an exhibit that most people will not even think about. People will come to the museum and look, or have fun, or will be on a field trip — where, hopefully, they will have fun and learn at the same time.

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