Building Networks – A Toolbox

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This article was prepared for the session *Making Connections: The Value of the Museum in the Community* at the 2001 American Association of Museums Annual Meeting. This set of tools is designed to assist people who work in museums in their community-building efforts. We have outlined a few suggestions for getting started.

Planning

Your purposes and goals for networking will determine the specific strategies you will use. As you plan, clearly articulate why you want to network and what you want to achieve in the networking process. Will you be creating a community advisory committee? Will you be working with others to create a coalition that addresses some specific community concern? Will you be joining an existing coalition? Are you forming and building one-on-one relationships with community leaders? Answering these questions is crucial to effective networking.

Researching Community Organizations
Finding out about the people and organizations that are active in a community

- **Neighborhood Associations**: In many cases, people form neighborhood associations to work on specific neighborhood concerns. As a member of a specific neighborhood, it is essential that the museum be represented in the neighborhood association. The museum representative(s) will be a voice at the table, offering the museum's resources to assist in furthering the neighborhood association's goals, advocate for the museum and express the museum's desire and commitment to being a good neighbor. Neighborhood associations may include residents, merchants, law enforcement and other city services, the faith community and community service organizations. To find out whether a neighborhood association exists in your area, contact local residents and businesses. Read the local newspapers and note who is involved in local activities, ask at the city council/board of supervisors. Find out when the group meets and go to the meetings. You will be welcomed.

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- **Merchants' Associations/Chambers of Commerce**: Networking with your business community can help in many ways, from fund development to developing relationships with community business leaders. Your museum is a part of a community, and every aspect of that community is of concern to the museum.

- **Service Organizations**: You will find many opportunities for working together on community service projects. Working together is a very effective way to get to know others in your community and to begin building relationships. There are numerous service clubs, including Rotary International, Optimist International, Kiwanis, Soroptomist International, etc. Check the Internet under *Community Service and Volunteerism: Organizations*, and find out which ones are most active in your area.

- **Consortiums of organizations and individuals who come together for a specific purpose**: Consortiums are often very effective ways to network with a variety of folks, and they are formed to address very specific issues. For instance, in San Francisco several years ago, an initiative to build healthier communities was established. Called "Neighborhoods in Transition: A Multicultural Partnership," it was a coalition of many different people and organizations, centered in nine different neighborhoods throughout the city, with the purpose of addressing economic and social problems.

    Another example is the Marin Human Rights Roundtable on Hate Violence, a consortium of 35 community organizations working to prevent hate violence. The roundtable includes representatives from ethnically specific groups, the faith community, law enforcement, the human rights commission, fair housing advocates, gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender groups, and many others. The museum/community connection becomes clear in the case of the Bay Area Discovery Museum. The BADM is currently hosting the exhibition *Face to Face: Dealing with Prejudice and Discrimination*, developed by the Chicago Children's Museum. The museum has been working closely with the Marin Roundtable to develop programs, and the Roundtable serves on the community advisory committee of the exhibit. The long-term effects of this networking are unknown at this point, but the museum and the Roundtable are committed to a linked future.

    Consortiums like these exist formally and informally in many places, and museum representatives are welcomed in the coalitions.

Articulating the Value of the Museum to the Community
You will need to have a clear vision of the value that you see that museums bring to building healthy communities. These can include: providing educational resources for community groups, providing expertise in specific areas, and serving as a linkage between the community and business/political leaders by introducing community members to them. The process of articulating your museum's value can include having the entire staff identify the skills and resources they have. Compile this information and share it with your network. Also share it with your staff, board and volunteers, to help everyone clearly see

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the value of your museum to the community.

Another way to articulate your museum's value is to conduct a mini visitor survey. Ask a few of your visitors what they think you bring to a community. In their opinion, what is the value of the museum? Identify a few others who have visited your museum recently, such as teachers, and ask them. Through your own research internally and externally, you will identify a number of attributes that are of value in community work. You will be amazed at what you learn and what you offer. Let this amazement crystallize into a vision of your museum as being an integral part of building a healthy community.

Getting Out There and Doing It
Community involvement is labor-intensive, and works best if everyone in the museum is actively involved at some level.

The challenge is devising effective strategies to become involved in the community. Effectively utilizing human resources, including staff, board members and museum volunteers, is key.

One way to do this is to rely more on museum volunteers, encouraging them to advocate for the museum in the community. You may want to establish a Museum Advocate Program and recruit volunteers to be the museum's voice in the broader community. Their task is to network, joining organizations and coalitions, and serve as the museum's representative in these groups. As with any volunteer program, this will require careful planning and organization. You will need to address:

- Training: Give the Museum Advocates a thorough training on what the museum is all about, so that they can speak knowledgeably about the museum to folks in the community.
- Authority: Give the Museum Advocates authority to act on behalf of the museum in specific ways: offering free meeting space for community groups, discount/free admission to specific groups, offering behind-the-scenes tours, publicity for community events that the museum is co-sponsoring, etc. It is up to each museum to determine what types of things they can offer to community groups and how much authority they feel comfortable delegating to volunteers. The intent is to open up the museum, so that all the community groups feel connected with it and know someone associated with it. The volunteers serve as advocates and conduits between the museum and community. When a request is made that is beyond their authority, they know who to go to and how to facilitate the connection between the museum staff and the community.

