

Making a Good First Impression

By Erin Bartlett, Western Historic Sites Coordinator, Ohio History Connection, Columbus

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You drive into your site every day. You pass buildings and the grounds as you walk across the parking lot and into the building. You've done it so many times that you know every part of your site...but do you really see it? How about your staff? Full-time, part-time, volunteer – you've trained them, but do you still take time to watch or listen to what they say? What about what's being said on phone messages, web pages, and social media? What a person hears and reads can determine whether or not they will decide to visit.

The impression your site makes on a potential or actual visitor is long lasting and far reaching. Word of mouth travels much faster when a negative impression has been made. As you prepare your sites for the busy 2015 season, it's a good time to think about good impressions. The rest of this article focuses on different aspects of first impressions from electronic messaging to buildings and grounds to appearance and body language. They are tips and reminders to keep in mind as you prepare for a season of new visitors.

Impression #1: While the Visitor is Still at Home

Although many people will stop at a site they pass because it sounds interesting or it catches their eye, the majority of people plan ahead and research sites to visit. People learn about sites through word of mouth, marketing such as lure cards and brochures at area convention and visitors' bureaus or hotels, the internet, and social media like Facebook and Twitter. It is important that all information is accurate. Make sure that your hours of operation, admission fees, phone numbers, and other information is up to date. Your information needs to be brief, but informative, exciting, and inviting. Pictures showing the visitor experience are a plus.



A smiling front line staff can help make the kind of first impressions on your visitors that inspires them to return. Photo courtesy of the Ohio History Connection.

Through social media, you can reach hundreds, or thousands, without spending your marketing budget. In this age of instant information, it's important to post frequently. Your site's pages will not appear high on the list of postings if the information does not change, or change frequently. If you're advertising an event, make sure the information is on social media with plenty of time to register if needed, and that you post reminders closer to the event. Upload posts during the event as well, and include pictures! Let people share in the experience. Some will see what they missed and keep it in mind for next time.

If people call your site with questions, what impression will they get from your voicemail or customer service representatives? If visitors reach your voicemail, the information must be accurate and brief. Few callers want to hear the entire list of upcoming events – just the next one. If they want directions, suggest they call back or direct them to your website. If you have a lot of information to share, perhaps you need a more sophisticated answering system with options, rather than one very long message.

If visitors reach a customer service representative, make sure they are knowledgeable about your site and can easily

answer questions about hours, admission, event details, directions, and other questions a potential guest may have about the area. They should be pleasant and happy while talking with the caller. If they don't know the answer, it's fine to say so, but take the caller's contact information and follow up with an answer.

Impression #2: The Approach – Driving In

The first on-site chance you have of making a good impression is the approach: what do your visitors see when they enter the site? Every employee should drive into your site each time as if it were their first time. What would you notice?

The following tips might seem intuitive, but can be easily overlooked because you see your site every day and it becomes invisible. It is not invisible to your visitors.

- Are the roads and driveways clear of trash, fallen branches, and leaves? In bad weather, are roads, parking lot, and sidewalks clear and salted?
- The welcome/ID sign at your entrance should be clean, easily read, and not faded. The sign posts should be painted and plumb (straight, and even). This also applies for on-site directional and wayfaring signage. They're not helpful if people can't read them.

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- Do your signs have accurate information? If hours or admission have changed, a handwritten correction taped over the sign is not the professional message we all want to convey.

- If your site has a post and rail fence, are all the rails in place? Are the posts plumb?

- Grounds should be mowed, leaves raked, and limbs and trash picked up. Line trimming (weed whacking) should be done along every sign, fence post, curb, and sidewalk. For an extra touch, edge your sidewalks and curbs once or twice a season.

- Make sure you're following proper flag protocol and treat all flags with respect. They should never be displayed faded, tattered, or torn. They should not remain wrapped around a pole after a windstorm. Visitors will even notice how you carry, raise, and lower a flag. For more information on flag protocol, visit <http://www.usflag.org/flagetiquette.html>. If you need a new flag, contact your local VFW; they will often supply United States flags.

- If you have outdoor lighting, is it all functioning properly?

- Your guests have parked and are walking to the door. Are the parking lots and sidewalks weed-free? After a long winter, people enjoy looking closely at flower beds. Have they been cleaned,

weeded, and dead-headed?

If you follow these tips, your visitors will be so impressed that they will be excited to walk inside and see what's in store for them!

Impression #3:

Face to Face

It takes just a quick glance for someone to evaluate you when you meet for the first time. In this short time, the other person forms an opinion about you based on your appearance, your body language, your demeanor, your mannerism, and how you are dressed.

Front desk or floor staff are often called your "front line staff." The definition of front line is "the most advanced, exposed, or conspicuous element in any activity or situation." They are the employees and volunteers who are in direct contact with the public. Making a great first impression is critical. Here are some tips to help you do just that:

- Be yourself. If you're calm and confident, you will put your guest at ease.

- Present yourself appropriately. You do not have to be "dressed to the nines," but your appearance should be clean and neat with well-groomed hair, neat makeup, and clean and dry clothes.

- If your site has a uniform, then there should be policies on how they are worn. Are the shirts always tucked in

or out? If you have a nametag, how is it to be worn? If you do not have uniform clothing, what are your policies? Are jeans permitted? Do you permit shirts or hats with sayings or non-site logos? Tennis shoes?

- Be careful of your body language. When greeting a visitor, be confident, stand tall, make eye contact, and smile.

- Small talk can go a long way. If time allows, get to know your visitors. Are they on vacation or just out for the day? Where are they from? How did they learn about your site? If you learn about a particular interest, guide them toward specific things at your site to look for or share information that may not be on an interpretive panel. Always be open to questions and feedback – both positive and negative.

- Be positive, courteous, and attentive. Good manners and polite behavior make for a good impression. You should not be talking on your cell phone, to another staff person, reading, or even working on that project that you know has a deadline. Be present – be there with, and for, your guest.

Creating good impressions with your visitors leads to a more successful experience for everyone, and can lead to the holy grail of museum visitors – the repeat guest. ■