

TIP SHEET

Mission Based Exhibitions (2015)



Mission Based Exhibitions

“A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.”¹

-The International Council of Museums

When most people think of museums, they think of exhibits. At exhibits, museum visitors can view artifacts, make connections, and learn about historical events, ideas, or concepts that they might not otherwise encounter in their daily lives. Exhibitions also provide the public with a place to socialize and spend their leisure time.

Because exhibits are such a prominent part of a museum’s public face, they play a vital role in helping the museum achieve its mission. While it’s important for exhibits to be professional and for the public to see them, an exhibit’s success isn’t really about how good it looks or how many people attend. Like all activities at a museum, the purpose of an exhibit is to help the museum achieve its mission.

How does Mission Steer Exhibitions?

A museum’s purpose is found in its mission statement. A museum must always be more than just a tourist attraction or place full of old things, it must have direction and purpose. The answer to why a particular museum exists, is to read the museum’s mission.

A mission is also what makes a museum distinctive from every other museum. This uniqueness can come from “focusing on a particular time period, geographical area, piece of technology, or other distinctive theme.”²

A museum without a clear mission statement may find it difficult to determine what it is trying to accomplish. As a result, decisions regarding the collection, programs, and exhibits may become inconsistent, varied, and not fulfill the public trust obligations of operating a museum. Scarce resources may become mismanaged as well as the precious staff and volunteer time. For example, an exhibit about the Titanic or mummies may generate lots of visitors and media attention for a museum, but if the museum’s mission concerns local Saskatchewan history, then it would not be an appropriate choice.

Additionally, a museum that does not follow their stated mission risks violating the trust they have with their public including visitors, donors, funders, and volunteers. These supporters have provided their time and resources for the museum under a particular vision. All museum operations, including collections, education, and exhibitions, should be centered on that vision. If this vision and focus are abandoned it will become very clear to the public.

It is important to ensure that all staff and volunteers understand and support the museum’s goals. Before beginning any new project, everyone involved should review the mission. Find creative ways to remind staff and volunteers of the mission statement, such as posting the statement in the workplace.

All policies and decisions, including exhibition policies, should be created through careful planning and consideration, including ensuring that

the mission statement of the museum is adhered to.

Exhibition Policy

A museum should have an exhibition policy in place. An exhibition policy guides how and why the museum plans on carrying out exhibitions, and spells out how exhibitions support the museum's mission. There are many reasons why a museum should have an exhibition policy. The policy will act as a guide to ensuring everyone understands and follows the same principles. An exhibition policy creates standards for the museum to follow and should contain a commitment to accuracy, objectivity, and ethical behavior. In addition, the policy must affirm that conservation standards will be followed and government requirements, such as safety codes and copyright, will be met.³

In case of disputes, the exhibition policy can be referred to for clarification. Having a policy also helps with transitions in staff and volunteers. If someone leaves during the development of an exhibit, or even in between exhibits, the policy will keep the museum working towards the same goals.

The Association of Nova Scotia Museums provides an excellent sample exhibition policy.⁴ Another useful source when writing an exhibition policy is the American Alliance of Museums list of exhibition standards.⁵ Some of the sections typically included in an exhibition policy include:

- **What types of exhibits does your museum intend to present?** (Temporary, permanent, in-house, travelling, etc.)
- **Who is in charge of the decision making process for exhibits?** (Is there an exhibition committee?)

- **What potential partnerships are available to the museum?** (Community groups, graphic design firm, carpenter?)
- **What themes or messages does the museum want to tell?**
- **How are artifacts from the collection used in exhibits?** (What conservation standards are in place? Are there artifacts that should not be displayed?)
- **Are exhibits created with educational opportunities in mind?** (Do the exhibits align with provincial school curriculum outcomes?)
- **What safety standards are in place?** (The museum needs to ensure staff are safe during the construction of an exhibition and visitors are able to safely view the display?)
- **What is the policy on accessibility?** (Physical, intellectual, cultural, etc.)
- **What plans are in place to evaluate the exhibit?** (Include both Formative, during an exhibition development, and Summative, after the exhibition is completed)

Other Exhibition Considerations

Many factors may be considered when selecting the theme of an exhibition, including the popularity, budget, floor space, staff/volunteer expertise, and programming.⁶ While all of these elements are important, they should only be considered once a museum is sure the exhibit will adhere to their mandate.

