ABSTRACT

As an old way of communication, the exhibition event with the specialty of presence, also highly attended, is one of important approaches to attract the public attention and shape the brand image for modern enterprises. The exhibition is composed of content and form, and exhibition design means transferring the content to the perceptible form by information carrier namely media. The various types and forms of media provide the multiple options for designers. In the era of information hunger, information is highly prioritized, so the design principle of “form follows content” has been accepted widely. From the beginning of the Internet age information is available for almost everyone anywhere and anytime. Content does not keep the pivotal attraction any more, while form, new media form becomes a pivotal point of attracting audiences’ eyeballs. The design thinking is required to change with the new situation, taking the form as the priority. On the other side, new technology develops new media’s type constantly, which usually come to be the hot point, as well as the part of exhibition’s content. Therefore, a new design method grows up: taking form as content and taking the media form as the first step of design. That is firstly choosing the media type or creating the new media form under the exhibition theme, secondly developing or detailing the content basing on the media’s speciality, then design the visual form combining the media and content.

Keywords: exhibition design, media, form, content

Exhibition has become one of the important ways to build up the brand images for enterprises. There are the long term exhibitions and the short term exhibitions, the former, such as exhibition halls and museums, displaying the history, culture and products; the latter, as a kind of events, getting more and more attention since it serves marketing directly and keeps renewing continually and flexibly. With the particular theme, this kind of event tends to be reported by mass media and turns to be hot news, which could make greater social influence. This requires more interest points in the event and gives more challenges to the enterprise and the design team.

1 THE COMMUNICATIVE NATURE OF EXHIBITION

From the perspective of communication, exhibition is a kind of old way to convey information. All kinds of exhibitions take presence as the feature, which means highly attended for visitors, just as audiences must enter the theatre to watch plays. In other words, in the special physical space and in the limited time, the specific information is conveyed to visitors who aim to exhibition space. In according to the 5w model of communication, the enterprise is the
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communicator; the display content is the information; all things arranged in exhibition space is the media including exhibits, display boards, A&V, instalments and so on; all the visitors including reporters is receiver; the effect consists of the on-site effect and the advertising effect; the on-site effect comes from the response of attendee; the advertising effect means the further social influence produced by mass media reporting. The key to success contains attracting people to exhibition space, catching the eyeballs in short time, making the exhibition content being understood quickly, and turning the exhibition to the hot social point by mass media. Exhibition design is such a progress of expressing content through form; content is the information in exhibition and form is the combination of the type of media and its visual form.

![Figure 1](image)

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**2 THE MEDIA SPECIALTY OF EXHIBITION**

Integrating content with form is essential to a success exhibition. The enterprise provides the content and the designer provides the visual form usually. Prior to the Internet age, information is needed eagerly. In the process of design, content is considered firstly and form is secondary to content. As the classic modernist method “form follows function”, the principle of “form follows content” has been accepted widely. In the Internet age, information is available easily to almost everyone. More and more time and attention is given to the mobile terminals, particularly mobile phones and pads. In other words, exclusive content is nearly something impossible. So how can exhibitions catch visitors’ eyeballs? The enterprises and designers, who are responsible to the effect of exhibitions, face the greater challenges.

Since content doesn’t work, the attraction of form will be more important. Endless information spread over various small sizes of screens, represented by mobile phones. Conveying information on small screens is simple and shallow. It is difficult to inspire people’s deep interpretations and experiences, as if you watch the IMAX movie on the mobile phone, you could not be immersed like in the theatre. Exhibitions present almost all the information carrier in the communication history. There are oral media such as presentation and conversation, physical media such as exhibits and models, print media such as pictures, graphics and words, electronic media such as video and audio, new media such as virtual reality, augmented reality and human-computer interaction, and activity such as on-site performance and game. All kinds of media, whatever new one basing on computer science or traditional one lasting thousands of years, integrate into physical space in a period of time. The information receiver must enter the physical space to visit.

Therefore the important media specialities of exhibition, one is integration; being situated in space and time, exhibitions provide us an irreplaceable environment with multi-dimension and multi-level setting up by variety media. The other is presence; there is no other way to experience exhibitions but stepping into the
integrating space. Furthermore, connecting the new science and technology, exhibitions provide us with the infinite possibility of creating new forms. Like chemical reaction, the fusion of all the elements could happen in exhibition and produce new forms continually. The creativity of media form will be the new hot point to attract visitors; further more will be a new approach to expand content and provide extensive experience.

