



British Columbia
Museums Association
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Best Practices

Module

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY PROGRAMMING

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Introduction

Socially responsible programs are the efforts by museums to become more engaged with the communities that support them. This type of programming reflects the belief that museums can make an active and positive contribution to society, beyond the walls of the institution.

The modern concept of the museum emerged in the late 18th century as captured treasures, newly discovered species, and artifacts from exotic cultures were brought back to Europe from ever-expanding empires. In a grand gesture, the leaders of the French revolution converted the Louvre from a royal palace to a public museum. The art and artifacts within became the property of the people of France, rather than the royal family. Napoleon Bonaparte continued this tradition, creating museums throughout France to house treasures brought back from the far reaches of the French empire. He used museums to advance France's self-image as the world's greatest power and proclaimed the treasures to be the patrimony of all Frenchmen.

In the mid-19th century, museums in Britain presented exhibitions that used art to reflect the advanced state of British development. It was believed that exposure to the arts would produce a self-reforming man who would reject the evils of drink in favour of quiet contemplation of a Raphael painting. Museums became places where social problems could be addressed and it became the museum's responsibility to facilitate the reformation of society. This was especially important at a time when alcoholism was on the rise among the working class.

Today, the International Committee on Museums (ICOM, which is part of UNESCO) defines the purpose of museums more broadly. Museums are to collect, preserve, research and interpret. The scope of the material that is the subject matter of museums includes art, human history and natural history. The ICOM definition has been extremely useful in separating museums from other, similar institutions. However, ICOM does not consider what museums should do with what they collect or with the results of their research.

In the last quarter of the 20th century two views emerged concerning the proper roles of museums. On the one hand, museums were seen as temples that instructed visitors through authoritative exhibits and programs. On the other hand, as forums, museums used their resources to engage the public in debate, discussion, and dialogue.

Social responsibility programming is an extension of the idea that museums are a forum. The museum's worth becomes evaluated in terms of its positive contribution to society through active engagement with society. Because these contributions reflect the reality of society outside of the museum walls, it is likely that the key issues of engagement will be identified by people who do not work in the museum. Therefore, successful social responsibility programming requires partnerships that reach beyond the museum, sometimes to parts of society that are not normally considered to be part of the museum clientele. This also means that museums relinquish their ideal as a temple and acknowledge that important knowledge often resides outside of the museum.



Introduction, cont'd...

Social issues continually change and evolve. In fact, continually changing programs can be one measure of the success of socially responsible programming. As some issues are redressed, new programs must be developed that engage other concerns.

The following considers how a variety of museum collections might be applied to social responsibility programming. Although this discussion organizes the collections in traditional groupings (art, archives, human history, natural history, and education) different collections can be combined for more effective programming. Rather than grouping collections by their subject matter, we must consider the objects in terms of how they can be used in programming. Then, partnerships can be found that will discover new uses for the collections.

TIP:

Social responsibility programming is an important way in which museums bring value to their communities. This programming is often rewarded with enhanced support (including financial) from the community.

TIP:

Several different types of collections can be combined in one program. This interdisciplinary approach creates an enriched experience for the museum visitor. Consider working with other museums or galleries whose collections complement your own.



Visual Images

Visual images come from art collections (including paintings, sketches, prints, sculpture video, installation and photographic art) and from archival photographic collections.

Visual images elicit very strong responses from viewers. Emotional responses reflect how we feel about an image and the memories that it evokes. Intellectual responses concern what we think about an image, whether we like it or not, and how we interpret it. The analysis of visual images can also teach us a great deal about our changing social, political and natural environments. The rich nature of visual images can lead to many opportunities for social responsibility programming.

Exhibits and programs within a museum can address our intellectual response to visual images in many ways. First, works of art and archival photographs are rich records of environmental change. These images document communities and landscapes over time and, when used with historical research, can lead to discussions about long term impact of human activity on the social and natural environments.

