



# Engaging your Community: A Toolkit for Museums

2015



Adapted from:

Building Responsive Museums:  
A Discussion Framework



# ENGAGING YOUR COMMUNITY: A TOOLKIT FOR MUSEUMS

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# Overview

The Ontario Museum Association (OMA) believes that museums are a critical and necessary element in a healthy society, as one key vehicle through which an appreciation and understanding of our connections to natural and cultural history are formed.<sup>1</sup>

Building a relationship with, and in, our communities has become a high priority for museums. Operating in the public trust means almost every function undertaken by museums has relevance to the communities we serve. There is increasing pressure on museums from the public, from community stakeholders and from funders to develop a closer, more meaningful relationship within the community.

## **What is *Engaging your Community: A Toolkit for Museums*?**

*Engaging your Community: A Toolkit for Museums* is a process through which individual museums can work with their communities to assess their relevance and create a plan to deepen their relationship with the community, in turn increasing the sustainability of the museum.

It is intended to:

- Provide your museum with a process to deepen your understanding of what community engagement means to you;
- Examine, evaluate, and articulate your current relationship with and role in your community;
- Explore how community engagement can be part of planning and delivery, at all levels and in all aspects of the museum.

*Engaging your Community: A Toolkit for Museums* is not a strategic planning process; it is a community engagement and self-assessment process. It is a process that can inform the creation of a new strategic plan or the implementation of a current one.

## **Who is it for?**

*Engaging your Community Museums* is useful at any stage in a museum's development, whether you are considering starting a new museum in your community or your museum has been open to the public for many years. The *Engaging your Community* toolkit can help staff (paid and volunteer), boards, advisory boards, and communities to examine their perceptions, their involvement and their experience with the museum.

In addition to having a dedicated team at the museum to champion this process and commit to following through with the identified priorities, it is important to bring a diversity of participants into this process. This will not only result in a wider scope of perspectives, increased knowledge, and reveal further opportunities, but will ease your progress when it comes time to translate your ideas into actions.

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<sup>1</sup> Ontario Museum Association. *Reinforcing Relevance: The Strategic Plan of the OMA, 2010-2015. Summary Version*. Ontario Museum Association website. PDF file.

## Why use *Engaging your Community: A Toolkit for Museums?*

Because:

- Community engagement is an objective in your strategic plan and you need help to translate that into action;
- You are starting a strategic planning process and you need to bring your museum's goals into alignment with the community's goals;
- You are experiencing one of the common triggers on the Possible Triggers for undertaking *Engaging your Community: A Toolkit for Museums*
- You believe that it is important for your museum to build sustainable, long term relationships with stakeholders and groups in your community;
- You want your museum to be connected and relevant;
- You believe that your museum should identify the needs of your community, and that ongoing community engagement should be embedded in the infrastructure of your organization;
- You want to be better able to assess your museum's impact on the community you serve;
- You want to achieve outcomes for your museum such as:
  - Museum staff and board are better informed about the museum's current role in your community.
  - Museum staff and board are able to articulate the museum's desired relevance and worth within the community.
  - Museum staff and board, together with community members, share goals and priorities, leading to programs and services that have meaning and value within your community.

## Are you ready?

From participants, the program requires:

- Board and staff leaders committed to being involved
- Commitment to community building across the organization (financial and operational)
- Time dedicated to think, discuss and plan
- Commitment from everyone involved to think critically about what the museum does and an open mind to see opportunities and new ways of operating

This process will stimulate discussion for your museum to explore how you define your community, how you currently engage with your community and how you can increase that engagement to benefit your community. Don't forget to take time in your discussions to celebrate the things you are doing well. The goal here is to build on strengths and improve your weaknesses. Undertaking this process already demonstrates organizational maturity by coming together and thinking about what you do and why you do it. Bravo!

## The Process



*Engaging your Community: A Toolkit for Museums* follows a 6-step process that typically takes between 4-9 months to complete:

- 1 Assemble a Working Group**

Create a Working Group to lead and champion this process in your museum. Form a small group that represents several kinds of people involved in the museum, including staff, board members, and volunteers.
- 2 Find a Facilitator or Choose a Team Leader**

The facilitator plays a vital role in this process by ensuring equal participation, helping your group stay focused to allow for productive discussion, ensuring action items are documented, and providing clarity to the process and next steps.
- 3 Working Group Orientation**

Orient your Working Group to the purpose in undertaking the process. What do you hope to discover or do through this process and how will it inform your work? Schedule your Self-Assessment, Community Consultation and other meetings.
- 4 Group Self-Assessment**

Organize an internal self-assessment session for your Working Group as well as other staff, board, and volunteers. This session will help you to find a starting point of shared information and will include discussion on Mission and Planning, Audience and Community, Community Perception, Community Experience, and Community Involvement.
- 5 Community Consultation**

You have already gathered the impressions and feedback of the staff, board, and volunteers of your museum, and now it's time to hear from the community. The community consultation session is a time for aligning the museum's mission, programs and services with the community's objectives to achieve mutual goals. There are three different facilitation options available based on the number of participants, facilitator experience and community considerations.
- 6 Plan for the Future**

Compile the results of the community session and share them with internal and external stakeholders, and the community. Devise an action plan for moving the ideas forward to become reality.