

# Extending the Brand:

## *The Body Worlds Effect*

By Jeff Rudolph



More than 665,000 visitors saw *Body Worlds* at the California Science Center in 2004. Photo by Alexander Lawst courtesy Institute for Plastination, [www.bodyworlds.com](http://www.bodyworlds.com)

The California Science Center today is the result of a long master-planning process. Starting in 1988, at what was then known as the California Museum of Science and Industry, we began thinking hard about who we were as an institution, what we stood for, what our values and our mission were. Surveys told us that the Los Angeles community didn't know what our museum did or what it represented, that our institution wasn't well known and respected by its public. We set out to change that.

By the time we opened the first phase of the California Science Center in 1998, we had completely rebranded the institution. We not only introduced a new name and a new look; we also introduced a new way of integrating our mission, our vision, and our values into our work. Integrity of the brand would now be part of every decision we made—including the decision of which outside exhibitions to book for our visitors.

Six years later, we would have a unique opportunity to put that commitment to the test.

### A leap of faith

In 2004, we approached anatomist Gunther von Hagens to ask him to consider bringing his *Body Worlds* exhibition of plastinated human specimens to North America for the first time. The exhibition had already attracted 14 million visitors in Europe and Asia, but it had also aroused controversy and media criticism, especially in Europe.

Many people stayed away, citing issues of privacy, of respect for the dead, of concern over the origin of the human exhibits, but many people also went to see it, perhaps because of those same issues.

After reviewing *Body Worlds* and discussing it at length with its creator, we felt comfortable that the exhibition was consistent with our mission and that we shared with von Hagens a common vision of its purpose. Its obvious potential to impact people emotionally and educationally and to expand community awareness of the science center also offered a chance to build our brand. But the opportunity was not without risk. Adverse publicity—though it might boost attendance—could have a negative impact on our carefully rebranded institution.

To mitigate the risk, we took a number of steps. We gathered a group of medical and religious bioethicists to advise us and hired a bioethicist to travel to Europe on our behalf to review body donor forms and other legal paperwork. Throughout the process, the science center's board was involved and concerned. After listening to staff

and advisors, board members engaged in longer discussion than on any issue in the past 20 years. The vote to show *Body Worlds* was unanimous.

Our next consideration was the messaging. In Europe, *Body Worlds* had been billed as an "anatomical exhibition of human bodies" but had sometimes been described by the media as an art exhibition. Only once had it appeared in a museum. Our communications strategy was to position it clearly as an anatomy, physiology, and health exhibition that belonged in a science center.

We also prepared for possible negative impact. We reviewed the history of prior exhibition controversies and underwent extensive media training—including having a former investigative reporter lob hostile questions at von Hagens and our staff.

### A dramatic impact

The story has a happy ending, as you may know. The Los Angeles media, after seeing *Body Worlds* and talking with von Hagens, staff, and advisors, promoted the exhibition enthusiastically. A record 665,000+ people visited the science center during its six-month run, and 270,000 came to our subsequent two-month hosting of *Body Worlds 2*. The response from philanthropic institutions and the business community was equally gratifying. Decision makers viewed us with new respect—an outcome that has continued to open doors.

But from the perspective of extending our brand, the most important result has been the exhibition's long-term impact on science center operations. *Body Worlds* showed us that the way we approach ethical

issues is extremely important; we have therefore expanded our ethics committee and made it a standing committee. Both staff and board members are now willing to take on more controversial issues, if we do it right.

*Body Worlds* brought not just expanded audiences—almost half of those who came were first-timers—but also different audiences, including a demographic we hadn't seen before: people without children. Young adults in the 20- to 35-year-old range came by the hundreds, as did senior citizens. The effect has lasted. We have more adult visitors today than ever before.

Finally, *Body Worlds* enhanced our brand as a learning institution. Medical students, nurses, anatomy professors and their classes—all came to study the exhibition. We saw art students sketching in the galleries. This seemed appropriate, since von Hagens had drawn inspiration for *Body Worlds* from the lifelike drawings of Vesalius and other Renaissance anatomists, some of whose works were reproduced on the exhibition banners.

