

Good Practice in Exhibit Policy

A Good Policy...

- ❑ addresses the real situation and concerns of your museum; it is NOT just copied from someone else's model or done to meet the CMOG requirements!
- ❑ is preventive medicine. Policy writing is a way of managing risk, of identifying areas where the museum might fall into difficulties, and then setting up guiding principles to prevent this. It's a lot easier to prevent a crisis than to solve it!
- ❑ is the result of a collaborative effort. One person may write the first draft, but the policies will be stronger if several people with different backgrounds work together on identifying the issues that need to be included.
- ❑ is written in clear, straightforward, easy-to-understand language. A good policy is not necessarily a long policy!
- ❑ is more than a motherhood statement. It's easy to knock off broad statements like "we will protect the collection" or "we will behave ethically", but it's pretty meaningless. Good policy states HOW you will protect the collection and what "ethically" means in situations that are likely to arise. BUT...
- ❑ is not filled with time-sensitive detail. Changes to policy have to be approved by the board, so keep details that may change frequently out of policy. They can go in a procedures document or staff and board manual.
- ❑ is understood and applied by the board and staff. If it just sits in the filing cabinet, it's a waste of time!
- ❑ is reviewed annually and revised when necessary

A Good Exhibit Policy Address These Issues...

NOTE: Each museum is different. Your museum may not need policy for some of these areas, or may have additional issues that need to be addressed.

Scope and nature of exhibits

- ❑ what subjects is it appropriate for the museum to present in its exhibits? The answer to this question should flow naturally from the museum's purpose and the audiences it is trying to serve.
- ❑ what types of exhibit activity will the museum undertake? Almost all museums present a mix of long- and short-term exhibits made by the museum, drawn from its collection, and shown within the museum's own galleries. However, museums may also make travelling exhibits, borrow exhibits from other sources, create off-site exhibits around their community in outreach spaces, provide space and/or advice where local groups can mount their own exhibits, put up temporary exhibits at special events and conferences, create marketing and promotional exhibits for the museum, and, increasingly, create virtual exhibits for organizations such as VMC or for the museum's own web site.
- ❑ how will the annual exhibit schedule be established? where will exhibit ideas come from, who will decide what exhibits to do, will there be any community input?

Accuracy and balance

- ❑ whose voice or point of view is represented in the exhibits? A municipal museum, for example, may consciously decide to try to include many different voices or points of view to represent the diversity of its community. Other museums may, by the very nature of their mandate, be dedicated to presenting the story of an ethnic or occupational group “from the inside”.
- ❑ how will the museum ensure that exhibits present accurate information, both verbally and visually?

Ethics

- ❑ how will the museum handle ethical problems that may come up in the course of exhibit development? Most museums already subscribe to a broad code of ethics that will cover many situations. However, there are often issues that require further thought, such as:
 - exhibition of human remains
 - exhibition and/or censorship of works of art
 - exhibition of religious and sacred artifacts
 - right to privacy
 - exhibition and treatment of live animals
 - sources of new natural history “specimens” and taxidermy
 - commitment to energy conservation
 - commitment to “green” product choices and/or sustainable development
 - should preference be given to local suppliers?
 - exhibition of privately-owned collections, especially dealer-owned collections and/or items owned by staff and board members
 - acceptable and unacceptable sources of funding and sponsorship for exhibitions
 - suitable and/or inappropriate recognition and rewards for funders and donors
 - use of temporary exhibit space for shows put on by local craft and hobby groups or other organizations; sales at these exhibits
 - if the museum hosts community-based exhibits, which organizations and topics are acceptable? which are not?

Preservation of collection, staff, and visitors - and the museum!

- ❑ how will the museum preserve and safeguard the collection? What standards will the museum strive to meet in its exhibition areas? Who will decide if an object can be exhibited and if conditions in an exhibit are adequate?
- ❑ how will the museum safeguard the public in exhibit areas? how will the museum safeguard staff and volunteers?
- ❑ that the museum will comply with all relevant legal requirements while making exhibits. You may want to mention the examples most likely to affect your museum’s exhibits, if only to make all members of the board aware of them! Common areas of concern include: fire codes, copyright, right to privacy, health and safety, service in both official languages. And then there’s tax receipts for

donated materials and services, taxes on admissions, and the liquor license and SIP training for the opening! And, and, and.....

- ❑ that the museum will adopt a risk management approach to exhibits and try to reduce risks and/or insure against existing risks.

Customer service and quality control

- ❑ a commitment to providing good customer service to those visiting exhibits and how the museum will strive to achieve this
- ❑ who are the proposed audiences for the museum's exhibits? To what extent and how will the museum seek audience input into the exhibit schedule, content, and design? What languages will be used in exhibits, and will they be used equally or as supplements? What provisions will be made for people with disabilities?
- ❑ how will the museum determine if the exhibits are serving its audience well? How will exhibits be evaluated?
- ❑ how will the museum ensure that it has trained people with the necessary skills working on exhibits? Will the museum use volunteers and/or outside contractors? How will it gradually improve the quality of its exhibits?
- ❑ how will the museum ensure that exhibits are maintained?

Responsibilities

NOTE: many of these issues may be covered elsewhere or be procedural rather than policy issues - but they do tend to cause a great deal of turmoil if not discussed and agreed upon...

- ❑ who is responsible for proposing and approving the exhibit schedule? who is responsible for setting budgets?
- ❑ who manages the creation of exhibits? who monitors budget and schedule?
- ❑ who has the authority to spend money, enter into contracts on the museum's behalf, and so on?
- ❑ who gets to approve and/or veto plans on the grounds of object safety, health and safety of staff, cost, and so on
- ❑ who has approval/veto power over the design and aesthetic decisions? who is consulted? who is just told about them as a courtesy?