

## How to Recruit Docents and Conduct a Docent Training Workshop

Part of creating a successful Museum on Main Street exhibition experience at your venue is providing capable, well-trained docents for your visitors. This document assists you as you recruit docents and helps you conduct a docent training workshop at your site.

### What is a Docent?

Docents for Museum on Main Street (MoMS) exhibitions are tour guides who lead observation- and inquiry-based tours. No formal training or experience is required to become a docent for MoMS exhibitions. Enthusiasm and commitment are the main qualifications needed. Usually, MoMS docents volunteer for the run of the exhibition, but some sites have groups of docents, paid or volunteer, already on staff. However, when the Smithsonian comes to town, you may need to recruit new docents to your existing staff. Many sites have used docent recruitment for MoMS exhibitions to create a docent base that remains an active and valuable asset for the museum.

### Recruiting Docents

The first step in recruiting docents is to write a **job description** for the position. This will help you identify your needs and shape your expectations as well as let prospective docents know what is required of them and how they will be participating. Include in the job description:

**Scheduling information:** You may only need each docent one day a week for an eight-hour stretch, or you may require each docent to work three days week in four-hour shifts. How you schedule your tours and staff of docents is entirely up to you, but try to anticipate your visitation and base your docent scheduling on that information. Docents will appreciate knowing, from the beginning, how much time they are expected to commit.

**Procedures:** Make sure to have a procedure in place to provide a substitute if a docent can't make his or her scheduled hours. You may decide to have docents call each other to find a back up (provide a docent contact sheet) or you may prefer to have them call the volunteer coordinator at your site.

**Dress code:** Decide if you have any special dress requirements for docents. This could be as simple as standard nametags, or you could choose a colorful shirt, vest, or tabard. Some sites have been very creative with docent dress. Docents at one **Key Ingredients** site wore chef's aprons over their street clothes. Whatever dress requirements you decide upon, make sure the docents know what they are from the outset.

**Docent Materials and Training Workshop:** Make sure to let prospective docents know that the Museum on Main Street team has created materials to assist them. Each MoMS exhibition has a comprehensive docent handbook that provides tour structure and questions appropriate for visitors of all ages. In addition, a training document, "How Do I Become a Great Docent?," is available to local coordinators in the Administration section of the MoMS website: [www.museumonmainstreet.org](http://www.museumonmainstreet.org). Please provide a copy of this document to each docent at or before any docent training. It is helpful to provide a docent training workshop prior to the opening of the exhibition (details below). Attendance at the workshop should be made a requirement.

**Skills:** The most important part of docent recruitment is selecting individuals with the appropriate skills. Docents need to be pleasant, affable people who are comfortable speaking in public. They need to be flexible and able to roll with the punches because there is no way to anticipate what can happen on the exhibit floor. Docents need to "take charge" and guide visitors through the exhibition. They also need to be willing to devote time to learning about the exhibition and to studying the docent handbook.

### **Who to Recruit as Docents**

Now that you're working on a docent job description, start thinking about who to recruit. Teachers make great docents; they are well versed at asking questions and leading discussions. Students at your local high schools, community colleges, colleges or universities may be interested in participating in an internship arrangement or as a student club service project. Civic clubs and service organizations (Women's Club, Rotary, Kiwanis, Jaycees, etc.) may be interested in similar service projects. Remember

that retirees in your community may have more time available to offer to the exhibition. Don't forget to tap their expertise and experience. Many sites call on their board members to serve as docents, too.

Often the content of the exhibition suggests who to recruit. Approaching special interest groups (community or school) is a great way to recruit volunteers who already have an interest in the exhibition theme. Think about groups like the following:

- For ***Barn Again!***: Future Farmers of America, 4-H, Boy and Girl Scouts, quilting clubs, historic preservation organizations
- For ***Between Fences***: The National Grange, Junior Grange, Future Farmers of America, 4-H, Native American groups
- For ***Key Ingredients***: gourmet cooking clubs, local or ethnic food festival sponsors, folklore organizations, home economics classes
- For ***Produce for Victory***: VFW, Red Cross, fine and graphic art groups
- For ***Yesterday's Tomorrows***: architects, pop culture collectors, science fiction aficionados

Avoid placing "docent wanted" ads in the newspaper. Make an effort to create relationships with civic organizations, teacher sororities, and special interest groups. These relationships may last long after the exhibition has moved on to its next site. However, don't feel that you must limit your docent source to one club. Having a complementary mix of docents with varied backgrounds and special skills will only enrich the visitor experience. The most important thing to remember in recruitment is to be creative! You may be surprised at the number of docent resources in your community.

