Building Relationships Between Visitors and Museums

By Nina Simon for iMuseum Symposium

Recently, I've been doing a lot of workshops with cultural professionals around the question of developing authentic relationships between institutions and visitors. There's a fundamental strangeness to the concept of a relationship between a human and an organization. Most of our relationships, after all, are with people, and when we try to put an institutional face on relationship-type transactions, it can kill the intimacy or makes it feel creepy and commodified.

This expresses itself most powerfully in museums when we talk about building relationships with visitors over time. If I go on a date with you and we have fun, I develop some expectations about what will happen the next time I see you. I expect you'll remember some basic things about me--say, my name. But museums are one-night stand amnesiacs in the relationship department. A visitor comes once, has a great experience, starts "building the relationship," and then the next time she shows up, no one at the front desk knows anything about her.

This is terrible, both for the visitor and for the museum. And for most institutions there's no practical solution to the problem. Unless your organization is tiny, staff members can't have personal relationships with every user--nor, ethically, might they want to. And so, unless we give up entirely or settle for the amnesiatic status quo, we have to find another way.

How do we appropriately extrapolate from what works in interpersonal relationships to develop relationships between organizations and users that are authentic, meaningful, and positive?

In looking at successful examples from institutions around the world, I've come to feel there are three important elements that can support healthy, inspiring relationships between organizations and users--being personal, supporting social experiences among visitors, and developing relationships across multiple platforms and experiences.

Make room for personal expression and ownership--both by staff and audience members.

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So often, organizations present people--staff, donors, board members--in the most formal ways possible, via long lists of printed names or stilted photographs. These lists do not convey the passion that these people feel for the organization. They model impersonal, businesslike relationships between the institution and the people who care about it the most. In contrast, organizations that feature staff or member walls

celebrating people's diverse talents and interests reflect the idea that this is a community of people who care about each other.

This kind of personal expression comes out in exhibitions via signed or handwritten labels, staff picks, and visitor-contributed objects and stories. It comes out in creative donor walls and staff directories online. I always love it when I see a staff show at a museum or a wall at a design firm celebrating the kids who have come in to serve as focus group members. These kinds of indicators help me understand that I can be part of a community by getting involved.

As a simple example, when the Oakland Museum of California redesigned the California history gallery, they invited community members to participate. For the exhibit on the baby boom, rather than showcasing images from the Museum's archive, the Museum invited local neighbors to bring in their own photos of themselves and family members as babies and children in the late 1940's. Now, when people visit the Museum, they can point out their photos, their grandparents, and their friends. The Museum becomes a little less someone else's place and a little more their own.
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Wherever possible, use institutional resources to encourage relationships among members and users rather than just with the institution.

We know from copious audience research that the social experience is one of the most cited reasons that people visit and enjoy museums. There are so many ways that institutions can enhance this social experience, both for intact groups and for people who are interested in engaging with strangers. And these relationships--among people---are more natural to sustain than relationships with institutions or staff members. The challenge is initiating them. In most cases, docents and floor staff are trained to be the point person for conversation and idea-sharing. This creates a dependency where visitors only experience the communal relationship if it is facilitated by staff. We have to retrain ourselves and our staff not to be the center of the relationship but instead to be the hosts who match make among visitors, who can then pursue more sustainable relationships on their own.

This can happen around artifacts, especially provocative ones that serve as "social objects" that triangulate conversations among visitors. It can also happen through designed elements that mediate interactions among visitors. For example, in 2009, a graduate class in the University of Washington Museology program developed an experimental exhibition about advice. As part of the exhibition, they built an advice booth that was staffed by visitors who gave each other advice on all sorts of topics--from fashion to money to relationships. The booth didn't invite visitors to engage one-on-one with staff--an expensive and limiting activity. Instead, visitors could engage with each other and the broad diversity of their expert advice-giving capabilities.

Support and enhance relationships through consistent multi-platform engagement.

In our personal lives, we use lots of tools to stay in touch and further relationships with each other. We hang out. We call. We write. Museums and non-profits use all these tools as well, but they often employ different staff (with different personalities and relationship styles) to manage each platform. I may have a conversation with a floor educator at a museum and then receive an e-newsletter from the same institution with a different tone and focus.

This may make sense from a workflow perspective, but it's unnatural from a relationship-building perspective. Instead of feeling like each communication medium enhances and deepens my relationship with an organization, I feel like I'm getting lots of discontinuous blips from a fragmented institution. This is most extreme in institutions that have a delightful, idiosyncratic style to their content communication and a more formal approach to development communication. I'm less likely to become a member or donate if that experience isn't naturally and obviously part of the relationship I'm building with the institution on the content side. Making this change means shifting from thinking about content experiences over here and communication strategy over there and instead focusing on community engagement as a coherent, unified experience.

As an example, consider the work that Beck Tench has been doing at the Museum of Life and Science to support continuous onsite and online relationship-building. Bloggers and Twitter users--"tweeple" in the Museum's parlance--are invited to exhibit previews and receive personalized welcome from the same staff members with whom they engage online. Winners of the Museum's "name that zoom" Twitter game now receive a handwritten card in the (snail) mail from Beck, along with tickets to the museum and a silly prize related to the nature of the game. The idea of sending winners a reward is nothing new, but in this case, the reward shares the same sensibility as the game, thus more effectively deepening the relationship. Visitors don't meet Beck online and someone else onsite. They build the same relationship wherever they engage with the institution.

How will you support deeper relationships with visitors?