

THE FUTURE OF US: WHEN STORYTELLING BRIDGED THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

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My inspiration for *The Future of Us* came from the film *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), and Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954).

The windows in every block of *The Future of Us* "Home Tomorrow" section are windows into the lives of the future. This came from the idea of Grace Kelly and James Stewart [in *Rear Window*] looking into their neighbours' lives. That same voyeurism has been reframed into something like a looking glass into the future. The overall art direction for "Home Tomorrow" was developed from the tornado scene in *The Wizard of Oz*. The tornadoes that connected the ground to the sky are reimagined as the vertical homes reaching up to the sky. (Tan 2016)

The Future of Us (TFOU) Exhibition showed a world where technology, especially the digital, can make dreams come true for Singaporeans of all ages and persuasions. More than 15,000 dreams collected from Singaporeans were woven into a narrative on how – in 2030 – Singaporeans could live, work, play, and learn in ways that are currently inconceivable but are made plausible through the technological advancements probable

today and realisable in the next 15 years.

This was presented through static and digital presentations housed in three specially built domes – a fantastical and colourful creation of a world that visitors could walk through and be dazzled by the possibilities akin to Dorothy discovering Oz for the first time. For an exhibition that portrayed a highly futuristic and technologically-enabled lifestyle, a major challenge was to engage the demographic group of seniors – one usually not as conversant with the digital and would likely feel alienated from a future heavy with it. Yet, at the end of the exhibition, this demographic group was one of those that charted the highest scores in the visitor satisfaction polls conducted.

This was achieved via the medium of oral storytelling. More than 1,000 volunteer guides were repositioned as storytellers to present the exhibition's narrative and to make TFOU a dazzling social experience for the elderly and for all visitors.

This paper explores the approach used to construct the emotional architecture of the exhibition that put the art of storytelling

at the centre of the experience, and which succeeded in bridging the digital divide and bringing home to all groups the idea of a future worth dreaming of.

A Different Kind of Exhibition

TFOU opened on 1 December 2015 and ended on 8 March 2016. Like previous milestones in Singapore's progress that were marked by national exhibitions, TFOU was envisioned as a focal point to present the Singapore Story for SG50 (the 50th year of Singapore's independence). As the other SG50-related exhibitions being planned for 2015 focused on the historical narrative of the past 50 years and the values of the generation that built modern Singapore in the 1950s and the 1960s, also known as the Pioneer Generation, TFOU was eventually conceived to highlight the forward-looking aspect of SG50 and galvanise the public to look forward with optimism and confidence even as they recognise the sober challenges ahead.

The new narrative of the government as expressed during Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's speech at the swearing-in of the new Cabinet on 1 October 2015 emphasised the building of the next chapter for Singapore – one that would be co-authored by Singaporeans. (Prime Minister's Office 2015).

So, in the end, the nature of the exhibition became a new way of communicating a narrative about the future – a future that is not set but is conditional upon the choices we make individually and the impact of the sum of those choices. It was no longer a message-heavy exhibition with considerable messages to impart, but an exhibition in the form of a question: "What would you do for the future of us as a nation, as a people, as a society?"

The design and execution of TFOU faced a few challenges. An exhibition of the future would invariably have elements that are high-tech and digital, especially with the number of ideas on how a Smart Nation could work in 15 years. This could end up being alienating to the older demographic. Secondly, in order for the exhibition to galvanise the nation, it had to appeal to all demographic groups, each with their specific preferences. Finally, there was the barrier of language especially for people in the older demographic who might not be conversant in English.

To address these issues and ensure that the visitors will not feel a disconnect with the content and the presentation of the exhibition, we designed the exhibition to be an immersive experience with more visual and multimedia content, artefacts and minimal text panels. The aim was to have visitors feel like they had walked into a movie set of the future.

This was put to the test in previews that were conducted in November 2015 prior to the official opening of the exhibition. Several test groups, while finding the exhibition very immersive and thrilling as a vision of the future, were not able to discern a narrative pulling the different threads together. As a result, they felt disorientated after the experience. On the other hand, the test group of seniors, who were accompanied throughout by staff and hosted like a social experience, were able to appreciate the key issues and were inspired about the future after the experience.

