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Body Worlds Exhibition @ Sci-Bono

A Few Lessons Learned

1. Introduction

In 2013 Sci-Bono Discovery Centre hosted its most successful travelling exhibition. This exhibition, Body Worlds, attracted over 133,000 visitors over a four month period. It touched the public consciousness and became an item featured in the mass media and social media. Using real bodies donated to the project the exhibition revealed the inner workings of the human body through a process called 'plastination'.

The exhibition was hosted in partnership with a commercial exhibitions company. This company bore the financial risk and liaised directly with the German Institute of Plastination to bring the exhibition to this country. Sci-Bono provided the venue and a range of support services.

The purpose of this report is to highlight some of the key learnings from hosting this exhibition.

2. Objectives

The objectives of the exhibition, for Sci-Bono, were as follows:

- To create an awareness of and interest in human biology and the sciences related to the exhibition
- To enhance Sci-Bono's public profile by hosting this high quality, internationally acclaimed exhibition

3. Lessons Learned

The project turned out to be a very illuminating exercise, not only for the many visitors but for the science centre and its staff. The key lessons we learned were these:



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3.1 There is viability in bringing similar high quality exhibitions to science centres and to this country. This, however, is dependent on the funding available to underwrite such initiatives. The costs of bringing in large exhibitions ranges between R10 million and R80 million. It is unlikely that science centres can secure the capital to mount such projects alone and will need to rely on third party partners for such projects.

Lesson Learned: *Science centres such as Sci-Bono can manage large scale projects of this kind but will need to do so in partnership with entities that can carry significant capital risk.*

3.2 Sci-Bono made R1 220 808 from the exhibition. This was constituted as follows:

| Item | Income |
|-------------------------|-------------------|
| Portion of Ticket Sales | 677 118 |
| Operational Expenses | 400 629 |
| Parking Income | 143 060 |
| Total | R1,220,808 |

This model, where the partner carries the financial risk, has been very beneficial to Sci-Bono. We were able to gain from the publicity, and we made our mark in Gauteng (and beyond) as an education and leisure destination. Our long term viability was thus improved significantly. Our profit share was more than we had projected and that was a bonus. We would consider this a useful model for the future, though we would also support a second option that sees us venture into the area where we carry more risk in order to gain greater value.

Lesson Learned: *Science centres could develop a financial model for such projects so that we are able to plan the surplus that we want to generate.*

3.3 Additional funding to support school groups to attend is required. Working with a partner whose main aim was to (a) break even and then (b) drive a profit has meant that it has not been possible to create opportunities for disadvantaged schools to participate. Sci-Bono and the third party partner had very different goals. Whereas we sought to optimise the number of learners from disadvantaged schools that attended, the partner had a purely commercial goal to optimise profits. Whilst many schools did visit, these were the privileged schools. The marketing to schools and the coordination of the school visits was not well managed between the commercial partner and Sci-Bono. A more rigid agreement around access to schools will need to be included in future contracting.

Lesson Learned: *Science centres need to be clear at the start that a certain number of learners will be allowed free access. Alternatively, the commercial partner must plan for subsidised entry as part of the business model sold to sponsors.*

Lesson Learned: *Where possible, the science centre should manage all contact with schools, both public and private, so that there is a centralised control of visits by school groups.*

3.4 It was disappointing that over the period of the exhibition Sci-Bono's school visit numbers were down. It was impossible to host the large numbers we usually do but we have come to accept that this was a short term issue based on the nature of the exhibition and the model that was used. Although there was sufficient space and time to run parallel programmes, there was much noise disruption and pressure on services.

Lesson Learned: *Large scale projects severely disrupt normal activities. It is difficult to run normal activities in parallel, even when it theoretically feasible.*

3.5 Managing the exhibition as well as our partner's expectations while we were forging ahead with a very noisy, dusty construction of the West Wing building was a challenge. Sci-Bono had committed that the construction would be complete two months before the exhibition started (by January 2013), however that did not happen. This created endless conflict between Sci-Bono and The commercial partner as well as Sci-Bono and the contractors. This was managed to some extent through negotiated agreements and using key relationships.