### **Rewarding Docents**

As you're making plans for your docent program, don't forget to think about ways to thank and reward your docents. There are a number of ways to reward docents for a job well done,\* some ideas are:

- Pins, plaques, or certificates of merit
- Gift shop discounts
- Free one-year museum membership
- Thank-you breakfast, lunch, tea, or dinner

- Recognition in your local newspaper

Although gifts, discounts, and parties are wonderful ways to reward your docents, sometimes the best support is guidance and praise. Make yourself available to answer questions, assuage fears, and provide support. Make an effort to catch your docents in action and praise them. Be specific and personal in your praise. Instead of a pat on the back and *Good job, Ruth*, try *Ruth, you handled that group of third graders on Tuesday very well. You really got them thinking about the exhibition. Good work!*

(\*Remember, April is National Volunteer Recognition Month)

### **The Next Step**

Once you have recruited your exhibition docents, the next step is to schedule a docent training workshop. It is best to hold the workshop once the exhibition is installed in the gallery space, but this is not always possible. If this is the case, distribute the exhibition script (also available to local coordinators in the Administration section of the MoMS website: [www.museumonmainstreet.org](http://www.museumonmainstreet.org)) and the docent training materials to your docents prior to installation so that they can become familiar with the exhibition content. If you plan your training workshop before the exhibition arrives at your site, be sure to schedule some time for the docents to explore and practice before opening day.

### **The Docent Training Workshop**

Training workshops usually last between two and three hours. This allows plenty of time for reviewing the materials, exploring the exhibition, question-and-answer time, and breaks. Many new docents may be apprehensive about the training, so make sure the workshop is relaxed, casual, and fun. Refreshments always are a nice touch!

All docents should have a copy of “How Do I Become a Great Docent?” and the docent handbook for use during the workshop. In fact, let “How Do I Become a Great Docent?” be your outline for the first part of the workshop. Below is an annotated, workshop leader’s copy of that document. Information in the document text that should be emphasized to docents-in-training is underlined. Notes for workshop leaders appear in boldface. There is a version of “How Do I Become a Great Docent?” for each MoMS exhibition with specific references to that exhibition. Some of these specific references have been removed or changed for this general workshop leader’s copy. You may want to have an exhibition-specific copy on hand as well. Review “How Do I Become a Great

Docent?” with your docents and be sure to keep asking, *Are there any questions?* There will be plenty!

### **Sample Tour**

Once you have finished reviewing “How do I Become a Great Docent?,” take a short break before beginning your sample tour of the exhibition. Before you start your sample tour, take a moment to review the format of the docent handbook again and then demonstrate how to use it in a gallery tour situation. Don’t feel like you have to present in front of each side of each kiosk. Select five or six sides of the exhibition and use those as examples. Since getting started is sometimes the hardest part, always give an example of a tour introduction. After you’ve led the group through several kiosks, you might want to give your docents a chance to try their hands at leading the tour.

Below are sample tour welcomes and introductions, but please don’t feel restricted by these examples. There are innumerable ways to welcome tour groups and introduce them to the exhibition. Encourage your docents to be creative and innovative in their individual introductions.

### **Sample Tour Welcome and Introduction for *Barn Again!***

Hello, my name is (docent name). Welcome to (venue) and the Smithsonian exhibition ***Barn Again! Celebrating an American Icon***. *[This is an appropriate place to add a sentence or two about your venue. Ex: The (venue) was established in 1965 to preserve the history of this county.]* I'm going to lead your tour today and it should last between 30 and 45 minutes. Before we get started, let me ask if anyone ever visited (venue) before? *[Ask several other questions to familiarize yourself with the group.]*

- Are you from the (locale) or have you traveled here to see the exhibition?
- Has anyone here ever worked in a barn? What was your job?
- Has anyone ever played in a barn?
- Has anyone ever helped build barn?

It sounds like everyone is very familiar with barns and what happens inside them. I'm sure you'd agree that the barn is a symbol of America, yet we don't see as many on the landscape as we used to. As we tour this exhibition, we'll talk about where barns come from, how they are made and what materials are used, why there are fewer barns, and why many barns are being preserved. But first, let's talk about what barns mean to us.

