

Extending the Brand:

The Body Worlds Experience

The California Science Center today is the result of a long master-planning process. Starting in 1988, at what was then known as the California Museum of Science and Industry, we began thinking hard about who we were as an institution, what we stood for, what our values and our mission were. Surveys told us that the Los Angeles community didn't know what our museum did or what it represented, that our institution wasn't well known and respected by its public. We set out to change that.

By the time we opened the first phase of the California Science Center in 1998, we had completely rebranded the institution. We not only introduced a new name and a new look; we also introduced a new way of integrating our mission, our vision, and our values into our work. Integrity of the brand would now be part of every decision we made—including the decision of which outside exhibitions to book for our visitors.

Six years later, we would have a unique opportunity to put that commitment to the test.

A leap of faith

In 2004, we approached anatomist Gunther von Hagens to ask him to consider bringing his Body Worlds exhibition of plastinated human specimens to North America for the first time. The exhibition had already attracted 14 million visitors in Europe and Asia, but it had also aroused controversy and media criticism, especially in Europe. Many people stayed away, citing issues of privacy, of respect for the dead, of concern over the origin of the human exhibits, but many people also went to see it, perhaps because of those same issues.

After reviewing Body Worlds and discussing it at length with its creator, we felt comfortable that the exhibition was consistent with our mission and that we shared with von Hagens a common vision of its purpose. Its obvious potential to impact people emotionally and educationally and to expand community awareness of the science center also offered a chance to build our brand. But the opportunity was not without risk. Adverse publicity—though it might boost attendance—could have a negative impact on our carefully rebranded institution.

To mitigate the risk, we took a number of

steps. We gathered a group of medical and religious bioethicists to advise us, and we hired a bioethicist to travel to Europe on our behalf to review body donor forms and other legal paperwork. Throughout the process, the science center's board was involved and concerned. After listening to staff and advisors, board members engaged in longer discussion than on any issue in the past 20 years. The vote to show Body Worlds was unanimous.

Our next consideration was the messaging. In Europe, Body Worlds had been billed as an "anatomical exhibition of human bodies" but had sometimes been described by the media as an art exhibition. Only once had it appeared in a museum. Our communications strategy was to position it clearly as an anatomy, physiology, and health exhibition that belonged in a science center.

We also prepared for possible negative impact. We reviewed

by Jeff Rudolph

Body Worlds showed
us that visitors
appreciate science that
is connected to their
own experience.



Gunther von Hagens' Body Worlds specimens fascinate museum visitors.

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the history of prior exhibition controversies and underwent extensive media training—including having a former investigative reporter lob hostile questions at von Hagens and our staff.

A dramatic impact

The story has a happy ending, as you may know. The Los Angeles media, after seeing Body Worlds and talking with von Hagens, staff, and advisors, promoted the exhibition enthusiastically. A record 665,000+ people visited the science center during its six-month run, and 270,000 came to our subsequent two-month hosting of Body Worlds 2. The response from philanthropic institutions and the business community was equally gratifying. Decision makers viewed us with new respect—an outcome that has continued to open doors.

But from the perspective of extending our brand, the most important result has been the exhibition's long-term impact on science center operations. Body Worlds showed us that the way we approach ethical issues is extremely important; we have therefore expanded our ethics committee and made it a standing committee. Both staff and board members are now willing to take on more controversial issues, if we do it right.

Body Worlds brought not just expanded audiences—almost half of those who came were first-time visitors—but also different audiences, including a demographic we hadn't seen before: people without children. Young adults in the 20- to 35-year-old range came by the hundreds, as did senior citizens. The effect has lasted. We have more adult visitors today than ever before.

Finally, Body Worlds enhanced our brand as a learning institution. Medical students, nurses, anatomy professors and their classes—all came to study the exhibition. We saw art students sketching in the galleries. This seemed only appropriate, since von Hagens had drawn inspiration for Body Worlds from the lifelike drawings of Vesalius and other Renaissance anatomists, some of whose works were reproduced on the exhibition banners.

After the blockbuster

The challenge with results like these is to find ways to maintain them once the blockbuster is gone. Body Worlds showed us that our public is interested in seeing issues in science and health addressed in a professional, balanced way. We have built on that.

In September 2005, we started a new speakers program, "Science Matters," that brings together ethicists and scientists to examine current issues in science. Our first event was a discussion of "The Promise and Pitfalls of Stem Cell Research." Some 600 people—including a surprising number of college students—attended.

For a January 2006 session, "Defining Life and Death," the panel included the dean of the Annenberg School of Communication, the retired pastor of L.A.'s largest African-American church

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(now a senior fellow at the University of Southern California's Center for Religion and Civic Culture), and Terry Schiavo's court-appointed attorney. In conjunction with the panel, we scheduled a more intimate round-table seminar to explore the definition of life through Plato's Phaedo; we also brought in After Life, an exhibit developed by the Dallas Museum of Art that explores diverse perceptions of death and dying.

April's panel, "The Science and Ethics of Reproductive Cloning," brought together, among others, a scientist who predicts that he will clone a human within two years, an ethicist who believes this work is so unethical that researchers shouldn't touch it, and a leading Muslim scholar and ethicist who is also a physician. A related seminar explored the foundations of our respect and appreciation for human life through selections from Aristotle's Nichomachean Ethics.

Body Worlds showed us that visitors appreciate science that is connected to their own experience. We have kept that in mind as we both develop and host new exhibitions. It led to our premiering the Ontario Science Centre's Marvel's Super Heroes Science Exhibition, which uses popular comic book subject matter to arouse interest in science topics. For 2007, we developed our own traveling exhibition, Goosebumps: The Science

of Fear, again based on a subject with strong popular interest.

Not every exhibition can be a Body Worlds, of course. Von Hagens' exhibitions continue to break attendance records wherever they go. In Los Angeles, we may not see their like again for some time. But at the California Science Center, the Body Worlds effect continues, as we build on the brand identity and community respect generated for us by this celebrated blockbuster. ■ ■ ■

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