Art and archival photographs also reveal the social perspectives of artists and photographers. Sometimes the artist created idyllic images that obscured a harsh reality. Sometimes minorities were entirely left out of images, excluding their contributions to building society. Sometimes minorities were portrayed through a cultural bias. Understanding how images were created leads to a better understanding of how we create our own history and how people from various cultures have been depicted.

Visual images are especially important as stimuli for our memories of the past. Archival photographs can help the elderly to recall events from the past. These, in turn, can be an important aid to retaining an active memory. Similarly, images can be used with brain-injured patients to stimulate memory.

Visual images also draw emotional responses from an audience. Art exhibitions can be a place of rest and repose where visitors regain physical and emotional energy through quiet contemplation. Art can also have this effect outside of the gallery or museum. For example, the McMullen Art Gallery at the University of Alberta Hospital in Edmonton uses art in hospital wards and waiting rooms to relieve stress and create a comforting environment. The same can be expected in seniors' homes and extended care facilities. Social responsibility programming seeks places outside of the museum where the art collection can be used and museums should consider creating off-site galleries in these institutions.



Visual Images, cont'd...

The creation of art can be therapeutic as individuals address personal problems and work through resolutions. Museums can be the location for this type of therapy and their collections of visual images can stimulate activity. However, art therapy requires professional supervision that is often beyond the expertise of museum staff. On the other hand, exhibiting such art helps the public understand the emotional effects of traumatic events.

TIP:

Hospitals, seniors' homes and other institutions with long-term residents are excellent partners in finding new ways to make visual images meaningful.

TIP:

A program of art therapy requires the supervision of trained medical personnel.

TIP:

Photographs and paintings of the same locale often reveal different ways of seeing the same environment.

TIP:

A program that records modern locations through photography or painting will engage the public as active participants. Exhibits can be developed in which these works can be compared with historical images.



Human History Collections

Human history collections include the products and by-products of human activity. These collections also include provenance that documents the manufacturing process and ways in which the objects were used. This documentation can also include personal stories and family histories that bring life to the objects. As with visual images, human history collections can lead to both intellectual and emotional responses among the public.

One of the most powerful potentials for social responsibility programming of human history collections is the possibility of seeing history in a different light, and using this new perspective to understand current social issues. The biases that frequently enter into historical writings often exclude minorities as active participants in past events. Similarly, when artifacts from other cultures are used in historical exhibits, they may be misinterpreted or misrepresented.

Source communities are the people from whom our artifact and archival collections have come. Working closely with source communities has many advantages. Collaboration can bring a different perspective to the collection that illuminates new meanings. Collaboration can also draw out historical information that has not been recorded or that was recorded erroneously when the collections were made. A new understanding of the collections is a new way of seeing history and can lead to new ways of understanding the past and the present while planning for the future.

Social responsibility programming of human history collections requires that partnerships be made with groups, organizations and individuals who may not normally be involved with the museum. When community partners disagree with interpretations that have been developed by the museum, our self-image as museum professionals is also challenged. Sometimes these new partners question the very purpose of the museum as keepers of objects, especially when the objects are kept away from people in the source community who may have little or no access to the museum.

The resolution of these issues requires time, patience, and a great deal of discussion. All parties must learn about each other's culture and perspectives. As solutions are found, new museum audiences are developed and the source communities that once felt excluded now feel a sense of ownership toward the museum and value it as a place that can preserve its heritage. The general population may express a renewed interest in the museum as a place where history is dynamic and actively linked to the present.

Physical objects are also powerful triggers of emotions about a remembered past. As with visual images, objects can be used as memory stimuli among the elderly and medical cases with memory problems. In some cases, access to objects may be sufficient through loans to local facilities. In other cases, museum personnel may collaborate more closely with local medical staff to identify the most appropriate items for this type of programming.



Human History Collections, cont'd...