*[Stand in front of Kiosk A, Side 1: Grant Wood's painting Stone City, Iowa]*

Take a look at this beautiful Grant Wood painting and think about what seems most familiar to you.

*[This leads to the questions in Let's Talk (Kiosk A, Side 1) of the ***Barn Again!*** docent handbook.]*

## Sample Tour Welcome and Introduction for *Between Fences*

Hello, my name is (docent name) and I'd like to welcome you to (venue) and the Smithsonian exhibition ***Between Fences***. [*This is an appropriate place to add a sentence or two about your venue. Ex: The (venue) was established in 1965 to preserve the history of this county.*] I'm going to lead your tour today and it should last between 30 and 45 minutes. Before we get started, let me ask if anyone ever visited (venue) before? [*Ask several other questions to familiarize yourself with the group.*]

- Are you from the (locale) or have you traveled here to see the exhibition?
- Do you have a fence around your yard or property? Did you build your fence?
- Why did you build a fence?
- Of course, we see all sorts of fences everywhere, everyday, but have you ever really thought about them?

Today, we'll talk about different kinds of fences and the materials used to make them, why people build fences, and how fences have been the center of conflict. But first, let's talk about what fences mean to us.

[*Stand inside the picket fence introductory area and in front of Kiosk A, Side 1: This Land is My Land.*]

Take a look at his house in the countryside and think about what the fence surrounding it means. What do you think it means to the homeowner? Fences and land ownership are inextricably linked. The ownership of land is thought to be the ultimate American dream. So let's begin today by thinking about how fences figure into ideas of home and happiness, property and prosperity, and living the American dream.

[*This leads to the questions in Let's Talk (Kiosk A, Side 1) of the ***Between Fences*** docent handbook.*]

## Sample Tour Welcome and Introduction for *Key Ingredients*

Hello, my name is (docent name) and I'd like to welcome you to (venue) and the Smithsonian exhibition ***Key Ingredients: America by Food***. [*This is an appropriate place to add a sentence or two about your venue. Ex: The (venue) was established in 1965 to preserve the history of this county.*] We're delighted that you're here and we're thrilled to share this new and delicious exhibition with you today. Our tour today should last about 45 minutes, but feel free to stay as long as you like to explore the exhibits in the rest of the museum.

[*Stand in front of the title kiosk that features the food-related objects from all over the country.*]

Before we get started, I'd like to ask you a few questions. [*Ask several questions to familiarize yourself with the group.*] Has anyone ever visited here before? Is anyone from out of town? What school do you attend? Now, here's a real tough question ... has any here ever thought about or eaten food?! Everyone! Well, we have a lot of experts on this tour! Let's get started before we get too hungry to go on!

Walk around this kiosk and take a look at the objects in the case. Do any of these objects seem familiar to you? Do any of them bring back memories of childhood or family vacations?

[*This leads to the questions in Let's Talk (Introductory Kiosk) of the **Key Ingredients** docent handbook.*]

## Sample Tour Welcome and Introduction for *Produce for Victory*

Hello, my name is (docent name). Welcome to (venue) and the Smithsonian exhibition ***Produce for Victory: Posters on the American Homefront, 1941-1945***. Has anyone ever visited here before? [*This is an appropriate place to add a sentence or two about your venue. Ex: The (venue) was established in 1965 to preserve the history of this county.*] Our tour today should last about 45 minutes. Before we get started let me ask if anyone here experienced World War II first hand? How and when? Has anyone ever studied about World War II?

[*Stand in front of the red **Produce for Victory** “V” for the introduction.*]

Well, except for one battle, the attack on Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, World War II was fought in Europe, Asia, Africa, and in the Pacific. However, people who remained in America actively participated in the war effort in many ways. They made arms and military supplies, they used food and gas rationing stamps, they made blackout curtains and practiced blackout procedures, they collected aluminum, they learned how to identify aircraft, and they knitted for the troops, in addition to many other efforts. The U. S. government encouraged these activities and the support of Americans through posters. Posters of all kinds could be found everywhere (schools, factories, stores, etc.) and this is what ***Produce for Victory*** is about.

[*Move to Kiosk 1, Side 2*]

Wartime posters were designed to be a “visual call to arms.” Take a look at “Come on, Gang” and think about how it makes you feel.