Figure 2 –the composition of exhibition media

3 THE FORM CREATIVITY IN EXHIBITION

Since 1851, the World Exposition (abbr. Expo) had been keeping the Olympic of exhibition and the pioneer testing field of design, as well as the arena of national image, as the most of exhibitors take a nation as a display unit. For the aspect of setting up image there is no difference between nations and enterprises on exhibition, except the nation with more connotations, so Expo has been more general than other exhibitions no matter content or form. The Expo left us many good examples of form creativity due to the large investment, the large space and the experimental study.

For example, there are different ways to display the fine Chinese ink painting "Riverside Scene at Qing Ming Festival" in 528.7cm long and 24.8cm high. The traditional way in museum is displaying the real painting under glass with proper lighting, temperature and humidity, as well as the detailed illustration. In the early days of the Internet age, electronic copies were popular in digital galleries. At present, electronic copies can be found easily in mobile social networks, such as "We Chat". With the more convenient network communication, this Chinese ink painting seems becoming smaller and smaller, and details are ignored more and more. However, exhibition is not like this. In Shanghai Expo, a huge "Riverside Scene at Qing Ming Festival" was displayed in Chinese pavilion, which was created by 3d animation and projected by dozens of huge projectors on a wandering wall in more than 150m long and more than 5m high. On the screen wall, pedestrians are walking, peddlers are hawking, the river is rippling, and the lights turn on when dusk is coming. Is it the original painting? In the aspect of
content, definitely it is yes. Though there is a little negative voice that says the huge animation weakens the original artistic meaning. In the aspect of form, it is not. The form is newly created, which amplifies the details and extends the content. It is becoming more vivid, funny, richer and accepted more widely.

In museums visitors enjoy deeply the distinct detail of the first hand thing in the quiet and solemn atmosphere. On the mobile terminals the convenience, efficiency and popularization are welcome in spite of ignoring details. In special exhibition like Expo, the novel and powerful form is the key point. The animation of “Riverside Scene at Qing Ming Festival” not only excited all visitors in Chinese pavilion and became a star exhibit on shanghai Expo, but also caught mass media and became popular in all kinds of news reports. Furthermore it stimulated the people’s enthusiasm of Chinese traditional culture which brought far more positive effect beyond the Expo’s space and time. Traditional or new creating form, which is better? It depends on the different situations, which need the different forms to bring us different experience. Anyway the new form always impress us with the new feeling even the new content.

Another similar example is from Spanish pavilion. Like a cave with dozens of meters long, the first exhibition hall presented the splendid culture from ancient
to modern Spain: from caving painting to Picasso, from bullfight to football match, from flamingo dancing to swing pendant light...all the images of video were long and huge enough to cover all the inside surface of the cave, as well as cover the wide-open eyes of all the visitors, who was shocked and impressed too deeply to breathe. In a different way Danish pavilion looked like easy and delightful. The pavilion’s space structure was composed with the continuous ramp like two levels “8”. The wandering ramp was divided into two parts: walking lane and bike lane. Bicycles, once the most popular transportation for Chinese, demonstrated the specific meaning again. Visitors could take a tour by riding bicycles up and down on the ramp in the sunshine and breeze. It is a model of experiencing the lifestyle of Danes, thus in Danish pavilion it is the more pivotal thing than seeing the mermaid from remote Copenhagen. Due to the special media “riding bicycle”, visitors never forget another bicycle kingdom besides china: Denmark.

Figure 6 – the cave in Spanish pavilion
Figure 7 – Danish pavilion

4 EXHIBITION DESIGN BEGINNING WITH MEDIA FORM

There are two similarities of these successful exhibitions from the perspective of communication, one is taking the form as the first and creating the exclusive form by which the content is conveyed effectively; the other is returning to the core value of exhibition: presence. Visitors acquire content and unique experience no other than immerging their body in the exhibition space.

Thus the relationship between form and content should be rethought. On one side, the popularization of all kinds of “small screens” reduces the signification of the traditional communication way prior to network era; on the other side, exhibition, the old communication way, is not reduced in the social space which is full of all kinds of “small screens”. The presence calls people to get together in the physical space which could bring us brand new experience. Meanwhile the quickly changing technology inspires the new media type, new type promotes new form, new form requires new design, and new design needs new thinking and new methods. In thus background, a new approach to exhibition design could be opened: taking form as a kind of content, and as the first step in design process.