Another consideration is whether an exhibition should be created in house or if the museum should bring in a travelling exhibit. There are many different factors to consider in making this choice. If a museum chooses to develop its own exhibits, it will need to ensure they have the necessary artifacts in its collection or the ability to borrow the items. It will also need to have staff or volunteers with exhibition knowledge and the time available to create the exhibit. There are several aspects of a travelling exhibit that the museum will need to consider: required floor space,

meeting environmental standards for exhibited artifacts, and expenses such as shipping and rental fees involved in hosting the exhibit.⁷

If a travelling exhibit is selected, it is important to ensure the exhibit adheres to your museum's mission statement. Popular travelling exhibits are often selected to attract visitors but should never be chosen solely because of their mass appeal.

Case Study – Transcona Historical Museum – Remembrance Week Display

The Transcona Historical Museum is a small community museum located in a present day suburb of Winnipeg, Manitoba. The Transcona community began as a railway town that was politically and geographically separate from Winnipeg. The museum's mission is "To preserve and promote the community spirit of Transcona, through sharing our history and stories for the benefit of all."⁸

For the past several years the museum has hosted an exhibition in recognition of Remembrance Week at a local shopping mall. In 2010, the museum realized their current remembrance display was becoming dated and they wanted to create a new exhibition. It was decided the display should focus on soldiers who had died in combat. During the development of this exhibit, Canada was still engaged in the war in Afghanistan and the loss of soldiers in combat was back in the public consciousness, in a way not seen since the Korean War.

The museum felt that an exhibit about Canadians killed in the Afghanistan war would have a great deal of relevance for the public, especially young people. As no members of the Transcona community had been killed fighting in Afghanistan, an exhibit solely featuring Canadians killed in Afghanistan would not meet the museum's mission of telling Transcona's history or stories. The museum's challenge was to create an exhibit that would include the Afghanistan war, while still meeting the museum's mission statement.

An exhibit focusing on the men from Transcona who had died during the World Wars would fit the mission statement of the museum but would lack the present day relevance.

The completed exhibit was both aligned with the museum's mission statement and was relevant to the public. Titled, "The Ultimate Sacrifice: Remembering the Fallen," the exhibit featured the stories of Transcona men killed during the World Wars but also included the stories of Winnipeggers who had died in Afghanistan. As Transcona is now part of Winnipeg this fell within the museum's mission statement.

The case study is an example of how a museum followed its mission statement but still created the relevant exhibition they hoped for. It is important to remember that a mission statement should not function as a straightjacket but instead as a road map for the institution.



The Transcona Museum's Remembrance Week Exhibition was created in a way that met the museum's mission statement.

Developing the theme for exhibitions at your museum

One of the most significant considerations when developing an exhibit is what the theme, core idea, or message will be. The theme of an exhibition needs to be a fully thought out idea, not just a group of keywords.

A few keywords do not let you determine if an exhibition is required or fits within the mission.

If however the theme is fully thought out, the museum can demonstrate to its public and supporters why it is important to tell this particular story.

Suppose the Transcona Museum wanted to host an exhibit on trains. The museum must first ask if this topic fits within their mission. An exhibition on trains could be a collection of historic railway photos from across Europe, or it could be a display of toy trains. These topics would clearly not meet the museum's mission statement.

However, if the topic was "how the Transcona Rail Shops constructed the only armored train built for the defense of Canada", we would now be able to see how it meets the mission statement.

It is important to remember a theme or idea must be a complete sentence not just a few words. If you ensure your exhibition theme is a fully thought out statement, it will be easier to determine if it is in line with your mission statement.

Conclusion

Exhibitions, just like any museum activity, needs to be aligned with the museum's mission statement. A well-written exhibition policy will assist the museum in ensuring the mission is met. It is important to always remember the success of an exhibit cannot just be measure in terms of attendance, artifact rarity, and aesthetic appeal. We should measure success in terms of how well the exhibit helps us achieve our museum's goals.

References

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Written by Matthew Komus

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For more information or additional copies of these notes, contact:

Museums Association of Saskatchewan
424 McDonald Street
Regina Saskatchewan S4N 6E1
Phone: 306-780-9279 or 1-866-568-7386 (toll free)
Email: mas@saskmuseums.org

