



Elements of Successful Collections Management

Part 11

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 eight elements in previous issues. In this issue we will look at the final element, the importance of safe and secure exhibition practices.

❖ Safe and Secure Exhibition Practices

In order to provide interesting and educational exhibits for your visitors and protect your collections and visitors, consider the following elements when planning and executing your exhibitions:

➤ Use exhibit furniture and materials that are safe for your collection items

Traditional wooden exhibit cases, particularly oak, are generally used in museums because they look nice. However, without being properly sealed these cases can actually be harmful to the objects you display in them. Wood gives off harmful acidic gasses that can increase the aging properties of many collection materials and oak is the worst of all. Be sure to place a protective barrier between your objects and the wooden floor of the case. Use a barrier material that will block the migration of the acids from the wood such as Polyester sheeting, Marvelseal, or aluminum foil. The wood can also be sealed using a moisture-cured polyurethane or latex paint, but these products must be allowed to dry completely and finish curing before artifacts are placed in the case. This process may take up to 3 to 4 weeks.

Better choices for exhibition cases are powder-coated metal and glass cases or sealed wood bases with Plexiglas vitrines.

Fabrics used in exhibition cases should be inert and un-dyed: polyester, cotton, linen, or a polyester-cotton blend. If you must use a colored fabric for esthetic reasons, test it for color fastness before using it. You do not want your exhibit fabric to bleed onto your objects if the humidity rises or there is a water incident.

Artifact mounts should be made of safe materials and should properly support your objects. Mounts should be padded so as not to scratch or rub your objects. Metal mounts can scratch and corrosion can stain objects if they are not protected by polyester, polypropylene, or polyethylene tubing or other inert padding. Plexiglas can be used for mounts; be sure the cut edges are polished so they are no longer rough. Fabric or Tyvek covered polyethylene foam blocks or Backer rods can be fashioned into mounts for storage and exhibition.

➤ Case Lighting

In-case lighting can raise the ambient temperature inside the case and lower the relative humidity such that your artifacts are affected to their detriment. Close-in lighting like this can also increase fading of artifacts like textiles and paper-based items. Florescent lighting must be filtered, inside or outside of the cases and

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incandescent lighting is extremely hot. Fiber optic lighting can be safely used inside a case as the heat source is away from the end of the light tube; however, the nearness and intensity of the light can still increase fading. Outside- the- case lighting is a better option if possible, but remember to filter for UV and limit the length and intensity of the exposure for optimal collection care.

➤ **Plan an open traffic pattern for your exhibits**

Make sure that there is enough room in the exhibit for visitors to comfortably navigate around the exhibits and cases. Refer to the American with Disabilities Act for the proper path width so that disabled visitors in wheelchairs can negotiate your galleries. Always plan with ADA compliance in mind and make sure the exhibition cases are not too tall for children and people in wheelchairs; that wall cases and other design elements are not hazards for blind or limited vision visitors; and that your labels are readable by all visitors in terms of mounting height, print size, color combinations and location.

Making the space around your cases wide enough to comply with ADA regulations will not only make the exhibit more enjoyable for all your visitors, it will make it less likely that the cases will be accidentally bumped because of close quarters. Bumped cases can cause artifact damage.

➤ **Security for exhibition galleries**

Exhibit security is a very important element of any exhibition. Your exhibit cases must have good locks that are not easy to open. Alarmed cases are better if you have the funds to manage it. Open exhibits should be monitored closely and/or have perimeter alarms to alert staff when visitors get too close or attempt to remove items from the exhibit. They should also have a barrier to keep visitors from entering the area--stanchions are good; Plexiglas or other solid barriers are better. You might be surprised what visitors will do even when there is a barrier blocking their way! Watch out for the parent who lifts their child over the barrier to pet the buffalo, Mountain lion (big kitty) or touch an artifact! This is not only detrimental to the artifact, but can be dangerous for the child (ex. arsenic in animal mounts).

Beyond the physical security of barriers, locks and alarms, and cameras, there is a simple and effective way of keeping your exhibition galleries safe. Even if you do not have the funds to have a full time security staff, your regular staff can take 'walkabouts' at irregular intervals around the galleries to survey what is happening. Walk around the museum and engage your visitors by asking if they are enjoying themselves and ask if they have any questions. An engaged and happy visitor is less likely to mess about with your collection than a visitor who thinks no one is watching.

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COLLECTIONS RESEARCH
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January 7 to February 1, 2013

MS207: Collections Management: Cataloging
Your Collection
July 1 to 26, 2013

MS007: The Mission Statement: Is It Really That
Important?
November 11 to 15, 2013

MS218: Collection Inventories
November 4 to 29, 2013

MTN/WESTEND TRAINING CENTER

Collections Management Boot Camp
On hiatus for 2013

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Collections Research for Museums now offering a half-day workshop titled "*Security for the Small Museum: Practical Low and No Cost Solutions*".

This workshop is designed for small museums with 10 or fewer staff (paid or unpaid) who are looking to improve or learn about museum security. It will present practical tips that anyone can implement with little or no cost focusing on non-technical solutions.

We are currently looking for institutions who would like to host one of these workshops

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PROJECT SERVICES

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