The new approach coincides with the practice projects. When some enterprises begin to plan exhibition events, what they consider firstly is how to attract eyeballs by what kinds of new forms. Here is an example from FAW Audi, who holds itinerant exhibitions in several metropolises in recent every year. The
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exhibition takes young people as the aim; the main content is three key technologies which represent the automobile trends in near future. However, in the early stage of design process, the design team was directly told that Audi failed to take the advantage in technology, which means there was not the exclusive content to attract consumers or potential consumers. So the design team was required to take the first important work as to find or create new form.

In 2012, three special display boxes were made to display three technologies. The display box, like a small stage, combined motion graphics on the transparent touch screen and physical models behind the screen precisely. Visitors could see virtual and physical images interacting at the same “stage”, and control the picture “in air” by touching the transparent screen. In 2013, the same three technologies were displayed by three pieces of PixelSense, which was developed by Microsoft and produced by Samsung. The PixelSense basically is a touch screen in 40 inches size standing with four legs, thus it was called the most expensive coffee table in the world. It is the special point that the screen of “coffee table” can see material objects. The speciality brings to the interaction between object and screen. It was so new that there were no goods in stock in China. Shipping three pieces of PixelSense to Beijing would take one month, so when they were booked according to the schedule, the display script and design proposal were not completed. The form of display was decided firstly.
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The design process of the new approach is like this: under the exhibition theme or the content coverage, firstly choosing or creating the media form, then organizing and detailing the content according to the specialty of the media, and finally design the aesthetic visual form combining the content and the media. There is a Chinese proverb “a good beginning is half the battle.” The new and creative media form is the good beginning of a success exhibition, while the subsequent work is even harder. After practising the new approach, some problems are found gradually which need to be further discussed.

Figure 10 – the new design process

In the first place, there is a paradox between creation and stability. To some extent, “new” means exploratory and immaturity; adopting new technology and creating new form means the risk of abandoning the stability. Furthermore, “new” needs more investigations on both time and money, and “new” needs repeated testing especially for the interactive software. However almost all the events like exhibitions is fast-paced to cooperate with the marketing’s requirement. Thus the paradox between the slow ideal and the fast reality would promote the risk which the enterprise and the design team must undertake. The PixelSense in Audi itinerant exhibition, mentioned earlier, was an example. Seen hardly and known little, three pieces of PixelSense were booked without any experience. When they were shipped to the exhibition hall they did not work at all, because the most of walls of exhibition hall were constructed by transparent glass, thus the interior of the hall is so bright, while the PixelSense only works in dark environment, which was illustrated merely in the instruction book. No other way and no time to change, three light shields were specially made to cover the fashionable “coffee tables”, which consequently looked like the heavy ATM machine.

Figure 10 – 2013 Audi itinerary exhibition hall
In the second place, it is not easy to update designers’ thinking. In this reversed process, designers must thoroughly understand the new hardware firstly and try the best to take advantage of it. After three pieces of PixelSense were booked, crystal Audi model cars followed on, which the only object was set the PixelSense could see. How to play “see objects” as the key role became the most important. All the interaction with the PixelSense is related to the crystal car, which brought many troubles to designers.

Last but not least, it is difficult to give consideration to both the form’s attraction and conveying concrete information effectively. This paper’s point of “form is content” does not mean “form equal to content”. Form is a kind of abstract content coming from instinctive perception, while there still is the concrete information which needs to impress visitors. In the Audi exhibition hall visitors succeeded to perceive the features of Audi brand as advanced technology, but failed to know what kind of technology is advanced and how the advanced technology works. In fact visitors usually were interested in interacting with PixelSense but not the technology of Audi.

Form and content is the permanent core subject in design field. The design approach whether “form follows content” or “form is content” is decided by design requirements from enterprise and market. In such social environment as enterprise competition focusing on the public attention, form is more effective rather than content, especially in the short term exhibition. In the promotion of the new technology, new forms grow up constantly. Taking form as a kind of content and taking form as the first step in design process, this new design approach has worked and needs to be developed further.