



Collections Research News

Summer 2011



Elements of Successful Collections Management

Part 8

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 six elements in previous issues. In this issue we will look at the importance of a safe and stable environment in the museum.

❖ Safe and Stable Environment, Part 1

Good collection management requires a certain level of knowledge relating to the environment within and surrounding your museum, and the forces which can act upon your collection to its ultimate detriment. These forces are commonly called the 10 Agents of Deterioration and we can, through good collections management practices, effectively mitigate them.

- The first agent of deterioration is Direct Physical Forces. These can be sudden and catastrophic such as the shock caused by the collapse of shelving or a support; falling off shelving or a support; earthquake; war; or terrorist act. Mishandling can also cause this type of damage--dropping, incorrect support, grabbing appendages, etc.

The second type of damage from direct physical forces can be long-term and gradual such as deformation from improper environmental conditions; improper or inadequate storage and support; and stacking.

The third type of direct physical force can cause either sudden or long term damage—Vibration. Constant vibration from highway traffic or a nearby rail yard or nearby construction can wear down the integrity of your artifacts over time causing stress cracks or increasing existing cracks and damage. The sudden vibration of an earthquake, demolition of a nearby building, or construction within your own building could cause shelving to shift and artifacts to fall.

Make sure that shelves are stable and, if necessary, install a lip or barrier along the open side of the shelf to stop objects from falling off the edge. Use stable and stabilizing mounts for objects. Mitigate as much as possible outside environmental conditions that might cause this type of damage—use padding, boxes or other methods to protect your collection from vibration. Finally, practice careful handling procedures. More damage occurs to museum collections from poor handling than from any other cause.

- The second agent of deterioration is Thieves, Vandals and Displacers. Theft is a very real threat to

Continued on page 2

Cont from page 1

museum collections whether you are a small museum in a small town or a large museum in a big city. Security is everybody's business in the museum. From greeting people at the front door, securing doors and windows during both open hours and after hours; to utilizing secure cases and displays, any museum can reduce their chances of having a theft by making security a high priority.

Vandalism does not only happen in the large museums, though most of us are aware of incidents where an individual has taken exception to a work of art or has attempted to damage a high-profile object.

The third piece of this is the Displacers. What exactly is a 'displacer'? He/she is the person who refuses to put things back where he/she found them creating a large collection of misplaced materials and if you cannot find it, it is as good as gone. This type of agent of deterioration can be eliminated with good access procedures and training. If this person does not need to be in the collection areas, do not let him/her in!

- Agent of Deterioration number three is Fire. Damage occurs not only from the fire itself, but from smoke damage and the effects of fighting the fire (see Agent number four). An important step all museums must take to mitigate this potential for damage is to have fire protection for the facility—smoke detection; monitored smoke alarms; fire suppression; and monitored fire alarms. Other procedures that help prevent fires are to unplug appliances when not in use; keep flammable materials away from heat sources; pick up and dispose of garbage on a regular basis.

- Agent of Deterioration number four is Water. Water can be introduced into your museum in three major ways. The first is water from fire suppression during a fire or due to a malfunction of the fire suppression system. To prevent malfunctions of your fire suppression system, it should be tested at least yearly.

The second is water from leaky pipes, leaky roofs, and leaky skylights. Proper maintenance of your building is imperative and can go a long way toward preventing these types of incidents.

The third is water from natural disasters such as floods. Examining your location—proximity to rivers or other bodies of water—and doing a risk

assessment on your chances of having this type of water incident will help you plan for and mitigate damage to the collection should a flood occur in your area.

- The fifth Agent of Deterioration is Pests. Who are these pests? Much as we might like to we cannot include co-workers or visitors in this category. The pests to which we are referring here are critters--insects & vermin--and fungi--mold and mildew. Critters may use your collection as food or may find the collection objects a barrier to food through which they must go to get to what they really want. A program of Integrated Pest Management within the museum will help control the critters. Know what sort of pests you may have by using sticky traps for monitoring. Seal cracks in the foundation or walls and in the door or window frames. Make sure that there are no gaps under the doors by using door sweeps. Fungal growth occurs when the humidity in an area or building is very high—over 75%. This could be the result of poor environmental conditions or may occur after a water incident. To control mold or mildew growth, you need to reduce the humidity.

- Agent of Deterioration number six is Contaminants--Dirt, Dust and Pollution. What affect do dust, dirt, pollution and other particulates have on your collection objects? These kinds of chemical agents in the environment can cause damage to collections from disfigurement to complete destruction. Containments can be in form of gases, liquids or solids. Gases include pollutants from external industry and vehicles; off-gassing from materials within the museum or oxygen itself. Liquids include plasticizers migrating from deteriorating plastics and grease from improper handling. Solids include salt—both airborne and from handling—and dust.

How would you mitigate or control these issues? Practice proper handling techniques—clean hands and gloves as recommended for the type of object you are working with. Place particulate and/or carbon filters on air handling systems; keep doors and windows closed; and seal cracks and gaps. Use proper storage and exhibition materials and separate deteriorating objects from the rest of the collection.

The remaining four Agents of Deterioration will be addressed in the next issue. Stay tuned!

2011 TRAINING SCHEDULES

ONLINE TRAINING

MS103: Basics of Museum Registration
February 22 to March 21, 2011

MS207: Collections Management: Cataloging Your Collection
July 1 to 31, 2011

MS007: The Mission Statement: Is It Really That Important?
July 18 to 22, 2011
November 14 to 18, 2011

MS218: Collection Inventories
November 7 to December 2, 2011

WESTEND TRAINING CENTER

Collections Management in Times of Change
May 16-20, 2011

Check our website for details:
<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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