

Exhibition Proposals With Punch

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Susannah Fabing, former director and chief curator at the Smith College Museum of Art (Northampton, MA), sums up the requirements of a great exhibition proposal well: “A fantastic proposal is clearly and beautifully written. It anticipates the museum's questions and has good answers to them. It has strong visuals and enough information to make a persuasive case.”

Although every director and curator has a unique sense of style and individual preferences, there are several things you can do to create a strong, appealing proposal most directors would be happy to consider.

Research

Before you even begin to write your proposal, get to know the venue you plan to approach. Most venues have web sites, which can be (but unfortunately are not always) a great source of information. Reviewing past, current, and upcoming shows will help determine whether the exhibition you plan to propose is suitable. Reviewing an organization's mission will help you articulate the ways your exhibition and its related programming will support that mission.

In addition to the kind of artwork a venue accepts it is important to be familiar with the space. Be sure the number of pieces you propose to exhibit fits the space—art galleries and museums generally allow about two feet between pieces.

If you cannot find the information you need online, call or e-mail the venue to introduce yourself and ask for the information you need, including what specifics the proposal should contain, how many linear feet the exhibition space has, contact information for the person to whom you should address the proposal, and what the timing of the review process is likely to be.

Requests for Proposals

When responding to a request for proposals, read the requirements very carefully to ensure you provide exactly what the venue wants in the format they prefer. Artist Nancy Crasco says, “If the artist cannot follow instructions for the proposal it follows that difficulties mounting the show might also occur.” She warns that this might lead to a proposal not receiving serious consideration.

Consistency/Cohesiveness among works

As artist Pascale De Coninck says, “It's always best to have a unifying theme, color, or size that pulls the work of several people together for a group show.” However, individual exhibitions should have a consistent feel, as well. Crasco says, “Gallery owners do not want shows that are all over the place visually.”

Great visuals, exceptional work

We have all heard it, but those interviewed were unanimous in emphasizing that great visuals of exceptional artwork are the single most important element in any proposal. Anita Loscalzo, curator at the New England Quilt Museum (Lowell, MA), says, “The quality and subject of the works to be presented trump any glitz in a proposal. Some not-so-worked-out proposals result in fantastic exhibits.” And Susan Loring-Wells, executive director at the Fiber Art Center (Amherst, MA), says, “Sometimes I don’t get to the rest of the proposal if the slides are poor.”

These days some venues still prefer slides, some prefer digital images, and some will happily accept either. Do your homework and send the visual format your target venue prefers.

That said, Fabing recommends sending prints of your artwork as well:

“Don't rely on the museum finding a slide projector to look at your slides projected in large format; they are likely to be squinting at the slides against an overhead light. Don't rely upon them to track down . . . a computer to play your PowerPoint, either.

Well-written material

Be clear, be concise, be complete. Don’t use “art speak,” don’t tell your life story, and if you’re proposing an exhibition of two-dimensional wall art don’t elaborate on your sculptural work.

Edit, edit, edit. “Wading through irrelevant information is daunting,” Crasco says, “and it becomes easy to put aside.” So determine what really needs to be in the cover letter, the overview, and the artist’s statement—and let the rest fall away.

Proof, proof, proof. Fabing says, “Carelessly prepared materials can hurt you—they send a message that you're sloppy and disorganized, not the kind of person the museum will want to partner with.” So review your final draft for clarity, typos, and grammatical errors—spell check and grammar check are not good enough. Better yet ask someone to review your proposal before you send it—you may be too familiar with the content to notice errors.

Professional presentation

Remember that your proposal makes the first impression; even seemingly superficial touches can influence a venue’s decision. Just as you present a tidy appearance for job interviews, present your proposal neatly and professionally—use quality paper for your proposal and contain your materials in a folder or binder.

Judy Plummer, former director of the Widmann Art Gallery at Kings College (Wilkes-Barre, PA), says, “I really hate to see poor quality. . . . I want to see good writing on good paper and great slides presented well. Enclose an SASE [self-addressed stamped envelope]. The gallery needs to know the artist is dependable, reliable—and when an artist neglects these details you wonder how careful and capable the person is of following through.”

