

The Public Face of Exhibits

by Melissa Mannon

Coupled with our behind the scenes work, the effort cultural heritage professionals put into public presentation can lead to the success or failure of our mission. In addition to outreach and public programming, exhibits allow us to tell the public who we are and why we are important. Good exhibits can generate enthusiasm about what we do and are vital to the health of our institution.

When created properly, exhibits can be a boon to the public face of museums, libraries and archives. But exhibiting is not easy business and many institutions do not think to use their core collections to highlight the general work they do. Exhibiting is more than educating the public about a specific topic of our choosing. It also entails educating the public about the role of cultural institutions in the community.

First, I would like to examine museums since they are the most obvious institutions to make use of diverse collections, viewing exhibiting as a core function. To be successful as a tool for promoting the institution, exhibiting should be tied to the core of its mission.

The Wenham Museum in Wenham, Massachusetts (www.wenhammuseum.org) is an example of an institution that is striving to build around strong collections and exhibits. Last week, I had the pleasure of bringing my daughter to the museum, which features displays of children's toys with dolls and trains as their central focus. Over the years, the museum has tightened their focus and found a niche that allows them to develop exhibits with built in fun.

The museum appealed to

visitors of all ages and sexes. We girls mainly enjoyed the dolls. The little one loved looking at the displays as she carried her own American Girl doll tucked under her arm. I enjoyed reading the histories of the artifacts. My personal favorite was the doll collection of the family of Ralph Waldo Emerson. I found it fascinating to consider the items' provenance and to see the artifacts sitting beside photos of the Emerson family. We also enjoyed books that were set out alongside exhibit cases and featured educational children's stories. On our visit I noticed some enthusiastic parents and youngsters enjoying the collections while others took a break in a special play area. The gift shop was also spectacular, balancing contemporary toys with old-fashioned and collectible dolls, and mixed with traditional souvenirs such as postcards. The museum offers special events related to their mission and programs such as doll

A few weeks ago, an acquaintance of mine brought up the subject of the government stimulus package. She expressed some concern over what the government was proposing to fund. She ran through a list of items and then said, "And should we really be giving money to museums?!" Here I felt confident and stopped her mid-thought. "Yes!" I enthusiastically chimed. I explained that I worked in the cultural heritage field. I explained how museums are vital to the continuance of our culture. They house resources that explain our society—who we are and how we got here. If museums do not receive support and are forced to cut back or even close, who would care for our cultural heritage. Are Americans willing to part with their history to get over a short-term hump?

My conversation partner replied, "Oh. I really never thought of it that way." Phew! I wish I always had an opening like that in a conversation or had the opportunity to talk one-on-one to "the public."

What we do is becoming a hot political topic. Are museums, archives and libraries just "extras" that people frequent for recreation when they have nothing better to do? Or, are cultural heritage institutions vital entities in this quickly changing society? What is the best way to make ourselves the latter? How can we reach out to the general public and bring them into the fold? Exhibits allow us to put our best foot forward — especially when we can't reach every potential patron face-to-face.

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teas and disco parties to get the public into the building and to enhance the institution's community presence.

All of these elements help make the institution appear vital to the community. While behind the scenes, Wenham is operated as any other museum — managing collections and occupied with other general administrative duties — the face they put on is fun and contemporary as well as educational.

But its not just museums that benefit from exhibits and exhibit space planning that incorporate practical elements such as play areas. Libraries, archives, and other cultural institutions can

make use of their collections by putting them on display to benefit their public image. And we do not have to be a toy museum to make our work seem interesting. All archives and libraries should make an effort to use their unique collections, see their informational value beyond research purposes, and inform the public about the institution's cultural goals.

Exhibiting should work hand in hand with collection development and the other basic core functions of cultural heritage institutions. Tightly focused collections developed through written planning documents logically lead to focused and interesting exhibits. Exhibits should be designed to highlight a collection's strengths and peek the

curiosity of the community.

Any curating skills I have come from my undergraduate work in museum studies as an art history student. Why didn't my library school teach the basics about creating exhibits? Exhibits can garner the attention non-profits crave, especially in tremulous times as these. Our unique resources should be brought to the forefront to explain what we do and to attract those who may not realize our institution has anything to offer them personally. Creating an enjoyable space for the visit is also prime for success. Make your public face welcoming and the visitors will come.



Archives and Information Consultant Melissa Mannon is owner of ArchivesInfo.

Please send questions and comments to melissa@mannon.org.

For more information about ArchivesInfo and for access to past issues of this newsletter see www.archivesinfo.com

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Tips for Creating Attention Grabbing Exhibits

- Develop a list of possible exhibits based on your collection's focus and develop appropriate themes.
- Make sure you have appropriate display space for your materials. Display cases should be purchased from reputable suppliers and based on the size and format of your items. They should also (most importantly) ensure the safety of materials.
- Do your own research! Do not just put out interesting items. Think of yourself as an interpreter, describe each item and how each relates to others on display. Create an experience for your visitor.
- Create professional looking printed materials including brochures and labels.
- Consider creating online exhibits that highlight collections.
- Pay attention to the bigger picture. Use your exhibit and its printed material to explain the needs of cultural items and your methods of care. Encourage visitors to learn about other items in your collections and explain how your collections represent your community.
- Think beyond the standard informational content of the exhibit itself. Many people view cultural heritage institutions as elite or stuffy places that they can't relate to their own lives. Try to modernize your thinking if necessary. Make exhibits interactive or provide connections to individuals' everyday lives. Make your exhibit areas inviting.