[*This leads to the questions in Let’s Talk (Kiosk A, Side 2) of the **Produce for Victory** docent handbook.*]

## Sample Tour Welcome and Introduction for *Yesterday's Tomorrows*

Hello, my name is (docent name) and I'd like to welcome you to (venue) and the Smithsonian exhibition ***Yesterday's Tomorrows: Past Visions of the American Future***. *[This is an appropriate place to add a sentence or two about your venue. Ex: The (venue) was established in 1965 to preserve the history of this county.]* *[Ask several questions to familiarize yourself with the group.]* Has anyone ever visited here before? Is anyone from out of town? What school do you attend? Has anyone ever studied about the future?

We're glad you're here and we're thrilled to share this exciting exhibition with you today. Our tour today should last about 45 minutes, but feel free to stay as long as you like to explore the exhibits in the rest of the museum. Let's get started!

*[Stand in front of the title kiosk that features the image of "City of the Future."]*

The title of the exhibition, ***Yesterday's Tomorrows: Past Visions of the American Future***, is a little confusing. Does anyone know what the title means? We're here today (which used to be the future) looking back to the past (yesterday) at how people imagined the future or tomorrow ... which is really today. Whew! That may sound confusing, but it is a fascinating perspective. Looking back at how the future was envisioned teaches us about the past. These visions of the future offer us a glimpse into the times and the culture in which they were created.

Now if you're not totally dizzy by all this past/present/future talk, take a look at this image of the "City of the Future." What captures your interest first? What captures your imagination?

*[This leads to the questions in Let's Talk (Kiosk A, Side 1) of the ***Yesterday's Tomorrows*** docent handbook.]*

**Workshop Leader's Copy of  
"How Do I Become a Great Docent?"**

**How Do I Become a Great Docent for  
*Barn Again, Between Fences, Produce for Victory,  
Key Ingredients or Yesterday's Tomorrows***

**Workshop Leader's notes appear in boldface.**

Thank you very much for volunteering to be a docent for the **Museum on Main Street's** exhibition (either ***Barn Again, Between Fences, Key Ingredients, Produce for Victory*** or ***Yesterday's Tomorrows***). In case you've never served as a docent before, we have put together some information about what docents do and guidelines to help you learn how to become a great docent.

The role of the museum docent, tour guide, or interpreter is an essential one. Acting as a bridge between visitors and the exhibition, the docent is the catalyst for learning in the museum. It is the docent who guides visitors on their journeys of discovery, helping them blend what they already know with what they learn on the tour. **(Make sure your docents know how important and appreciated they are. They give a voice to the exhibition.)**

Docents rise to the daily challenge of engaging diverse and discriminating audiences in creative ways. They find themes that are relevant to visitors and provide them with opportunities to tell their own stories. Docents stimulate visitor curiosity, imagination, and individual expression by asking questions and encouraging the active participation of each tour group member. When docents actively engage visitors in looking at and talking about the exhibition, they will take with them a deeper understanding of the exhibition themes. Through this personal relationship between visitor and docent, learning and appreciation for the exhibition occurs. So, long after the exhibition has moved to its next venue, visitors continue to think about the issues raised in the exhibition and apply this new information to their everyday lives.

Sounds complicated, right? Not at all! But there are a few “tricks of the trade” that will help you become a terrific docent.

### **Know Your Stuff**

Nothing helps a tour go smoothly like thoroughly knowing the material you are presenting. The objects and images in ***Barn Again, Between Fences, Key Ingredients, Produce for Victory*** or ***Yesterday's Tomorrows*** tell stories, so take time to read the exhibition script, or better yet, go through the exhibition and familiarize yourself with the information and images you'll be sharing with your visitors. Read the docent handbook and use it to guide yourself through the exhibition. The more you know about the exhibition, the more your confidence will grow. You are not, however, expected to be an expert, so don't feel like you have to provide a lecture. Be familiar enough with the exhibition so that you can ask good questions and shape a conversation. If you feel unprepared to answer a visitor's question, don't be afraid to say, “I don't know.” Before your visitors leave the museum, make every effort to find answers by consulting with museum staff and resources.

**(You may want to provide a list of resources, a bibliography, or other background sources or additional information at your site's reception or information desk for docent and visitor reference. Encourage docents to attend lectures, workshops, and other humanities programming scheduled to augment the exhibition.)** Then perhaps, refer your visitors to their local libraries. Remember, unanswered questions can be a positive way to lead visitors toward further inquiry and research.

