

Q&A with Clarence Sirisena

Interviewed by Joelle Seligson

From collaborations to chopped-up mannequins, Clarence Sirisena, assistant chief executive in projects and exhibitions at Science Centre Singapore (SCS), finds innovative approaches to traveling exhibitions. His research on this topic—and his efforts to share knowledge with other science centers—earned him ASTC’s 2011 Roy L. Shafer Leading Edge Award for Experienced Leadership in the Field. Between his work at SCS and with institutions worldwide, Sirisena found time to discuss his discoveries.

How long have you been with Science Centre Singapore?

Too long! No. Thirty-five years.

So while you’ve been based there, you’ve worked with science centers all over the world and you’ve helped your colleagues do the same thing. Based on your years of experience, what have you found are key elements to making a traveling exhibition successful?

I think a lot has to do with the kind of appeal the exhibition would have. Try and get one that has appeal to a wide range of audience. I guess cost is also a consideration. And sometimes opportunity; I’ll give you an example. We were fortunate enough to do an exhibition on the making of *The Lord of the Rings*. And we opened the exhibition two weeks after the New Line Cinema won 11 Academy Awards, so there was a thick amount of publicity, and I think because of that and also the fact that there are a lot of *Lord of the Rings* fans, particularly with the 28- to 35-year-old crowd, we had something like 130,000 visitors in a period of 12 weeks.

Partnerships are also important. In getting together and in putting shows—traveling exhibition shows have a certain cost, and you have a short period of time to try and recover that cost. What we have found in so many years—we have been fortunate enough, and I think one of the reasons could be because we have become a preferred partner in Singapore, and we get joint venture partners who agree to come [aboard] and share the risks as well as the revenues. And we have been fortunate to get our local media company as a partner. When you have an opportunity like that and if they are staking, say, one-third of the joint venture agreement, the chances are you will do a lot more than what you could do if you would just go for a media buy.

Along with establishing those kinds of partnerships, have you come across other innovative approaches to traveling exhibitions?

Yes. I think marketing is very critical, the kind of marketing that you do. When we did *CSI: [The Experience]*, some of the younger staff at the science center said, “Let’s try to make something out of it.” So what we did was, we got a mannequin, cut the mannequin up into parts, put them into plastic bags and dumped them in the lake, and we got the media to cover it, and they wrote this whole story: “Bags found with body parts inside. To learn more, visit *CSI*, the exhibition at the science center.” And it went down pretty well actually.

The other thing we have recently embarked upon: Young people nowadays look to new media. So we have worked with a number of bloggers. We bring them to the science center,

get them to go around the exhibitions for the opening and then they hopefully find time to blog about it. You'd be surprised with the amount of reach that you can have, so think of Facebook, Twitter. So these are some of the vehicles that we have in recent years reached out to.

Is this the kind of advice you've shared when science centers in other countries—India, China, the Maldives—have requested your assistance as a consultant?

Yes. I think one of the important things about when you are consulting to countries like this, particularly if they are interested in setting up a science center, one very important thing is to try and understand what the country, the people, are trying to do. Very often one thinks a model that works for you in your country can be replanted and transported into another country, and it's not really the case. If you do not fully understand the people and what they want to do and how they can be reached to, you can actually end up with a big failure. Oftentimes I've found that to be the case with a number of consultants—you go out there with good ideas that work in your country and you try to implement them in that country, and they just don't work. So I think that in all of the consultancies that we do, one of the first things we try to establish is know who the people are, what are their expectations, what is it that they're familiar with, and then try to work the course around it.

Have you learned anything from your experiences in other countries that you've brought back that was applicable to your work in Singapore?

Yes—that people learn in different ways. And some of these ways that we have seen, we have actually found quite applicable to what we do. This could be a simple thing as just a very—I guess one simple kind of interactive, which you probably are not used to doing and maybe you did years ago but it works in that country, and sometimes you bring it back and you find it does. Sometimes the simpler exhibits are the ones that have greater appeal, the ones that are intuitive and easier to understand. I think this is one of the biggest things we have learned about.

Along the same lines, working with your international colleagues, you've served as the treasurer of the Asia Pacific Network of Science and Technology Centres [ASPAC] and you were the co-convenor of the ASPAC exhibition group, and through that you helped establish the group's annual meeting, and you also helped set up an online traveling exhibition database. Why do you find these types of forums are so important for exhibition staff to have?

I think one important thing is when you attended meetings and perhaps specifics forums like the one that we have for traveling exhibitions, it gives opportunities for countries within the network to share their experiences and the issues that they face in working to set up a traveling exhibition. Some hurdles can be as simple as language, different kinds of language, and different levels of... logistics, and in forums like this it gives us this opportunity to share and understand each other's needs. So what we try to do is various commonalities of interest, try to bring an exhibition that can be brought—say it starts in Singapore, then there is appeal for it to go to Thailand, Indonesia, and so on and so forth. So at forums like this we try to establish these relationships and these opportunities, and we share our experiences. And I think that is very, very useful. And the network also gives us—it's very informal, easy to do.