Through narration and stories, the preview audience learned about our history, and came to make sense of the phenomena of this new Singapore. The TFOU team discovered that this was the secret ingredient for visitors to appreciate the key messages of the exhibition.

The Activation of the Storytellers

The TFOU team activated the induction and training of more than 615 guides from the Ministry of National Development and, subsequently, the Pioneer Generation Office (PGO), which reaches out to the Pioneer Generation, to act as narrators of TFOU throughout the exhibition experience. This turned out to be a game-changer for TFOU to go beyond an exhibition to become an inspiring narrative of what the future holds.

In place of extensive signage and text panels, TFOU had human narration throughout the exhibition to express the key messages of the exhibition, to interact with the visitors, and create a very inclusive experience for all. This demonstrated in action the key message of TFOU – a future where we will be caring and appreciative of each constituent.

To maintain the highest possible morale and esprit de corps during the exhibition period which lasted more than three months, weekly training sessions were conducted from January 2016 onwards for each new group of narrators. These training sessions included on-the-job-training with the current group of narrators before taking over the narrating duties for a week. The training was designed to be engaging, hands-on, and focused so that the personality of each narrator could come through when guiding visitors in the exhibition.

From January 2016 onwards, the number of narrators at the exhibition at any one time increased from six to nine. This was due to the infusion of guides from the PGO to augment the team of narrators from the Ministry of National Development (MND).

It was critical for the TFOU team to invest time and effort in building relationships



Building volunteer camaraderie, 2015.
Image courtesy of TFOU.

with the guides; this helped to build a sense of belonging and commitment which made a difference in terms of their engagement with the public.

The team also focused on the details of each guide and volunteer. For instance, it was important to know their backgrounds, experiences, likes and dislikes, and even their habits – this enabled their deployment such that their abilities could be maximised. For example, we were able to deploy guides who were comfortable speaking in dialects to groups with elderly visitors. Some volunteers were already accomplished photographers, while others were very personable and endeared themselves to visitors. Leveraging their skills and personalities in this way resulted in many iconic photos and videos of the exhibition as well as in-depth interviews with visitors.

The PGO team in particular was outstanding in showing how to work and deliver as a team. Each week from 11 January 2016, two constituencies of PGO programme co-ordinators would take over six out of nine of the guiding positions. The following are some insights from the TFOU team about the PGO guides:

What stood out was that the PGO guides worked very well as a team. They supported and encouraged one another. In the mornings, they brought breakfast to share with other team members before they started their duties. Some even walked around to see if the other guides were doing okay or needed help. There was so much pride in wanting to deliver a good job.

Indeed, the PGO guides operated in teams with a team manager to take care of



Photo by Volunteers of Visitors at “The Future of Learning” Exhibit, 2015.
Image courtesy of TFOU.



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their welfare as well as to ensure that a certain standard of narration was maintained. The existing peer support from the teams also made a huge difference in keeping the spirit and camaraderie of the narrators high. In addition, the teams invested heavily in the product, adapting their scripts and interaction styles with each iteration. This even included adapting the script to incorporate different languages so as to cater to different communities. While guiding visitors from a madrasah, the Chinese narrator in the “Symphony of the City” section charmed the audience by switching spontaneously to a Malay narration. Several guides also provided bilingual narrations based on the audience they were speaking to.

Just as the Lion, Tin Woodman, and Scarecrow provided emotional support and

assistance to Dorothy on her journey to find her “home” in the film, *The Wizard of Oz*, so these volunteers provided the personal touch in guiding each group of visitors through the different domes, making them feel that they would always have a place in this new Singapore which they would continue to call home.

A Transformational Experience for the People Involved

TFOU benefited from the support of many volunteers across the public sector especially from the Ministry of National Development and the statutory boards under its purview, and PGO. A clear dividend that arose from this was the strong affective connection that the experience created for the volunteers.

