

Experiences in Building a Small »Hands-on« Science Centre from Scratch

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In the following article, our approach and methods in creating a new “hands-on” science centre are presented. The article is not a cookbook – a set of How to do’s. It is barely a set of our experiences. We are aware that each Science Centre has different starting conditions as well as different environment in which it is born and grows.

The Science Centre Hiša eksperimentov (The House of Experiments) is the first, albeit small, Slovenian “hands-on” science centre, built with a lot of love and enthusiasm. It is attractive to the public. In the article we present some ideas how we believe we can keep the science centre attractive for the public in the long run.

Introduction

The idea of establishing a “hands-on” science centre (SC) was born after a visit to Exploratorium, San Francisco in 1994.

The “hands-on” concept was previously unknown in Slovenia, therefore in the beginning several groups of people had to be convinced about the need of having such a centre in Slovenia. Those groups included Scientists, Politicians, Economists, Journalists and the Public – the visitors of SC.

It was very hard at that time to create a new SC from scratch because of the lack of money and lack of awareness what benefits brings this idea. However, a group of young scientists – enthusiasts were gathered and the first four exhibits were built.

In order to raise the interest of necessary groups, the “suitcase method” was used. Four exhibits were put into suitcase. During the meeting with representatives of the aforementioned groups, they were asked to try these four exhibits before starting the communication. This method proved to be very efficient. The first difficulties were overcome successfully and further communication became more relaxed and focused.

Important target groups in the process of establishing the SC

Scientists are the primary group one has to have on his side in order to run a successful SC. They represent an important source of new and fresh ideas. On the other hand, their presence is the guarantee for quality and credibility of the science centre. The team in the SC should be susceptible to new members from the scientific field. It is very important to establish a healthy link between SCs on one side and the Universities, Institutes, the Academy of Science and Arts and teachers’ community on the other side. Their precious knowledge and experiences are very helpful in the process of building new science exhibits, scientific shows and other activities with the purpose of popularizing science and increasing science literacy.

Politicians are a group of decision makers that key factors in establishing, financing and building a SC. In our case the »suitcase method« proved again to be working well. It is a

method of showing the idea instead of promising the results. Since the method is not one this group is daily dealing with, it is quite convincing.

One should not think of the »suitcase method« as an omnipotent and always successful one. But without trying there could not be a success. A fisherman has to throw bait many times in order to catch a fish. And like a fisherman – be active. Do not fall for: “Do not call us, we will call you.” Call!

Since a SC is meant for the whole population one should not limit himself to politicians of only one party. SC is an apolitical body, therefore one should gain support from all parties.

Economists and **managers** are potential sponsors of the SC or can help you make connections to them. They should find their interest in sponsoring SC and its activities. They are daily overcrowded with proposals and requests for sponsorships. Therefore our request had to stand out in the myriad of others. Whenever possible the »suitcase« method was used.

When starting the sailing in the waters of sponsorship one has to build the sponsorship model. There will be bigger sponsors as well as smaller ones. Each should be adequately represented – sponsors of the same level equally and those of different level differently.

There is also one important rule when communicating with a potential sponsor. You do not beg for support. Sponsorship is trade. You offer promotion of the sponsor in the SC for resources they have. The mission of the SC is noble! You have many reasons to be proud of what you do.

The biggest sponsors are those to whom you offer most. Although at the beginning you cannot expect to catch a big fish - have these levels prepared for later.

Public is the most important group. They are your bread and butter but also the indicator of the quality of your work. By them you can measure how well or badly you have done your job. Of course the feedback comes with some delay, after some work has been done - after exhibits have been built and science shows being performed. It is the public that feeds you with suggestions and criticism. They are also the source of volunteers, supporters and a potential link to other target groups, especially the following one.

Journalists like the public. When the SC starts working there will be public coming. Therefore the journalists will come as well.

But one needs journalists much earlier in order to promote the idea of establishing a SC. It is important to start run the activities before having a permanent SC. At that time we started science competitions activities, we wrote several articles about foreign science centres and finally offered a set of shows for the national TV. When starting a science centre one should not be afraid of the public. Public is your weapon. But one reaches the public through journalists.

How big is big enough?

The House of experiments is a tiny science centre. However we are proud that we managed to establish it as a permanent entity inside our society. In 500 sq. metres there are several activities we perform on a regular basis: permanent exhibits, science shows, competitions, workshops, temporary exhibits, workshops for teachers, planning of outreach activities...

The hardest thing was to raise sufficient funds to pay the first employee. It was much easier with the second one ... It would be better if we had started with two.

Now, after 10 years, five of us are working on a permanent basis, and six on a temporary basis, plus 20 demonstrators.

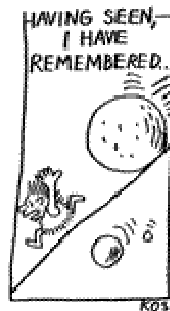
We have built 45 exhibits and 12 science shows. We are still growing and want to become bigger. But how big is big enough?

As parents we are all happy, when a child likes to eat. When a child becomes older it is a burden to be fat. The solution is to eat healthy, control the weight and exercise. The science centre is our child and we want to keep it healthy.

How to stay alive and not to become boring?

Growing and keeping the grow in control is important but it is even more important not to become boring. What follows are some actions we try to follow in order not to become boring:

1. Building our own exhibits
2. Refreshing the team
3. Planning new activities
4. Traveling, learning from others and adopting ideas
5. Combining Science, Illustrations (Art) and Humour
6. Inventing new activities
7. Following the motto



References:

- [1] Slovenian Science Centre: Hiša eksperimentov (The House of Experiments), 1996, Ljubljana, Trubarjeva 39, Slovenia, Vol. 1500 m3