### After the blockbuster

The challenge with results like these is to find ways to maintain them once the blockbuster is gone. *Body Worlds* showed us that our public is interested in seeing issues in science and health addressed in a professional, balanced way. We have built on that.

In September 2005, we started a new speakers program, "Science Matters," that brings together ethicists and scientists to examine current issues in science. Our first event was a discussion of the "Promise and Pitfalls of Stem Cell Research." Some 600 people, including a surprising number of college students, attended.

For a January 2006 session, "Defining Life and Death," the panel included the dean of the Annenberg School of Communication, the retired pastor of L.A.'s largest African-American church (now a senior fellow at the University of Southern California's Center for Religion and Civic Culture), and Terri Schiavo's court-

appointed attorney. In conjunction with the panel, we scheduled a more intimate round-table seminar to explore the definition of life through Plato's *Phaedo*; we also brought in *After Life*, an exhibit developed by the Dallas Museum of Art that explores diverse perceptions of death and dying.

April's panel, "The Science and Ethics of Reproductive Cloning," brought together, among others, a scientist who predicts that he will clone a human within two years, an ethicist who believes this work is so unethical that researchers shouldn't touch it, and a leading Muslim scholar and ethicist who is also a physician. A related seminar explored the foundations of our respect and appreciation for human life through selections from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*.

*Body Worlds* showed us that visitors appreciate science that is connected to their own experience. We have kept that in mind as we both develop and host new exhibitions. This spring we are premiering the Ontario Science Centre's *Marvel Super Heroes Science Exhibition*, which uses the subject matter of popular comics to arouse interest in science topics. [See "Building a Blockbuster," page 13.] For 2007, we are developing our own traveling exhibition, *Goosebumps: The Science of Fear*, again based on a subject with strong popular interest.

Not every exhibition can be a *Body Worlds*, of course. Von Hagens' exhibitions continue to break attendance records wherever they go. In Los Angeles, we may not see their like again for some time. But at the California Science Center, the *Body Worlds* effect continues, as we build on the brand identity and community respect generated for us by this celebrated blockbuster.

*Jeff Rudolph is president and CEO of the California Science Center, Los Angeles: [www.californiasciencecenter.org](http://www.californiasciencecenter.org). Body Worlds opens May 5 at the Science Museum of Minnesota, and Body Worlds 2 is currently at Colorado's Denver Museum of Nature and Science.*

(continued from page 4), 88,500-square-foot Cerritos Public Library was developed with advice from Harvard Business School professors Joseph Pine and James Gilmore, authors of the 1999 best-seller *The Experience Economy*.

Cerritos' "Experience Library" has 225,000 books (in several locally used languages, as well as English), 200 public-access computers, and 1,200 "hot seats" for computer users, all organized in themed spaces surrounding a winding Main Street corridor. Young visitors can enjoy the art studio, 15,000-gallon saltwater aquarium, and 40-foot *T. rex* replica; adults can read classics beside a "phantom fireplace" in the Old World Reading Room; and community groups can hold events in a state-of-the-art multimedia lab and conference center. Details of the project's development and some lessons learned are posted at <http://cml.ci.cerritos.ca.us/static.htm>.

Another partnership strategy is suggested by the work of the Urban Land Institute (ULI), an international nonprofit that supports community involvement in public land-use decisions ([www.uli.org](http://www.uli.org)). Here in Arizona, ULI recently sponsored a design charrette to help forge a common identity for Papago Park, a 1,500-acre open space abutting the cities of Phoenix, Scottsdale, and Tempe. Participants included many cultural and recreational agencies that had not previously interacted.

In the near future, I expect to see more science centers entering into such collaborations, as well as finding subtler ways of segmenting potential audiences and then doing things differently to meet their various patrons halfway. There will still be a place for wonderful exhibitions, of course, but only as part of a fully considered and well-rounded package of informal science education offerings. ■

*Sheila Grinnell founded the Arizona Science Center, Phoenix, and served as its president and CEO from 1993 to 2004. Now a museum consultant, she received the ASTC Fellow Award for Outstanding Contribution in October 2005.*