### **Know Your Audience**

Most visitors to the exhibition are already interested in the topic and they bring with them their own experiences and knowledge. They've come to the exhibition to learn more, to share their experiences, and to have fun. However, every visitor or group of visitors is different, so it's important to assess your audience before your tour begins. Take a look at your tour group. Is it made up of young people or older adults? Is it a school group of teens or youngsters? Do you have a small group of tourists from out of town? Are the people in the group interacting with each other? Are they strangers to one another? Ask a few questions to get to know your visitors: *What grade are you in?* or (for ***Yesterday's Tomorrows***) *Have you ever thought about what America will be like in the future?* or *Are you from out of town?* or *Have you ever visited here before?* Knowing a

little about your audience will help you structure and direct your tour.

**(Asking a few questions of visitors is not only a good icebreaker, it will set the tone for the tour and help them get used to speaking up and answering questions.)**

You already know that a tour structured for first grade students is not going to be appropriate or interesting for teens or adults. Without even thinking about it, you'll adjust your tour length and content to the group. Your docent handbook provides questions to ask your visitors. Some are more appropriate for student visitors; others are more appropriate for adults. It's up to you to decide which questions will be most effective with each tour group. After leading a few tours, you'll begin to see what works best with each group. Talk to your fellow docents and find out how they structure their tours for different audiences. (See "Know the Art of Asking Questions" below.) For more hints on structuring your tours to families and students of specific grade levels, refer to the last few pages of this document.

### **Know Your Docent Handbook**

The docent handbook will help you learn how to conduct your tour. It offers ideas, themes, and questions about the exhibition. There is an introductory section for each kiosk that provides you with the major theme (in a nutshell) of each exhibition kiosk. The "Think About It" sections give you some ideas or questions to "rev up" your visitors' curiosity and prepare them to participate. "Let's Talk" offers questions to ask your visitors. Most questions do not require a "yes" or "no" answer. They are designed to prompt memories, opinions, and new ideas that will lead to a conversation about the exhibition. Don't feel like you have to use all the questions provided. Let your group's level of interest and participation be your guide. Work with the museum staff to develop other questions that may be more directly related to your community.

**(Docents shouldn't feel restricted to only the questions posed in the docent handbook. Each exhibition host is encouraged to create community-specific questions for inclusion on the tour.)**

Feel free to carry the docent handbook on your tours, but use it only as a reference. Avoid reading directly from the handbook. This is the quickest way to discourage participation and conversation. The docent handbook also provides a list of "Hints for Being an Informed and Effective Docent" for quick reference.

## Know the Art of Asking Questions

There's a knack to asking questions, encouraging visitors to participate, and limiting discussion time. Here are a few hints:

**(This section may be overwhelming to your docents. In the training workshop, review the types of questions below, but assure docents that they do not have to memorize the material. The most important thing for docents to remember is to ask varied, open-ended questions.)**

### It Takes All Kinds of Questions

To facilitate a conversation, docents are encouraged to lead observation- and inquiry-based tours. So instead of reading from note cards or the docent handbook, involve your visitors by asking them different types of questions. Try to elicit opinions, memories, ideas, and new questions. Here are some types of questions (based on the Aschner/Gallagher System of Classifying Questions) you can ask on your tours.

- **Cognitive/Memory** questions ask what visitors already know or can see. Answers involve simple recall and are either right or wrong.

For example (***Between Fences***): *Do you have a fence around your property? What does it look like?*

- **Convergent** questions ask visitors to do something with the information they already have or can see. They involve finding similarities, differences, patterns, and/or relationships. Convergent questions ask visitors to categorize, to organize information, or to find a central theme.

For example (***Produce for Victory***): *How do "war art" posters differ from those inspired by advertising styles and techniques?*

- **Divergent** questions ask visitors for new ideas or inferences; they are open-ended (no one right answer). To answer divergent questions, visitors must gather information from past experiences, link it to information being explored in the exhibition, and create new understanding and interpretations.

For example (***Barn Again!***): *Why do you think barns are used as symbols on everyday objects like egg cartons and lunch boxes? or What symbolic message does a barn send?*

- **Evaluative** questions ask visitors for judgments, choices, or conclusions. Answers should not be casual opinions. To be valid, answers must come at the end of time spent considering the subject.

