



Collections Research News

Summer 2010



Elements of Successful Collections Management

Part 6

There are nine major elements of successful collections management in museums and all of these elements should be present to insure your museum is fulfilling its public trust and collection stewardship obligations. These key elements are:

- ✓ Clear Museum Mission Statement
- ✓ Mission-driven Policies and Procedures
- ✓ Knowledge of proper handling procedures
- ✓ Thorough and accurate documentation of collections
- ✓ Knowledge of safe and proper numbering methods
- ✓ Inventory control
- ✓ Safe and stable environment
- ✓ Consistent and sound access procedures
- ✓ Safe and secure exhibition practices

Collections Research News addressed the first four elements in previous issues. In this issue we will continue with our discussion of numbering museum artifacts.

❖ Numbering Museum Artifacts: New Innovations

This is the final installment of Numbering Museum Artifacts: Methods and Material. In past installments we have discussed traditional marking methods and currently acceptable materials. In this issue we will touch on new technologies that are creating innovative new ways of marking and tracking museum artifacts. Both of these technologies--barcodes and radio frequency identification (RFID)--have been around for a number of years, mostly in the retail and library arenas.

➤ Barcodes in Museums

Most of us are familiar with barcodes. We see them in the grocery store and other retail outlets; we see them on just about everything we buy. When we go to the Library we see them used to checkout and track books, CDs and DVDs. Do a search on the internet for Barcodes and you will find a great deal of discussion about barcodes and DNA—tracking species, DNA sequencing, and tracking of plant and animal specimens. What you may not find is much discussion of barcodes for numbering or tracking general museum collections.

So how are barcodes being used in Museums? Barcodes can be used for section tags, drawer and shelf tags, or other locations within the museum for inventory tracking. They can be used on boxes and labels to make inventories smoother and faster, but can they really take the place of traditional numbering of museum artifacts? The concern has been the relative size required to create a readable barcode—most barcode labels create a much larger footprint than a traditional museum object number and have therefore be relegated to tags that must be tied to an object or placed on the outside of a container in which the object is kept. Therefore, we are faced with the age old museum dilemma of how to make this solution permanent, yet reversible when it is applied directly to our objects.

Most Museum Collection Software has been updated to incorporate barcodes into the database, so integration is not a problem for this technological solution. There are three major considerations to bear in mind when considering the use of barcodes. First, the barcode must be visible to the scanner to be read. Second, just because the barcode label or tag is present does not necessarily mean that the object it represents is present. This is especially true if the barcode has not been affixed directly to the object. Third, is there a viable method of attaching barcodes to objects that does not damage the object?

➤ Radio Frequency Identification (RFID)

Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) is also not a new technology and has been used in the retail industry for years.

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This technology uses electronically transmitted information to track and identify materials using stationary and hand-held readers. RFID has been used with live collections in Zoos for a number of years and is the same technology used for identifying and tracking pets. It has also been, and is being used, in Libraries around the world to make tracking, shelving, inventory, and check-out/check-in tasks easier and more accurate.

For the past several years this technology has been explored and continues to be developed for use in museum collections. The most common application of this technology has been in Art Museums and Galleries where the RFID transponder can be easily affixed to the backing board, stretcher, or frame of an artwork without damage. Not only is this technology helpful for the conducting of inventories and tracking object movement, but it is also an effective security tool that can be used to track artwork, notify security of the movement or disturbance of an object, and create an alarm situation if an attempt is made to remove an object from the museum building.

One of the benefits of RFID technology over barcodes is the ability to read the transponder without it actually having to be visible to the reader. One of the drawbacks is that metal and water can effectively block the signal if it is between the RFID tag and the reader.

This technology is becoming standardized so that all RFID tags and readers work under the same set of programming rules and consumers can find the best set of applications for their needs without settling for less than optimum performance because a particular vendor does not provide a particular piece of the application. There has always been some standardization in the market in that RFID applications have been set for various areas of use—Library tags are coded differently than grocery store tags and grocery stores are coded differently than other retail applications. This prevents Library tags from being read by retail scanners and vice versa.

If you check the internet, you will find a number of vendors and applications for this technology being marketed to museums. As mentioned above, most of the marketing is aimed at Art Museums and Galleries. The permanent, yet reversible application of RFID tags to artifacts is still a concern, but indications are that these concerns are being addressed. One type of tag combines the RFID technology with Japanese paper technology and is said to be “formatted for most items in any collection”. While this tag was developed in consultation with a paper conservator, it remains to be seen whether this technology can be applied to non-art collections.

Other applications for this technology

Another area in which barcodes and RFID technology is being used is in Visitor Services—providing visitors access through mobile devices to information about specific objects in an exhibit; tracking traffic patterns within exhibits; creating Way Marking-type applications for objects and connections to information about objects through connections on the internet. All of these applications are intended to enhance the visitor experience.

Call me old-fashioned, but I wonder if we as a society are spending too much time with our noses in our I-phones, I-pads and other mobile devices and not enough time interacting with our fellow human beings one on one. Museums are about stories and real ‘stuff’ and serve a vital role in connecting us *directly* to pieces of our past and present. Barcodes and RFID tags are good *supplements* for inventory and security, but will probably never take the place of traditional numbering methods, and museums should still verify, view, and assess their collections periodically. Just because the barcode or RFID tag is there does not mean the object still is, and these technologies will never be able to assess the current condition of an object. Only a trained staff member can do that by visual inspection.

2010 TRAINING SCHEDULES

ONLINE TRAINING

MS103: Basics of Museum Registration
Look for it in January, 2011

MS207: Collections Management: Cataloging Your Collection
July 5 to 31, 2010

MS007: The Mission Statement: Is It Really That Important?
July 12 to 16, 2010

Look for MS207 and MS007 again in July 2011.

Still to Come!

MS218: Collection Inventories
November 1 to 30, 2010

WESTEND TRAINING CENTER
Collections Management in Times of Change
Look for it in Spring 2011

Check our website for details and next year’s schedule: <http://museumcollectionmgmt.com>

SERVICES

FILEMAKER® PRO CATALOGING TEMPLATES

Collections Research for Museums can assist small museums with computerizing their collection documentation using off-the-shelf database software.

Training is available for our database and in general FileMaker Pro techniques.

ON-SITE TRAINING

Collections Research for Museums offers classes for small museums in Cataloging and Collections Management. The course is designed for those museums which have small, non-professionally trained or volunteer staffs. It covers the basics of marking, handling, measuring, and cataloging, plus general care and storage for all types of objects and materials.

PROJECT SERVICES

We also offer a variety of other services to museums, large and small. These range from simple inventories to complete and thorough cataloging of collections. Feel free to contact us for more information. We provide a free initial consultation.

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Questions, comments or story suggestions are always welcome.)

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