

Nine Hundred Million Conversations

by Frank Lavin

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The largest World's Fair in history, the 2010 Shanghai Expo, ended its six-month run on October 31, but most Americans barely knew it even took place. Mammoth, yes, but did the Expo matter? Should US participation matter? Having helped lead the US effort for almost two years, you will not be surprised that I offer a hearty "yes" to both questions. Let's take them one at a time.

First, the Expo. With over 73 million attendees, the Shanghai Expo holds the distinction of being not just the largest World's Fair in history but the largest event in human history, the largest gathering of people in history for any reason. The Expo was also the largest in terms of participation, with some 246 nations, international organizations, and corporations presenting themselves through their pavilions – purpose-built and group buildings that hosted displays, presentations, and shows.

These superlatives seem to prompt an inevitable "so what?" from a US audience. Aren't World's Fairs passé? Aren't they a dated platform?

For more affluent societies, World's Fairs might hold less of an appeal. But if you were a Shanghai bus driver, the Expo might be the sum of your exposure to the world. Ever. Indeed, more Chinese attended the World's Fair this year than actually visited the world. These figures were even more pronounced at the USA Pavilion which hosted over 7 million visitors, over 10 times the number of Chinese who will visit the US this year. Each one of those pavilion visits constitutes a conversation of sort, in which the United States has a few minutes to engage the visitor and explain a little about our country. With over 73 million fairgoers each attending about a dozen pavilions during their visit, this makes for about 900 million total conversations. Simply put, the Shanghai Expo will do more to shape Chinese view of the world than any other mechanism.

This takes us to the second question: Why should the US care? As good as the Expo was, it did not significantly enhance US access to the world. Remember, the main value of the Expo was not to help Americans understand the world, but to help the world understand the US. Some Americans might not be particularly interested in the world, but it seems as though the world is particularly interested in us.

This takes us to the central purpose of the USA Pavilion. The USA Pavilion conversation allows us to engage with our guests (95 percent Chinese) as we share what we

think are some of the strong points of the US, some of our successes and challenges and some of the special elements that make our society work. It is a somewhat complicated conversation, including topics such as freedom of assembly and a de Tocqueville concept of civic problem-solving in a democracy – but we used an upbeat narrative format that would be accessible to the fairgoers. And our surveys showed the message worked, with visitors to the USA Pavilion leaving better informed about the US and quite positive about the Pavilion experience.

This element of people-to-people diplomacy, commonly called "Public Diplomacy," is a key pillar to overall US diplomatic efforts. I can relate as a former ambassador and undersecretary, that when we are dealing with foreigners who have some understanding of or frame of reference for the US, the odds are higher that we get a positive outcome. If we are dealing with people who are completely ignorant of the US, we have a much tougher time getting the outcome we want.

The USA Pavilion was a team effort, with Hillary Clinton playing the critical leadership role. Thankfully we had a superb commissioner general and a strong CEO – but it was still a scramble to pull the pavilion together.

Part of the problem was the US financial turmoil, which crested as our fundraising efforts got underway. The resultant economic downturn also caused some to question the wisdom of the effort – could the US afford to be in Shanghai?

To the contrary, we need to be able to reach out on cloudy days as well as sunny days. We need to engage. We need to tell our story. And we need to make sure we continue to improve the US effectiveness at Expos going forward.

Currently US Expo participation faces twin challenges: The US is the only national pavilion that does not receive government funding. The US is also the only nation that has no permanent body to manage the pavilion process. Perhaps either of these challenges could be dealt with on a solo basis, but together they made for a difficult environment. The USA Pavilion team was obligated to raise all necessary funds from the private sector as well as to constitute a governing body from scratch to construct and run the facility and to provide all the messaging and intellectual content.

To my mind, it would be well worth establishing a permanent body to manage US Expo participation as we go forward, just as the USOC is the permanent manager for US participation in the Olympics, this also without any government funds. A permanent body would allow the US Expo team to build the necessary expertise of pavilion management, communications, and fundraising. It would also allow for the audits and Congressional or State Department oversight necessary to ensure institutional integrity.

We also need to do a better job in the US to allow the US general public to get involved, for example...

- A national competition among architects for pavilion design.
- A national competition at film schools for movies that could be shown at the pavilion.
- An exhibit at the Smithsonian Institute of recent Expos and US Pavilions.
- An advisory board of all past commissioner generals.

The US is going to have to move quickly if it wants to build on Shanghai and have an effective Expo presence. Next up is the 2012 Mini-Expo in Korea, and in 2015 there is a full-blown Expo in Italy. The US needs to be in the game – now – to ensure we offer a constructive, upbeat way to help the world think about the US.

Let's get to work.