

TIP SHEET

Mission Based Collecting (2014)

Mission Based Collecting

The mission statement is one of a museum's most fundamental documents, from which all of the institution's goals, objectives, and policies are formed. A mission statement helps define the role of a museum within its various communities, while also being used as a tool for governance and management.

A mission statement is "a written declaration of an organization's core purpose and focus that normally remains unchanged over time. Properly crafted mission statements:

- (1) serve as filters to separate what is important from what is not,
- (2) clearly state which markets will be served and how, and
- (3) communicate a sense of intended direction to the entire organization."ⁱ

In other words, a mission statement is a concise summary of what the museum seeks to accomplish.

Mission statements aim to answer key organizational questions such as "what do we do?", "why do we do what we do?", and "who are we doing it for?"ⁱⁱ By answering these questions, a mission statement will set your museum apart from all others, whether it be through focusing on a particular time period, geographical area, piece of technology, or other distinctive theme.

The Wood Mountain Historical Society's mission statement highlights these principles:

"The purpose of the Wood Mountain Historical Society is to collect, conserve, research and interpret the story of settlement including ranching, rodeo, and homesteading in the greater Wood Mountain geographical area as well as the drainage plains surrounding the area"

How does Mission Steer Collecting?

On its own a mission statement is too broad to dictate how a site is managed. Therefore a museum crafts policies and procedures that guide the actions of the site toward achieving its mission.ⁱⁱⁱ One of the key policies stemming from mission is a museum's collections management policy.

A **collections management policy** explains how and why a museum collects what it does and details the professional standards that are to be followed to care for the objects under its responsibility.^{iv} To be effective, the collections policy must flow directly from each individual site's mission statement and must detail exactly how the collection helps the museum achieve its mission. To emphasize the role missions play in guiding collections activities, many museums include their mission statements at the beginning of their collections management policy.^v

A collecting mandate is part of a museum's collections management policy. It focuses the collecting activities of a museum and places limits on what will be accepted into the permanent collection.^{vi} Just like the broader collections management policy it is found in, a collecting mandate stems directly from a museum's mission statement and assumes its focus in geographical area, time period, or technology described in the mission to limit acquisitions.^{vii} Again, a sample from Wood Mountain Historical Society highlights this focus:

"The Society will collect buildings, artifacts, photographs and print material related to ranching, rodeo, and homesteading. Artifacts will relate to agriculture, agricultural practices and

Mission Based Collecting

related community activities such as commerce, communication, education, transportation, law, health, labour, local government, natural resources, organizations, entertainment and social activities; and to the people involved in the former activities.

The Society will emphasize the years from 1880 to 1940 but may collect and preserve artifacts and data from years previous or since if it is relevant to the Wood Mountain area and the lives of ranchers, rodeo people, homesteaders or those who offered services to them.”

Why does it Matter?

As public institutions, museums have an obligation to serve the public’s interest. This is referred to as “**public trust**,” and means a museum and its staff are accountable to the public in all of the museum’s activities.^{viii} In terms of collection activities, this means museums are required to “acquire, document and preserve collections in accordance with institutional policies”^{ix} as outlined by the Canadian Museum Association’s *Ethical Guidelines* document.

A collections management policy, with a well-defined collecting mandate stemming directly from a museum’s mission statement, clearly demonstrates the criteria an object must meet in order to be accepted into a permanent collection. Using the policy to carefully select which objects to acquire will reduce the number of accepted donations and more resources available to “preserve and minimize the physical deterioration of all collections” that truly belong in your collection. This means less space is wasted, less time is spent cataloguing, and resources spent on collections care are more effectively used.

In addition, any research undertaken to ensure that objects fit the collecting mandate, along with the approved

accessioned artifacts themselves, will strengthen the ties between the museum’s exhibits and education programs to the site’s overall mission. You’ll know exactly why and how the object matters to your museum. Engaging in educational and public outreach programs that are directly linked to the museum’s mission is another important aspect of the *CMA’s Ethical Guidelines*.^{xi}

Linking Objects to Mission

Many objects that come to a museum will have obvious ties to the site’s mission. An example is this “Dress Gauntlet” from the Wood Mountain Rodeo Ranch Museum’s collection. Cowboys wore gauntlets, such as this one, with wrist length gloves as a means to protect their shirtsleeves when riding through bushes or other difficult vegetation. Homesteaders wore gauntlets to protect their wrists while driving four or more horse hitches.

When the connection to the museum’s mission is this obvious, making decisions on accepting these pieces into a permanent collection becomes much easier (although other acquisition criteria, such as condition, need, and restrictions must still be considered).



Dress Gauntlets, owned by Walter Randall of Limerick, Sask. He used them at Wood Mountain Rodeo in the 1920’s.

However, there will always be objects available to a museum that have no obvious links to the collecting mandate or mission statement. These items could still potentially be key pieces to the museum's collection, and their value means they should not always be turned away. Instead, a museum may be able to research the object to discover any links to the mission that are not immediately obvious. Before an object is added to the collection, the museum must be able to explain why that object is important in helping the institution achieve its mission.

Here is where an object's provenance and history of use comes into play. **Provenance** refers to the "information about the chain of ownership for an item- who owned it when and how they acquired it."^{xii} The moment an object first comes into a museum is the best time to learn its provenance. Donors can have a fair deal of knowledge about the items they are offering. Similarly, when purchasing items, vendors and dealers generally know at least some of their ware's background. Donor questionnaires and interviews can help a museum learn about the object's provenance,^{xiii} including history of ownership, how it was used, and when it was made, all of which can help link an object to a museum's collecting mandate and, by extension, its mission statement.

Saying "No"

Once the fundamental organizational documents like mission statement and collections management policy have been enacted and shared, and research on has been conducted, making decisions on object acquisitions should become simpler for the museum. However, that will not stop potential donors from arriving at the museum with items that do not fit the site's mission statement and collection policy.

Despite knowing the importance of mission based collecting, many museums feel

pressured to accept everything donors bring through their doors. Common feelings include "But they are so-and-so's nephew", "if we say no, they won't bring anything in again", and "if word gets out that we turned an object away, nobody will donate again." If communicated clearly, turning down a potential donor should not cause any negatives feelings towards the museum.

When would-be donors bring in objects that are meaningful and significant to them, a decision not to accept it can feel like a personal rejection. Explaining exactly why an object does or does not in the museum's collection mandate can help show that the decision is not personal. Using the mission statement and collections management policy to support conversations with donors will make explaining what the museum collects and why much more straightforward. Museums can help soften the blow by expressing interest and appreciation in the donor and their object without accepting it into the collection.

Brief pamphlets handed out to all potential donors are effective means of conveying this information, as they can easily outline the museum's collection needs and priorities.^{xiv} The pamphlet can also include the site's mission statement and collecting mandate to further support any decisions not to accept an object.

Turning away an object does not necessarily mean the end of that particular exchange with the donor. Not fitting into one museum's collecting mandate does not preclude it from fitting into another. The object could be a prized addition in a neighbouring community's collection. Going the extra mile to act as an intermediary between the donor and another site shows a museum's good intentions and will not be forgotten by the donor or your fellow institutions.

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