TIP:

Most cultural organizations are eager to have their histories told. There is often a cultural liaison who can facilitate the collaboration between members of the community and the museum.

TIP:

The ownership of heritage objects can be a very contentious and emotional issue. While there are often no easy answers, it is always best to keep an open mind and keep the conversation going.

TIP:

Consider developing lending kits or small exhibits for long-term care or senior's facilities.

TIP:

Are there recent immigrants to your community? Invite them to develop an exhibit or program about their culture, homeland and experiences in coming to a new country. This can be an important step in building their confidence and increasing understanding throughout the community.



Natural History Collections

Natural history collections include plants, animals, fossils and minerals. These specimens can be used to initiate discussions about ecological complexity and the delicate balance of nature.

Exhibits and programs can be developed that illustrate the roles that various species play and the nature of their interdependence. Museums are key places where we can discover how we should live with our environment.

In larger museums, these concepts are often presented in sophisticated dioramas that present plants and animals in re-created natural settings. In some cases, exhibits are linked to radio-collars that track individual animals and allow visitors to follow the movements of the species represented in the exhibit. These kinds of links require sophisticated technology. However, the results of radio-collar tracking research are often readily available from researchers and plotting animal movements on topographic maps can provide insights about the vast ranges and varied environments used by some animals.

Some natural history collections are accompanied by records of when and where the specimens were obtained. The museum's public can be engaged in projects that record current species distributions in the community or region. Subsequent comparisons of past and present distributions lead to discussions about the nature, cause and consequences of environmental change. Even where collecting records are absent, a museum-centred program that records species distribution helps us to better understand our local environment.

As environmental change becomes a focus of programming, the museum can become a locus for positive action. For example, the Canadian Museum of Nature worked with local environmental groups to organize clean-up projects in the Rideau River valley. This active role brought new public awareness of the museum as a resource that is more than static displays.

TIP:

Involvement with local environmental groups to address local issues will broaden awareness.

TIP:

Document any clean-up project with pictures and collect some of the waste. An exhibit that discusses your work will keep your partnerships alive.

TIP:

School groups can be involved in creating distribution maps of various plants and animals in your community. They can then work with older members of the community to discuss changes in the types and locations of the wildlife over the course of one's lifetime.

TIP:

Provincial and federal parks departments are often engaged in tracking animal movements. They will have Information Officers who are responsible for working with the public. These individuals are a valuable resource.



Learning

Learning in a museum occurs actively through school programs and other activities and passively through visits to exhibits. Object-based learning is a strategy that involves people directly with artifacts to provide an enriched experience beyond standard educational methodology. It is a strategy that reflects the uniqueness of museums as centres of learning.

People learn in many different ways: aurally (through listening and speaking); visually (by reading and looking); and kinesthetically (by handling objects or doing activities). Museums, as places where all three types of learning occur, are very effective places of learning. As museums expand their audience through websites, they can also expand their learning role.

Museums are open to a broad spectrum of users. They are accessible to people of all ages and different social, economic and cultural backgrounds. They are ideal sites for life-long learning and for cross-cultural communication.

Much of the learning through museums is directed at schools. These connections arise partly because the knowledge of museum workers is more focused and detailed than that of teachers, enriching the knowledge offered to the students. As well, the objects in museums are strong connections for visual learners while hands-on activities create connections for kinesthetically-based learners.

The museum is a unique environment that can create enhanced learning opportunities through on-site visits. Unfortunately, too many students remember visiting the museum only once during their school careers and fail to integrate the museum with their life experiences. With repeated visits, familiarity replaces the disruptive effect of novelty and students learn how to use effectively the museum's resources. When there is a great deal of distance between the museum and the school, other strategies, such as web sites, can be used to connect students with the art and artifacts.

School learning is driven by curriculum needs. Effective school programming in museums makes key connections to the curriculum.

TIP:

Connect with local educators when developing programs to ensure that curriculum needs are being met.