Professional interaction

You are not done with a proposal when you mail or deliver it. Every interaction you have with the venue colors your image and affects your chances of being accepted. Always answer the phone professionally, and reply promptly and courteously to phone calls and e-mails—even when you are irritated.

In addition, Plummer says, “We always want artists to have an informal gallery talk and perhaps a more formal classroom experience as well, so good communication skills are important.”

Appropriate follow-up

The artists and directors interviewed all had different takes on what constitutes appropriate follow-up. There is no one answer that is most appropriate for all venues, so choose an approach with which you are comfortable.

Fabing offered one piece of advice that works for everyone: “Badgering the museum will not serve you well, though they do owe you the courtesy of adhering to their timetable for reviewing your request. Remember that you may want to approach [this venue] with another idea, even if this one is not successful, so don't burn any bridges.” Suggested approaches included:

From Gallery/Museum Representatives:	From Artists:
<p>“After [the time the venue said the review process would take place] has passed, make an inquiry if you haven't heard. Ask them once more when you might expect a reply. Don't call again until that date has come and gone.” —Susannah Fabing</p> <p>“I always preferred to get in touch with the artists—and I told them so—because of limited staff and the constraints on my time” —Judy Plummer</p> <p>“Once a few months later—our schedule is decided by the early spring for the following calendar year.” —Anita Loscalzo</p>	<p>“If I do not hear back after one month, (privately owned galleries usually look at slides once a month) then I make a phone call.” —Nancy Crasco</p> <p>“I follow up on [proposals] with phone calls, emails, and periodic postcards of my artwork.” —Carolyn Lee Veslage</p> <p>“I only follow up when further information is requested. I'm either accepted or not. If accepted, I do my best to cooperate with the process, including being flexible about scheduling, delivering, etc. Probably most important, I express enthusiastic thanks for the acceptance. I want them to feel that I'm going to be very easy to deal with and will meet the terms of the show.” —Diane Bielak</p>

Last, food for thought—Plummer says, “I would really stress that artists should be true to themselves regarding the sort of vibes they’re getting from a particular gallery and director. You really want to have a respectful connection.” Expect the same professional treatment from a venue that they expect from you. You will have to work closely with the staff and should feel as though your art will be discussed and treated knowledgably and respectfully.

What to Include in a Proposal

Cover letter (one page) Susannah Fabing, former director and chief curator at the Smith College Museum of Art (Northampton, MA), says, “A strong first impression depends upon a cogent but not necessarily very long letter outlining the basic premise of the exhibition and the reason it would be a good fit for the institution in question.”

Request for proposal (RFP) form or a synopsis of the exhibition—Judy Plummer, former director of the Widmann Gallery at King’s College (Wilkes Barre, PA), explains, “Most gallery directors . . . really want to cut to the chase. They want to know *that* you want to exhibit, *what* you want to exhibit, and *when* and *why*. Keep it short, sweet, and well thought out.

Include:

- A brief description of the show, its size (number/size of works and linear feet), and the audience it will attract.
- If this is an RFP, a brief statement reiterating the terms of the exhibition.
- When you hope to exhibit, whether the exhibition will travel, and whether there are times when the show is unavailable.
- A list of expenses the museum/gallery will have to cover, including installation costs, catalog/brochure, shipping, etc.
- A list of financial sponsors you can suggest or have already lined up.
- How flexible you are on the points above.

Excellent visuals—10 slides/CD of 10 images (different venues have different preferences—do your homework) as well as prints of the images. Plummer says, “Too many slides or photos might communicate that the artist is needy—like your friends who show never-ending slides of their vacation.”

Resume/s including former exhibition experience and awards. “Gallery directors need to be reassured they won’t be hanging a bomb. This is especially important when proposing an unusual or controversial medium,” Plummer says.

Brief artist statements (2–3 sentences per artist) about the artwork in the exhibition.

Other support materials—Support materials suggested include a balanced budget, copies of articles or reviews, and a sample media release.

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