

Emphasizing the Out in Outreach

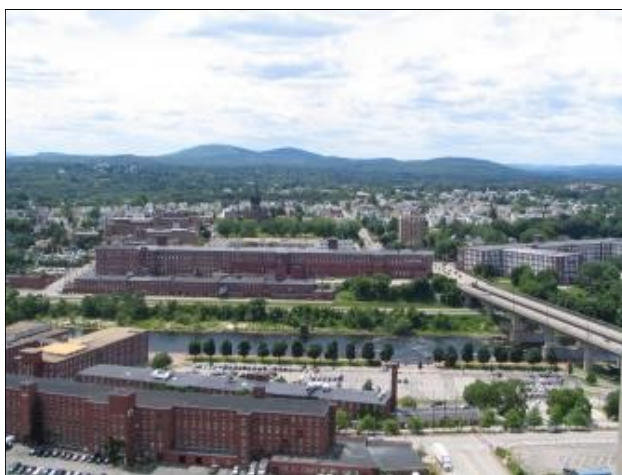
by Melissa Mannon

In this era of inordinately tight budgets, outreach is an extremely important component of what we do. When it comes to competing for funding, we must show ourselves worthy of support. If you position your organization at center stage in your town, you can better demonstrate your value to the community.

But how do we position ourselves at center stage? It is the little things that mean a lot. Outreach should involve the clever use of materials in our collections to show our potential audiences that history is everywhere.

I was thinking about this as I waited for an appointment in a phlebotomist's office in a renovated mill last week. I noticed a "then and now" photo of the city of Manchester, NH. The first photo was black and white, taken in the early twentieth century when the city was a thriving industrial center along the Merrimack River. Bridges were built over the river so that workers could get from the west end of town to the east mills. In the new color photo, many of the bridges were gone, but the revitalization of the mills as

centers for new businesses was evident. Proud to be part of the city's modernization efforts, this health center proudly displayed its place in history. How did these photos get here? Did the phlebotomist seek them? Did she randomly find them? Or, perhaps, did some smart historian identify the mill residents as appropriate targets for an historical outreach effort?



Manchester, New Hampshire mills

The best way to engage someone with our collections is to tie our materials directly to that individual's life. Seek to identify materials that awaken passions. Chances are, your collections contain documents related to almost every interest. Instead of seeing outreach as bringing people into your institution, emphasize the out. Show how history relates to the individual by bringing out your resources and

information to visible areas in your community. Give others a passion for history by showing how history has played a role in their interests and how a sense of history is omnipresent.

Here are some samples of history that I've seen around me lately and some food for thought:

- I've seen copies of historical photos in local businesses (like at phlebotomist's office.)
- Small exhibits in local shopping areas, transportation centers, and other places where people congregate often catch my eye. Historical organizations near me have displays up at the airport and the mall. (Some organizations may want to charge to use their space, but others may be happy to promote an engaging exhibit that benefits their city.)
- A local business in my town has caricatures of former presidential candidates painted on the side of their building. It promotes New Hampshire's place and pride as first in the nation to vote in the primaries. Perhaps our state political archives can play a part in a similar project?
- Since gardening is a passion of mine, I was very excited when I recently visited Canterbury Shaker Village and learned that the Shakers were avid gardeners too. I was treated to an historical reproduction garden. My

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local garden association is very active in decorating the town with plantings. I'd love to see a tie-in between the gardeners and the historical people to recreate a beautiful historic garden in the center of town.

- A photo exhibit in my local library that was sponsored by the Historical Society encouraged artists to think about what is special about our town. Artists were invited to contribute a piece that shows "Bedford Old and New."
- Olde Towne Day here in Bedford featured local groups such as the historical society and a gravestone preservation group. Who has photo-



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graphs and planning documents from past Olde Towne days? It would be nice to see them displayed at the event.

- I love American Girl. If you do not know about this and you handle historical collections, hold on to your hat! This is a perfect outlet for historical organizations get the attention of our youngest patrons and their parents. American Girls are imaginary characters who

grew up at various times during our country's history. Girls ages 7 and up are turned on to history through these dolls, their stories, and their reproduction clothing. My local Barnes and Noble has an American Girl club for the kids to discuss the books. Think about how local historical organizations can do similar programs out in the community, including maybe even bookstore tie-ins.

When planning for outreach...

- Know your audience - What associations exist in your town? What are students studying in school? What current events are impacting your town?
- Target a Community Identity - What things make your community proud? What drives your community's modern sense of self? What made your town special in the past?
- Aim for collaboration - What subjects are in your collections? Which subjects relate to the activities of local groups and do they know that you have records about them? What potential collaborators make easy targets like my "Olde Home Days" planners and participants?

Dear Friends and Colleagues,

The Archives and Information Consulting Newsletter provides information to help you care for, promote, and develop your collections. Over the past years, I have written about topics that relate to my latest consulting projects and current events that affect the work of historical record keepers. I would like to write more about topics that impact you directly. Please feel free to e-mail me with questions or subjects about which you would like more information. I will try to write about them in upcoming newsletters.

Best wishes,

Melissa