

Museum on Main Street 2009 National Planning Conferences Sharing Best Practices

Beyond MoMS: Extending Museum Services

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MoMS Tour(s) That You've Coordinated (exhibition and year): 1998 Barn Again; 2001 Yesterday's Tomorrows; 2003 Produce for Victory; 2005/06 Key Ingredients; 2006/07 Between Fences; 2009 New Harmonies

What needs did you identify among your local hosts that led you to develop this component of your MoMS tour? Or, how did this all come about?

In 1998, independent of the MOMS program, we saw that local museums could become locked into notions about exhibits, collections, and mission that were hampering success. So we developed an "outside consultant team" concept modeled on the "charette" in the architectural field. Our Executive Director created this consulting service and provided consultant brainstorming in seminar-like settings for 4 museums a year. The program became successful over time and evolved beyond 2-day seminars to true relationships with selected museums. We currently provide monthly sessions at a small number of selected museums to help take them through a transition from various forms of "static existence" to dynamic/exciting modes of operation.

We saw a general level of ignorance about Native American heritage in Missouri, combined with a lack of knowledge about the Native American Grave Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). We developed a one-day seminar on NAGPRA, taught by tribal Historic Preservation Officers from Oklahoma and Arkansas (because there are no organized tribes in Missouri). These good programs didn't attract much attendance, but did serve to educate our staff about the cultural sensitivities, so that we can advise museum clients who propose to undertake projects or activities that could be culturally offensive to the tribes.

In 2006 we created a Think Tank of our best Missouri museum consultants, and this group agreed that the single most important need in local museums was a lack of attention to the visitor's experience. We adopted training materials from Conner Prairie Living History Farm ("Opening Doors to Great Guest Experiences") and began writing newsletter articles about visitor-centered thinking and what a difference it could make. We extended our capacity to push this strategic idea by organizing a two-day conference in October 2008 on "Cutting Edge Strategies for Small Museums." The twin themes of the conference were Visitor-Centered Techniques and Building Effective Relationships with Schools. Presenters came from Conner Prairie and the Virginia Association of Museums. We are repeating that same conference on the eastern side of Missouri in April. We plan to organize dual conferences into the future.

What council resources/expertise were you able to utilize? What partner resources/expertise?

We built on the experience of the Executive Director, who had worked closely with museums throughout the twenty years leading up to 1998. He then engaged lively museum people to serve as consultants and formed a Think Tank composed of the best of them. The museum services are a "Council Project." The Think Tank has been engaged in a process of becoming a functional program unit for planning, implementation, and evaluation at individual museum sites.

What were the steps involved in implementation?

The steps are described above. The central feature of this is the freedom of someone at the statewide level, in this case the Council's director, to think unconventionally and to experiment to see how to achieve the central goal of making a whole class of institutions a lot more interesting and engaging. Museum Associations are generally not in a good position to focus on any one need, but a state humanities council has a flexibility to address problems that no one within the field might see as a pressing need. In the business of transformative education, it is often necessary to "push" an opportunity or service that no one has thought to request. So, you have to start with a focused idea of what change would make the most difference and then address the problem in a variety of ways.

What were the results?

After very spotty results for the first five years, we started to see immediate paradigm shifts in 2006 after focusing on "creating interest in the museum." That is a non-technical goal, easily accomplished by anyone who knows how to be sociable and how to create interesting spaces in a home. We show volunteers how to use their imaginations, how to add value by taking some objects away, how to set up hands-on opportunities and experiential learning. The responses to our first big conference were huge. Part of the explanation is the convening of people who are "in the same boat." They reinforce and learn from each other.

What adjustments (if any) did you make along the way?

We found a focal idea – creating interest – to guide what we do, and we tried a variety of ways to help local organizations transform the way they think about their mission and create visitor experiences. We are still taking risks, sending consultants out to try new approaches and see what works.

What's been the short and long term benefit to the local hosts?

The service is not designed specifically for the local hosts, though they may ask for it. What we have developed, in terms of a talent pool, has enriched our ability to train local hosts and promise follow-up benefits. A MoMS training need actually led to our realization that we have an outstanding volunteer trainer in our Think Tank, so now we have a volunteer training component that we are sure will be much in demand.

What's been the short and long term benefit to the state council?

The council positioned itself as a significant partner for local history organizations. We needed to find a variety of ways to be seen not as a source of money, but as a catalyst for productive change.

What advice would you have for other state tour coordinators trying to make a similar impact in this area?

This depends on the state council and its board seeing that the health of local museums is a central concern of the council. If the council doesn't see its mission as working to improve the local infrastructure, this is not likely to work well. The culture of the organization may be such that this idea would seem foreign.

Do you have any files, forms, documents or digital images illustrating this component of your MoMS tour(s) that we could post on-line to share with others?

This accomplishment requires your imagination. There are no forms in use, no documents other than the *Opening Doors* DVD and CD-Rom from Conner Prairie. If you can imagine excited volunteers rather than people who simply “mind the store” you can imagine this program.

Would you be willing to serve as a mentor to other state coordinators, advising them on this topic? If so, please indicate the best way for them to contact you.

Yes. Contact Patricia Zahn at patricia@mohumanities.org or Michael Bouman at mbouman@mohumanities.org.