Lesson Learned: *There must be a significant period of time between the end of any major work being carried on or the end of major programmes and the start of a large exhibition.*

3.6 The contract and agreements between the commercial partner and Sci-Bono was very useful. We did however have instances where the commercial partner tended to push the boundaries. They attempted to work as if they were in a rented space and, when it suited them, they often disregarded Sci-Bono's health and safety rules and standards. They allowed more visitors into the exhibition than our evacuation protocol allowed. This compromised Sci-Bono's reputation as visitors regarded this as Sci-Bono's exhibition. We had to manage the problem through ongoing meetings with the commercial partner and monitoring of the exhibition.

Lesson learned: *We must have a contract that includes adherence to all policies and procedures, with clear disincentives and penalties for non-compliance. We must react quickly once there is non-compliance and not allow any latitude.*

3.7 Ticketing remained an area of responsibility for the commercial partner. However, having larger sums of cash on the premises meant that our security and front desk staff had to be briefed around additional security measures. Sci-Bono also collected additional cash from parking and this too meant that risks had to be addressed. We have just conducted a thorough risk

assessment at the centre and we have identified areas for improvement in these departments. Action has now been taken to address the identified issues.

Lesson learned: *We need to have an established set of protocols for cash and risk management related to the management of gate and parking income.*

3.8 Visitors to the Body Worlds exhibition also visit the rest of the centre. While the special exhibition attracted large numbers of visitors, most visitors spent more time engaging with the permanent collection of exhibits than in the special exhibition. Our coffee shop also experienced a substantial increase in turnover. In future Sci-Bono needs to look how to exploit all the opportunities that an exhibition of this nature creates and at the other opportunities for generating additional income, e.g. hands-on workshops, demonstrations, shows and the sale of memorabilia.

Lesson learned: *We should plan upfront about how we will harvest the marketing, income generating and other opportunities that an exhibition like BodyWorlds can create. We need to plan a set of fringe activities to complement the main exhibition,*

3.9 The set-up, management and breakdown of the exhibition provided useful opportunities to develop our exhibitry and science centre staff. It would be useful to include such opportunities for such development as clauses or an addendum to the contract with the partner – this would facilitate these opportunities in a more structured manner.

Lesson learned: *Major projects such as this create opportunities for building experience and skills in all staff members. We should plan how best to use the opportunities to train all staff, including exhibitry, admin, security and cleaning staff.*

3.10 Sci-Bono lost out on the opportunity to capture all of the visitors details – only a small number responded to our feedback forms. Where a partner controls visitor access through ticketing we need to ensure that we also agree a process for Sci-Bono to capture visitor data.

Lesson learned: *Science centres must include its access to and management of data as a requirement in the contract*

3.11 Owing to the nature of the exhibition (that it required visitors to experience it in a way free of other disturbances) we initially tried to limit access to our other exhibits. This proved to be an error. Visitors who had come to Sci-Bono (and the others) were very insistent about seeing our exhibitions and exhibits. The restrictions were very quickly lifted and in hindsight we consider that our exhibitions added to the pulling power of the visitors over that period. Our feedback forms reflected as much fascination with the Sci-Bono exhibits as for the Body Worlds exhibition.

This was the first visit for many visitors who spent as much time in the rest of the centre as they did at the exhibition.

Lesson learned: *We need to plan to capitalise on the increased flow of visitors. This may include offering incentives for return visits.*

3.12 The large numbers of visitors that attended and who needed parking were severely intimidated by the informal car guards who extorted exorbitant payments from visitors to the extent that the exhibition drew bad publicity in the media.

Lesson Learned: *Where large numbers of visitors are expected, Sci-Bono must make arrangements for adequate parking and security (such as at Newtown Junction). We must plan to discourage informal car guards.*

3.13 We could not provide parking for the large number of visitors to the exhibition and so many people had to park in the streets surrounding the science centre. This became a major opportunity for informal car guards to earn money. Within days there was an army of vagrants and others 'selling parking and car-minding' to visitors for ridiculous amounts. There was so much extortion and intimidation of visitors that it was featured on many local radio talk shows. We received no help from the authorities or SAPS when we tried to deal with the issue.

Lesson Learned: *Plans must include logistics management such as parking and security for visitors, not only at the science centre but off site, if large numbers are expected.*

4. Conclusion

Large exhibitions such as Body Worlds are challenging to mount and manage but they have very important benefits for science centres. They also pose major risks and challenges that need lots of skill, capacity and vigilance to manage effectively.

