Show Me Your Tattoo: Creating A Successful Exhibit Around Veteran Narratives

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1. Talk to the community: What do the community that you want to engage have in common? What stories do they want to tell? What’s important to them?

Definitely getting more tattoos. This whole sleeve will be a military theme. It was a big part of my life; something I’m proud of. It would be a tribute. I also want to get some memorials for my friends."

"It also carries memories of what I did on that deployment; I’m hoping to add more stuff around it to build on the story."

"This is my 4th tattoo...I got it because I was out of the service; I was injured and wanted to continue to serve others and I really wanted to show my respect to our fallen comrades. It reminds of the sacrifice some people have to make for the freedoms we have."

I’ve always liked tattoos.

"This was my last deployment and I lost a lot and gained a lot from that deployment. I was deployed to Iraq first and when I came home it was a lot harder to be home than I thought it was going to be. I had met my friend James that was killed in Afghanistan, I met him in Iraq. He was from Ohio. When we all came home from Iraq, there were four of us, and we all decided that we just couldn’t be home and that we had to go back overseas. We went to Afghanistan and we got split up. We all went in different directions and he was killed about a month after we got there. I was stationed in Camp Phoenix and after he died, I realized that being home was more important than being deployed. That was the moment that I decided that with the military, I needed to go on a different track. Camp Phoenix was a big part of that. It was the moment that I decided that this (UIUC) was the school I wanted to go to and social work to help veterans is what I want to do." 

2. Showcase their stories: We interviewed veterans and then created an exhibit around their words. We used tattoos but an exhibit could be done around art, photographs, letters, poetry, whatever the group embraces.

Brandi Binder
Age: 38
Branch: Illinois Army National Guard
Rank: Sergeant
Years in Service: 16.5
Primary Job: Supply
Major and Degree Track at UIUC: Masters of Social Work for Mental Health

Notice that the picture of her tattoo has a white border and a shadow attached to it. This is so the picture “pops” and draws the eye to it.

3. Less is more: Exhibits often have far too much text. What is really needed? Now take half of that out. Use images, minimal text, and judicious use of bold. Also, try to be uniform with effects used, spacing, language, etc. Contextualize when you need to.

Some Tips
- It always takes more time than you think it does. There will be delays because of illness, misunderstandings, and miscommunication.
- Use project management skills.
- Proofread closely and get a veteran or two to check that the jargon has been correctly interpreted.
- Exhibit cases don’t have to be overflowing with stuff – a few books to highlight topics from each interview and some personal memorabilia from the interviewee’s time in the service made for a far more aesthetically interesting and compelling exhibit.
- Talk up the exhibit and invite people to come see it.
- Take credit for the work you did and put your name on it. If you don’t, a lot of people are going to be wondering who did the work.
- When interviewing veterans, don’t be shy about going off script and asking for details or for explanations. Military life is its own culture and absolutely requires an interpreter.

How did we know we were successful?
- People are still talking about the exhibit a year later.
- Every time I passed through the exhibit location, I noticed people had stopped and were looking at the exhibit including taking pictures and posting about it on social media.
- We put out a press release and announcements on social media which resulted in a lot of community discussion and engagement.
- The exhibit was covered by a national newspaper (Chicago Tribune).

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