For example (**Key Ingredients**): *Do you think that food festivals help build a sense of community or a shared sense of identity? Why or why not?*

You have probably asked and answered questions like this all your life. It's not important to memorize the names of these types of questions. You'll find that asking questions of all types will come naturally to you as you explore the exhibition. There are also questions of these types in your docent handbook. Try to use a combination of these types of questions on your tours to keep the discussion lively and interesting. **(Docents should try to validate all answers, even if they seem a little off the mark. Children are especially sensitive to being told their answers are "wrong." Since most docent questions are open-ended, there is no real right or wrong. But if a docent is stymied by a comment that doesn't quite make sense to him or her, they can ask the respondent to explain a little more or they can try statements like "Well, you've given us something to think about" or "I've never thought about that before. Thank you for the new idea." It is important to remember to thank visitors for responding, too.)**

#### It's Worth the Wait

After asking a question, give your visitors some time to respond. Usually, someone will speak up in about ten seconds. This "wait time" may seem endless, but it is worth the wait. If, after ten seconds, your group remains silent, a little coaxing is in order. Rephrase the question or redirect it to an individual. If you still don't get an answer, try someone else. It is important, however, to avoid intimidating anyone when you address him or her directly. **(It isn't our goal to put someone on the spot or make them feel uncomfortable in order to get a response. If an individual chooses not to answer a question, a docent should quickly move on.)** If no one has a response, you may answer the question yourself\* and then ask, *Does anyone agree or disagree?* You very likely will get a response. Remember, when asking questions to individuals, make sure to vary your audience sampling. Try to pose your questions to visitors of various ages, genders, ethnicities, and cultures.

**(\*When docents answer their own or someone else's questions, they need to do so in an objective manner. It is rare that politically or personally sensitive topics arise, but if this happens, docent objectivity is essential. As representatives of the host site, the docents' job is to ask questions and facilitate lively conversations; they are the bridge between the exhibition and the visitors. Docents should refrain from offering their personal opinions. This is not usually a problem, but it is a good idea to remind your docents at their training workshop.)**

### It's All About Timing

Your tour should take between 30 and 45 minutes; however, most venues will advertise hour-long tours. This gives you some leeway in managing your tour. In some instances, the tour discussion may go on longer than it should. It may only include a few visitors while the rest of the group becomes restless or bored. There may be another tour group waiting. No matter the reason, it is the docent's responsibility to limit the discussion, then guide the tour group to the next kiosk. Use a comment like: *I'm sure we could talk about this subject for hours, but I do want you to enjoy the rest of the exhibition.*

**(Good conversations are not uncommon, so docents should be prepared to gently and gracefully refocus or curtail lively discussions when appropriate.)**

### **Know Who's Boss**

You may occasionally experience an unhappy, unruly, or disruptive visitor. If you have an unruly student on your tour, remain calm and focused. Encourage his/her participation in the discussion. If the problem persists, ask the teacher or adult chaperone to remove the student from the tour. You are not responsible for discipline; you are responsible for a great tour.

If you are dealing with an unhappy or disruptive adult, calmly explain that his/her comments are interfering with the other visitors' enjoyment of the tour and ask him/her to refrain from the behavior. Most museums and other exhibition venues have policies in place for dealing with disruptive visitors. Check the venue's policy and defer to it if you find yourself in a sticky or uncomfortable situation.

**(Uncomfortable situations rarely occur, so don't scare your docents. Empower them to handle any situation and assure them that a staff member will be there to support them.)**

## **Know Your Own “Star Power”**

In a way, docents are performers, so stage presence makes a difference. Here are some things to remember about performing your “starring role” as a docent:

- Follow your museum’s guidelines for attire, nametags, etc.
- **Be confident!** If you believe you could be Hollywood’s next big star, your visitors will too!
- Facial expressions are the primary way we assess each other’s feelings, so **SMILE!** A friendly face will put visitors at ease and make them feel welcome. But don’t let that smile get stuck on your face. You’ll naturally respond to visitors’ comments and questions and that lets visitors know that you’re listening. Remember, a pleasant, smiling face tells visitors that you are having a good time. If you are enjoying yourself, they will too.

**(It’s fun to lead your docents in some facial exercises—stretching the face [big eyes, open mouth], then squeezing the face [as if you’ve slammed your finger in a door], pursing lips and then hiding lips, and loosening jaw. This makes everyone look a little silly, so it’s a great icebreaker, too.)**

- **Make eye contact with your visitors.** Good eye contact will make visitors feel included in the discussion and will often encourage their participation. Make sure your eye contact is natural and relaxed. Don’t try too hard or you may end up staring at visitors, which may intimidate them or, at least, make them feel uncomfortable. Good eye contact is a great feedback tool—you easily can assess whether you’re keeping the interest of your audience.