A pilot program may start with the museum's current volunteers that already are very familiar with the institution, docents, information desk volunteers, etc. They are people who enjoy interacting with the public and know how to engage people in conversation. The pilot program would identify a few key community organizations to begin with, then expand as more connections and networking naturally occur.

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Effective and Efficient Ways to Maintain Networks

As your network builds, you will be faced with the challenge of effectively maintaining it. Developing and nurturing relationships requires time and thoughtfulness. The strategies you use to maintain the networks will vary depending on whether the networks are groups that you created or ones that you joined. In all cases, the following points will assist you:

- Be realistic in what you can and cannot accomplish. This doesn't mean to think small but it does mean to consider what is really feasible.
- Be reflective at every stage. Ask – How is this step/task/decision getting us closer to our goal? Have the strength to let go of something that really isn't necessary. Keep it simple.
- Set up clear communication procedures at the onset and stick to them. You don't need to drown people in daily emails but the group needs to decide how often is often enough to assure that people continue to feel connected and informed.

The Challenges of Networking

Networking presents many challenges and many benefits. It helps to remember:

- Patience – find joy in little steps, small victories, accepting that small changes can yield great change but it takes time – sometimes years. But the joy and pleasure of hearing a community advocate say that they value the relationship as much as you do is immeasurable.
- Time – It's always more time-efficient in the short term to do it yourself. Building consensus and trusting relationships takes time and energy but it pays off big time in the long term.
- Personalities – In the beginning of establishing community collaborations and networks, the individual personalities seem to play a larger role. When a group of people share a vision and "click", the network gets a jump-start. When a network is firmly established or institutionalized in all of the collaborating organizations, individual personalities still factor into the smooth running of the network but seem to be less critical to the survival of the relationship.

  Another aspect of this personality issue is that so often community collaborations do hinge on the drive and energy of a few people and if those people leave the network, it can often collapse. The challenge is to institutionalize the network as quickly as possible, to move it beyond the individual. This means that the people who initially are the energy for the network need to work quickly to get commitment from others so the collaboration begins to have a life of its own and can accept individuals moving into and out of the network without great upheaval. This can happen more effectively if the people who initially network leverage the relationships, by involving more people from each organization in the network. In this way, the relationship is not just dependent on one person from each organization, but includes multiple connections.

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Key Characteristics of Effective Networking

There are several important qualities that are hallmarks of effective networking. Each of these is simply worded, but very significant:

- Building trust
- True listening
- Acknowledging differences of perspective, and valuing those differences
- Working together
- Sharing
- Spending time with others who share your vision, who stimulate you to see more connections, to see an even bigger picture
- Consistently and continuously nurturing and maintaining networks over time

Assessing the Success of Building Networks

Assessing the success of building networks can be challenging. Here are some suggestions:

- At the beginning, clarify the goals and purposes of the networking group. What are the outcomes of this network? How will the community benefit from this network? Think about what evidence might convince you that you had achieved your goals. Is it possible or practical to collect this evidence?
- Determine benchmarks or critical points during the building process where you want to get information. Be clear about how you want to use that information.
- Try to build in ways to collect information as part of the natural work of the network. For example, rather than resort to the usual written survey, can you ask a provocative question at the end of one of the scheduled meetings? Document the answers and write a brief summary of the interpretation of those answers. Or, if you want information from the larger community on the impact of the network, one approach might be to identify places (like a shopping mall) or events (like an art fair) where a large segment of the targeted community will be. Have a special table where people can stop by and contribute to a large message wall where a question or prompt asks people to reflect on specific issues that the network is trying to address.
- Think of evaluation or assessment as an important tool to help the network make course corrections along the way. It will not provide you with a sure-fire recipe for success. It will help you make informed decisions. The value of assessment is being able to use the information to strengthen the network as you go along.

Resources
There are a number of excellent resources for learning about community building. Here are a few:

National Community Building Network: http://www.ncbn.org

Fischer, Daryl K. Museums, Trustees, and Communities: Building Reciprocal Relationships, American Association of Museums, 1997. This is part of the Technical Information Service' s Professional Practice Series.

Partners for Livable Communities. Culture Builds Communities: A Guide to Partnership Building and Putting Culture to Work on Social Issues, 1995.

Join (and become active in) organizations that serve the needs of specific communities. Through meeting people and reading the organizations' newsletters and other publications, you can learn about and understand the issues that are relevant for those communities.

The United Way has done some very good thinking about ways to evaluate community services. Their website has excerpts from their excellent publication on outcomes evaluation at http://national.unitedway.org/outcomes/

Foundations are one of the best resources for information on community building, and often have publications available for free or low cost. Check the community foundation for your area, or the foundations that currently fund your organization.

The Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey http://www.cfsv.org/communitysurvey/results_pr.html

National Assembly of Local Arts Agencies' Institute for Community Development and the Arts. Building America's Communities: A Compendium of Arts and Community Development Programs. 1996

Americans for the Arts: Animating Democracy Initiative http://www.artsusa.org/AnimatingDemocracy/index.html

AAM's Museums and Community Initiative: http://www.aam-us.org/initiative.htm

The Drucker Foundation. The Community of the Future, edited by Frances Hesselbein, Marshall Goldsmith, Richard Beckhard, Richard F. Schubert. Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998. http://www.pfdf.org/

Lila Wallace–Reader's Digest Fund www.wallacefunds.org

President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities. Coming Up Taller: Arts and Humanities Programs for Children and Youth at Risk http://www.cominguptaller.org/