The following is the farewell message from one of our most enthusiastic volunteers,



TFOU Domes and Installation, 2015.
Image courtesy of TFOU.

the Public Utilities Board's Mr Lai Kwok Wah, who turned 65 three days before he ended his stint with us. Mr Lai chose to spend his last two weeks in service with TFOU as he wanted to be part of this national programme. He wrote:

I chose to be a volunteer for TFOU exhibition at the end of my career in the public service.

I'm very touched by the response by the public. When they look at the exhibition, I get a strong feeling that they fully agree. They are confident that Singapore will be able to go forward, and are enthusiastic to be part of it. And for those from the older generation, who may not have the time to see what lies ahead, the exhibition allows them to peek into the future. You can see that they are happy that these things are in place for their children and grandchildren to aim for, think about and work towards.

Kasmawati, a 59 year-old volunteer who is also the mother of Member of Parliament Rahayu Mahzam, shared:

If I don't come, 'macam' (Malay for "it's like") something is missing. Young and old, when working together, 'kami ada tenaga' (Malay for "we have energy!") We come from different backgrounds and have different ways of working, some work fast, some work slow and steady; this project will not be complete if there was only one kind of personality.

Something about the Connection between Young and Old

Iris Goh, 26, is a volunteer from the Civil Service College. She noticed and interviewed Uncle Joseph, a cleaner with TFOU, and subsequently gave us the idea to have a special tour for cleaners and security officers.

I spoke with Uncle Joseph, an amazingly diligent member of the "Mop Squad" who worked long hours to ensure that TFOU would be spick and span for the best visitor experience. He had many stories to tell me over the two weeks – stories about the exhibition, about his kids, his favourite exhibit in "Home Tomorrow", his pride at being able to speak at least three languages fluently (English, Mandarin, and Japanese). He is just one of the many interesting personalities I met over the two weeks at TFOU. They made everything so much more meaningful, and suffice to say, TFOU turned out to be a more enriching experience than I could have imagined. I certainly don't regret stepping out of my comfort zone and being a part of our history.

Visitor Experience

Exit polls were conducted on-site. A total of 5,530 visitor-respondents were polled on-site over the duration of the exhibition. The overall average positive rating for the exhibition experience was 92 per cent (ratings of 4 to 5 on a 1 to 5 scale)¹. Negative rating of 1 to 2 was 1.75 per cent.

¹ Five point ranking scale with 1 being "strongly disagree" and 5 being "strongly agree". The statement was "I enjoyed the whole experience and I would recommend to someone to visit the exhibition."

The overall rating for the exhibition increased noticeably from December, with the final full week (29 February to 6 March) registering an overall rating of 95 per cent. The increase was consistent across most of the demographic groups and was especially noticeable for seniors (60 years and above). This was significant as the seniors had previously given the lowest ratings across all the groups at the start of the exhibition.

The exit polls and feedback received suggest that the exhibition made a positive connection with visitors at the emotional level. From the feedback and messages penned by visitors, there also appears to be traction and reception of the core messages: the need to care for one another, for one's society, and for Singapore's future; and the need to be ready to do something, to take ownership of one's own future, to share one's dream and act on it.

Conclusion

TFOU had a core team of only eight staff in the project office. However, TFOU exhibition was able to engage and inspire a wide range of visitors across all demographic groups in an intimate and personal way. This was possible as the team was augmented by a large team of guides, volunteers, and operations managers who invested time and effort in the project to deliver an exhibition experience with the key message that the future is a time with a human touch.

It was remarkable that in an exhibition that projected and showcased the digital future, the understanding of its possibilities was only possible via social or even communal exchanges – both on the part of the volunteers and the visitors. It showed clearly that the ability to use technology as part of the social experience proved more significant than providing (on the part of the exhibitors) or gaining (on the part of the visitors) access to technology.

This underscored the brand of TFOU. The exhibition was organised with the greatest care for engagement, inclusivity, and appreciation of the importance of personal and social connections across diverse groups. The eventual digital divide was overcome by creating a social environment that amplified the overall experience.



Image of the team of volunteers, 2016.
Image courtesy of TFOU.

References

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