**(As an example, trying staring at one individual as you discuss this topic, then ask how uncomfortable they felt. You can also try pairing up your docents and having them try staring at each other during “mock” conversation, noting how unnatural and awkward it feels. This is also a good way to get your docents to participate and to meet each other.)**

- If you use hand gestures in your usual conversation, please do so on your tours. It’s

much better to **use natural hand gestures** than to shove your hands in your pockets and jingle your change, twist your rings, or wring your hands. Be careful not to get too close to the exhibition. Remember, you serve as a model for appropriate museum behavior, so don't lean on the kiosks or touch the cases.

**(Many docents use props on their tours. Some *Barn Again!* docents have used a wooden model of a mortise and tenon joint; some *Key Ingredients* docents have used wire whisks and wooden spoons as pointers.)**

- Be aware of your posture. Confident, professional docents **stand up straight!** Try not to sway or shuffle back and forth while you're talking to your visitors. It's very difficult for visitors to focus on a moving object! It is likely that visitors will be scattered around you, so try to place yourself so that your back is not toward anyone for any length of time. Move around just enough so that you can see everyone's faces and they can see yours.

- **Be a good listener.** When a visitor raises or answers a question, focus on the visitor, make eye contact, and respond appropriately. If the rest of the tour has not heard the question or comment, repeat it for the entire group to hear.

**(Encourage docents to ask follow-up questions to interesting visitor responses, even if they stray from the questions in the handbook. A good comment from a visitor may redirect the tour in a fascinating direction if the docent provides good follow-up. Encourage docents to be flexible and follow the spirit, if not the letter, of the tour.)**

- Your voice can be used to create a lively and exciting presentation. **Vary the tone and volume of your voice;** use it to show emotion or to emphasize a point. Try not to sound "canned" like a television commercial or a telemarketing representative, but natural and engaging.

- **Speak clearly;** try to enunciate or articulate your words precisely. Try a few tongue twisters before your tour to get your mouth, lips, and tongue loosened up and working together. You'll lose your audience's interest in no time if they can't understand you. **(Have the docents loosen up their tongues by sticking it out as far as possible, then circling around to the right, then the left. They try a few tongue twisters five times with increasing speed. Any tongue twister will do, but you may try the**

**traditional theatre warm ups: “Red leather, yellow leather” or “Green pools, blue pools.” This exercise is always good for a few giggles.)**

• **Make sure you can be heard.** Think of “projecting” rather than speaking loudly. Shouting uses only your voice and it strains it as well. Support your conversation with lungs full of air. Let your diaphragm push out or “project” your words on a stream of air. Think of a musician squeezing a bagpipe with his/her elbow, forcing air into the pipes. Good projection is based on that same principle. If you are getting a crowd of blank stares, ask your audience if they can hear you. If not, you’ll have to project a little harder! **(Demonstrate some deep diaphragmatic breathing exercises. Deep breathing is very relaxing for everyone, especially nervous docents)**

• Limit “um,” “you know,” and “like” from your vocabulary ... or at least try to. These pause fillers disrupt the flow of your tour. They may also make you seem nervous or unprepared. Be aware of these pause fillers and try to avoid them. There is nothing wrong with a few seconds of silence while you find the right word or collect your thoughts.

**(We are not suggesting that each docent needs to go through a long preparation before each tour. The exercises above are fun to do at your workshop, but aren’t necessary everyday. These ideas are just reminders to docents that presentation skills are important.)**

### **Know How to Practice**

Once you’ve explored the exhibition, read the docent handbook, and thought about the themes of the exhibition, it’s time to start practicing for your tour. Practice introducing yourself and welcoming your visitors. Then, walk through the exhibition again and see what objects and images catch your eye. What aspects of the exhibition most interest you? The ideas and thoughts you have will guide you in developing your tour.

Another good way to practice is to ask questions. Start a conversation at the dinner table, in the office, or at a local gathering place. Ask your family and friends a few questions like: (**Yesterday’s Tomorrows**) *When you were younger, did you ever imagine what the future would be like?* or (**Key Ingredients**) *What foods do you associate with your hometown or home state?* Really listen to their responses. This practice will prepare you for the conversations you will have with visitors to the

exhibition.

After leading a few tours, meet with other docents and share your experiences. Find out how they answered an unexpected or challenging question. Share with them how you structured your tour to a mixed group of older adults and their grandchildren. Take tours led by fellow docents; you'll be surprised at what you can learn from other docents' tours and they from yours. Don't be shy about incorporating others' good ideas and successful techniques into your tours.

