

Q&A with Denise Amyot

Interviewed by Joelle Seligson

Watt's Up? is both an exhibition and a question that Denise Amyot, president and CEO of the Canadian Science and Technology Museums Corporation in Ottawa, Ontario, is trying to answer through a cross-Canada initiative. Amyot spearheaded Let's Talk Energy: Engaging Ideas for Canada's Future, a six-year public engagement program launched in 2010. Her work earned her ASTC's Roy L. Shafer Leading Edge Award for New Leadership in the Field, which she accepted at the 2012 ASTC Annual Conference last October. Amyot spoke with *Dimensions* magazine about how she's energizing Canada about energy.

Denise, could you tell me, what was the impetus behind Let's Talk Energy?

Yes. What happened is that we did the—about two years ago—a cross-Canada consultation where we met a variety of people from society representing their different fields whether they were professional educators, chamber of commerce, business people, and different NGOs, and basically we asked them what they were doing in science and technology, second what was missing, and then what we could do together. And what happened is that in each of those provinces from coast to coast to coast, because we also went in the territories—everybody was talking to us at one point about energy. So I just thought, oh, that's interesting, you know, just immediately after the first one, and I began to ask people, what about if we were to do something about energy together, would that be of interest? And people were saying yes. But what was interesting is that everybody across the country had a different experience with energy depending on where they were from. So we felt that this would be an important topic to cover and ask something around energy literacy. So that's a long answer for a very short question.

Not, not too long at all! So more specifically, which venues are involved in this pan-Canadian conversation, and what exactly are they discussing?

OK, what is happening is that we were able to gather up a network of 24 partners in each of the provinces and that are located in fact in 27 locations across the country. So a variety of subjects are being looked at, ranging from facts about energy, about the different perceptions around energy, the technology with respect to energy, and I could give you specific examples of what each of those partners are doing. What is interesting about this initiative is that we believe it's unique in the world, so far, where different partners are gathering together to share their experience, their knowhow, resources, on a single team. And where we can learn

from each other as well. And we started by doing three main exhibitions, one in each of our museums in Ottawa—the agricultural museum, the science and technology museum, as well as aviation and space. And then what we did also—we developed an information kiosk and we have placed 12 of those kiosks in different places across the country.

Along with those, you have a few other aspects, like the traveling educational suitcases, and you're doing some pretty hardcore social media efforts. What else is going on? What are some highlights?

What is happening is that on top of the three main exhibitions and the information kiosks we have developed a number of educational suitcases, and I will give you more details, as well as, of course, our social media efforts. So if you look, for example, at the traveling suitcases, we developed different materials for different grades. Some are in terms of the traveling suitcases and others are materials that the teachers can download. For example, our Edukit Energy for Tomorrow is aimed at grades 4 to 6, and it's basically to help the teachers to have their students discover how energy is produced in today's world. So it would include, for example, hands-on activities, and a basic electromagnetism experiment using renewable electrical energy sources, or instructions on how to read and draw a basic wiring diagram, or experiments using series and parallel circuits. So at the other end, we developed another kit for grades 9 and up, which actually is on alternative energy and green ecotechnology. So this one is really about the basics of electrical circuitry by examining alternative technology, and again it has hands-on, people can see how to make biofuel and measure exhaust gas emissions or even discover electrochemistry as they assemble a fuel cell vehicle. And there are those three downloadable home and school programs that we have developed, again for grades 9 to 12, all around transportation and energy—or grade 1, where students can discover how energy is in our lives with a focus on the sun as a central source of energy.

What about at the museums themselves? What are one or two highlights of the programs they're doing related to energy?

We have a variety of them. And they can range from, of course, the interactives that you can have in the museums where you can move a wheel and then they see how much energy it takes before it can illuminate and go up to bringing electricity in the house, or running on a human hamster wheel if you want, where kids realize how much energy it would take to light—to illuminate the different lights and then end up with the Tesla coils that make a lot of noise and that kids really love. And of course there are different experiments that were done by the different guides that we have on the floor. There is also—right, now we have one traveling exhibition

that was done in collaboration with the Museum in Sherbrooke and this is circulating across the country right now.

Have you seen progress so far in increasing energy literacy in Canada?

Of course, you know, it's very hard to see evidence just because of what we have done, because you know people have access to information from different sources. What I can tell you, though, is that this initiative will run until 2017, and we are still in the early days, but one of the things that is quite interesting is the national annual award for energy literacy programming that we have put in place. And the first winner was Science World British Columbia for their annual Green Games competition, and we are very, very pleased with this because at the same time, it helps other science centers or museums across the country to know about those best practices. The other thing I could say is that in our largest exhibition, which is called *Power to Choose* at the Canada Science and Technology Museums, we have touchscreens, and with those touchscreens we can survey knowledge and intention with respect to actions in relation to energy. And we are amazed at how many people take the time to fill those surveys and also tell us about the different actions that they intend to take. Of course, there's also the growing numbers of followers and virtual visitors on our different social media presence.

What are some of the challenges, if any, you face in coordinating this massive project?

What were the challenges? Of course, like all the other science centers and museums, resources are always a challenge, but this is, I would say, compensated by the great support we got from our different sponsors, which is allowing us to be able to offer a number of tools and a number of resources that people can take advantage of. One of the things that is very important for us is to be able to—we have three goals in this initiative. Basically the first one is what we call Energy 101, so to dispel the myths with respect to energy because we've realized with this initiative that there are a lot of myths that exist around energy and that's what we are aiming at dispelling. And the second thing is to showcase the technology, the new technology so that people become familiar with this new technology. And thirdly, it's really—we hope to change the behavior with respect to energy and of course, the challenge is that being in a country that is blessed with lots of energy, people are often not as keen to save energy or maybe they are not as knowledgeable of it. But what we hope is that once they'll be knowledgeable of what is at stake, we hope it will change their behavior.

Great. Do you want to give readers just a little preview of what's coming up next?

Yes. First of all, we are updating our website. We have quite interesting new features that are coming. We are, for example, launching what we call an Explore Energy Map on which people will be able to upload and discuss sites of interest and places to visit to learn more about energy. So what we are aiming at is literally to have an energy map where we will be able to see who is talking about energy, what can they show, and that people can go to visit those places. We're also looking at other traveling exhibitions with our museum and science center partners. And of course we're planning also a fun and national activity involving kids and videos, so something that people could look forward [to]. And I would invite also—if there are other centers in the world that are interested in embarking on this initiative—at this stage we are looking at something that is national, but I would love to be able to invite—in fact, I'd love to invite other centers around the world that would be interested in being part of this initiative to make it the first of its kind at the international level.

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