TIP:

Consider setting part of the collection aside for use in hands-on programming. Holding and examining artifacts often brings unique connections to students.



Learning, cont'd...

TIP:

Develop a collection of hands-on artifacts for use by seniors. Handling physical objects stimulates memories and keeps the brain active.

TIP:

Engage students by having them develop web sites and blog sites for the museum.

TIP:

Object-based learning is an invaluable approach connecting students with museum collections. Work with the museums association to learn more about this approach.

TIP:

Work with your local teachers to make the museum visit a memorable and rewarding experience for everyone.



Getting Started With Social Responsibility Programming

Developing programs that are socially responsible can be daunting. Some museum personnel may feel that this means they must engage in controversial topics that will alienate their public. Others believe that they do not have the knowledge or background to address social issues. Yet, developing partnerships with other organizations brings the fear that the museum will be overwhelmed and lose control of the program; the museum will become merely an extension of another organization.

The following are some suggestions for developing socially responsible programming:

1. Work with what you know.

- What programs are currently offered by your museum?
- Which programs might lend themselves to a socially responsible theme?
- What is the knowledge-level of the staff? How comfortable would they be in becoming more socially active?
- Begin by working within your own comfort level.

2. Take a close look at your museum and its collection.

- What is its primary focus?
- Review your clientele. Is there a part of your community that might benefit from your collections, but that does not currently have access to it?
- What are the important issues in your community (either local issues or more global concerns)?
- How do your collections relate to these issues?

3. Look for help. Effective social responsibility programming requires connections with the broader community.

- Which organizations in your community share your ideals and concerns?
- Which individuals are available to help develop or present programs?
- Don't be reluctant to contact experts at larger museums, universities or government agencies.
- These people are generally very engaged in their work and are more than willing to help. Most are extremely approachable.

4. Buy a good coffee pot. Good partnerships require lots of meetings (with lots of coffee) and lots of discussion to develop a clearly-defined project.

- Define your roles and responsibilities. Everyone must understand what each participant can bring to the project.
- Everyone must agree on the goals. A common agreement at the start will help everyone assess the success of the project.
- Be patient. It can take time to work out agreed goals and strategies.



Getting Started With Social Responsibility Programming, cont'd...

5. Experiment and have fun.

- Not all projects will be equally successful. We can learn from our past experiences to develop new and different programs.
- A spirit of experimentation means that there are no right answers. This, in turn, creates a spirit of creativity.
- You are making a difference to your community and to your world. Enjoy yourself!



Resources

Internet (sites of interest):

Brooklyn Botanical Garden. New York Metropolitan Flora Project

See: <http://www.bbg.org/sci/nymf>

Chicago Wilderness Nature Reserve

See: www.chicagowilderness.org/biodiversity/you/index.cfm

Canadian Biodiversity Information Facility

See: www.cbif.gc.ca

District Six Museum

See: <http://www.districtsix.co.za/>

Centre for Cultural Understanding and Change

See: www.fieldmuseum.org/research_collections/ccuc

Florida Holocaust Museum

See: www.flholocaustmuseum.org

Holocaust Museum Huston

See: www.hmh.org

Living Landscapes – Royal BC Museum Regional Outreach Program

See: www.livinglandscapes.bc.ca

Mendel Art Gallery Mendeloc

See: www.mendel.ca/wordpress

Museums Blog Organization

See: <http://www.museumblogs.org/>

National Health Museum

See: <http://nationalhealthmuseum.org/>

The Nature of the Rideau River

See: <http://nature.ca/rideau/>

Robben Island Museum

See: www.robben-island.org.za

Royal Saskatchewan Museum

See: www.royalsaskmuseum.ca



Resources, cont'd...

International Coalition of Historic Site Museums of Conscience

See: www.sitesofconscience.org

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

See: www.ushmm.org

Virtualmuseums.ca

See: www.virtualmuseums.ca/English/Agora

Edublog.org

See: www.virtualvisits.edublog.org

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