**(If possible, schedule a "docent share" meeting to facilitate this kind of give-and-take among your docents.)**

### **Know You Can Do It!**

There is a great deal of information here about becoming a terrific docent, but it is not as challenging as you might think. The most important thing to remember is to relax and enjoy your tour. Most docents feel relaxed when they have a good grasp of the information in the exhibition, so explore the exhibition, then read and practice with the docent handbook. Be sure to use your new "great docent" skills as you lead tours through any companion exhibits or displays and permanent exhibitions at your museum.

**(Again, make sure your docents know how much you appreciate their contribution. Help them feel important. Empower them with your confidence in them.)**

**Before you proceed to the sample tour of the exhibition, review the guidelines below. Feel free to expand on any of this information during the training workshop.**

## **Guidelines for Structuring Tours to Family and Student Groups**

### **Family Tour Groups**

#### Families

- receive and share information from each other
- learn through conversation and social interaction
- come in all ages—from infants to grandparents
- sometimes have less time to spend at the exhibition than do scheduled groups
- need to know where rest rooms, water fountains, and food concessions are located

#### Hints for Leading Family Tours

- Be clear about the length of the tour.
- Make sure you address both children and adults.
- Be sensitive to the fact that adults accompanying the children may not be their parents. **(Encourage docents to avoid terms of address or reference such as “Mom” or “your father.” Relationships are not always easily discerned and shouldn’t be assumed.)**
- Create a team spirit by encouraging adults and children to answer questions and examine objects together.
- Tell children that their “jobs” are to assist the adults in solving problems or answering questions.
- Don’t be insulted if a family must leave before the tour is over.

### **Adult Tour Groups**

#### Adults and Older Adults

- visit museums to increase their knowledge
- may have little use for specific information, but may find insight into something familiar

### Hints for Leading Adult and Older Adult Tours

- Avoid alienating adult visitors by talking to them like students.
- Don't underestimate older adults; tap their wisdom and experience.
- Interpret the exhibition on the basis of relevance to past, present and future cultural contexts.
- Older adults may be intellectually sharp, but physical limitations may require shorter tours or time for rest.
- Background noise may interfere with hearing, so find a quiet spot for discussion.
- Speak audibly and clearly.

### **Student Tour Groups**

#### Pre-kindergarten–2nd Grade Students

- have vivid imaginations and like to pretend
- have short attention spans
- are more physically oriented than verbally oriented
- strongly identify with their names

#### Hints for Leading Pre-kindergarten–2nd Grade Student Tours

- Employ activities that allow children to discover things—don't tell them, ask them.
- Ask children to look or touch, then describe.
- Ask children to solve riddles.
- Tell stories.
- If students are wearing nametags, call them by their names.

#### 3rd Grade–5th Grade Students

- are avid observers
- are eager to learn new things
- like to talk
- love being challenged to find objects or clues
- work well on independent assignments

#### Hints for Leading 3rd Grade–5th Grade Student Tours

- Ask children to hunt for an image or an object in the exhibition.
- Ask children to describe that image or object.

### 6th Grade–9th Grade Students

- are aware of their appearance
- are peer centered
- like to work in groups
- can be distrusting of adults
- have an uninterested air about them (they seem like they don't want to learn or don't care)

### Hints for Leading 6th Grade–9th Grade Student Tours

- Treat adolescents with respect and as adults.
- Ask open-ended questions that allow them to express their opinions.
- Ask pointed questions (*Do you think America needs more “planned communities”?* *Why or why not?*).
- Give group-oriented assignments.
- With the teacher's permission, give adolescent students time to visit some of the exhibition on their own.
- Don't take whispering, giggling, or imitating personally.
- Don't take yourself too seriously; keep your sense of humor.
- Don't ask them to sit on the floor in a circle.

### 10th Grade–12th Grade Students

- have strong opinions about what they find interesting and relevant to their lives
- have longer attention spans
- like doing activities alone or with friends
- are peer centered
- often are compelled to challenge the status quo

### Hints for Leading 10th Grade–12th Grade Student Tours

- Let students express their opinions and provide opportunities for them to give feedback.
- Ask a provocative question or make a provocative statement at the beginning of the tour. Ask the same question at the end of the tour to test if opinions, values, or perceptions have changed.

- Create a debate over a value-laden or emotional issue.
- With the teacher's permission, build in some flexible or free time to their visit.