Sometimes when you use the network, it's not just to ask about traveling exhibitions but also to learn about problems. Someone posts a note and says, "Hey, I have a problem with

this, can somebody help me?" One thing I've come to learn in the science center world is the people who work at science centers are very, very forthcoming and want to help each other out. So in forums like this it's good, you know, it gives you an opportunity to discuss shared things and also build up on each other's ideas.

Another thing that we are currently trying to work on is through the network seeing whether we can produce an exhibition through collaboration. So, let's say the cost. If you need 3 million dollars to do it and you can get four partners or five partners, then the cost for each of them becomes a lot less. And having traveled through the collaboration itself you also have the opportunity to lead this exhibition to other countries. Currently we are now working within the ASPAC network on an exhibition on rice.

What will that entail?

Rice is very much a staple food for more than 2 billion people in the world, and very much a staple of the diet of most Asian countries. What we found when we did some research on this, that there are many very interesting cultural stories to tell. Say, for example, the Japanese make wine out of rice called sake. People from Bali have rice for breakfast, rice for lunch, rice for tea, and rice for dinner, in all forms. The Chinese can actually write an entire verse of the Bible on a single grain of rice. So when the exhibition travels to different parts, one thing we have put forth, we have reserved or kept aside a certain space for the local venues to showcase some of the things that are associated from a cultural perspective about rice that their country has.

That sounds fascinating. I'm trying to think what the American version of our primary use of rice might be, but I can't think of it off the top of my head.

Interestingly enough, in the American Museum of Natural History, whom we collaborate with on a regular basis, they are planning to do an exhibition on food. They wanted to hear some input from us on what we thought and what rice means to Asia. And incidentally, I found out there is a rice in the state of Terengganu in Malaysia that they give to women who have just given birth and evidently they recover in half the time. So there are many of these interesting stories, and stories are a good thing to do in an exhibition. People like stories. That's why movies never die. If you can tell a story within an exhibition, you know you get the scientific point across but with interesting bits, these notes of information.

You also spearheaded a benchmarking project for improving the exhibition design process in general, and, if I understand correctly, that led to the invention of the Science Centre Singapore's Fire Tornado exhibit, and that was seen worldwide at the World's Inaugural Youth Olympic Games in 2010. What else did you see emerge from that project and what benchmarks were established?

Through the publicity that we've had with our Fire Tornado, a number of landscape architects have recently approached us and wanted us to develop something like this for the condominiums that they build. Instead of having normal water features, the usual water features, they said, "Why not have a fire feature?" So these are some of the side benefits that actually we didn't plan for.

From the benchmarking project itself, are there—have there been new goals established within the science center, or is that still developing?

They're still being developed in the process. We're not trying to force any issues at the moment. We're keeping them somewhat fluid and giving it another year or so to see how things go.

You clearly have plenty on your plate. And it sounds like, along with holding a top leadership role at the Science Centre Singapore, you are also frequently at science centers in other countries, if not helping them online. But you still, according to your colleagues, make time to go and walk the exhibition floor itself and talk with visitors and help them engage with the exhibitions. Why do you see that as a priority?

I think an exhibit on the floor, as it stands, that's fine, but if there's a face to it and if somebody interacts with it, I think there's a great opportunity to bring out a lot more from the exhibit to the visitor. One of the reasons why we—all senior management at the science center walk the floor—and one of the things that we do is of course first we get to see things that are not working, the problems that we face, all the staff are facing, we talk to them and find out what are the issues and how they can be best resolved. When you sit there and watch a group of people looking at an exhibit, playing with it, and then you go up to them and talk to them and explain a little bit more, and then you see that look of delight that comes on their face.

I remember there was an exhibition that we just opened on sound. I just walked in and I saw this family...with a little girl playing with one of the exhibits. I went up to the parents and said, "Come, let's go over here and let me borrow your daughter for a while," so they looked at first a little alarmed, and I turned to her, and I told her, this is—you know the famous echo tube that you find probably everywhere. And I asked her—and I demonstrated to her how to cup her hands and what do you hear, you hear the echo, and then I thought she was a little scared, but slowly she ventured in, she cupped her hands, and then that look on her face, I mean, that made my day. The sparkle that came upon her face really made my day. And then the next minute she was starting to shout and scream—see, the spark that the exhibit turned on, it really initiated the learning experience. And it is important for staff at the science center to walk around and try and make these things happen as often as we can. Because science centers—it's all about people learning. They're not just exhibits in a room, it's all about people who love to interact and talk to people and explain to them some of these wonderful, beautiful things that happen all around us. And to me that makes my job.

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