

How Tech Can Make Life Easier at a Small Museum

Terrie Puckett, OLHA Region 8 Representative and Director, Grailville

Let me start by saying I am NOT a techie. I have a 4-year-old smartphone and currently it has a cracked screen. So don't skip past this article because you aren't comfortable dealing with technology. In fact, you are just the person who should read further, because I am here to give you some basic information on the kinds of technology that can help you manage your society, organization or site.

Why use technology? Well if you are an all-volunteer organization, or one with very limited staff, you are always trying to do fifty thousand things at once. Wisely chosen technology can help manage day-to-day operations, streamline tasks, save money, and save time.

Sometimes our board members argue against investing in increased tech use because of initial costs. Well the good news is, you have access to many programs and software through TechSoup at greatly reduced costs, plus there is a wealth of free applications. Do not let nominal costs stop you from investing in the future of your organization. In addition, the cost associated with snail mail alone is exorbitant.

You might also hear the argument that "our members are older and do not use technology." The reality is, those folks who do not use ANY electronic communications whatsoever are aging out and you need to start building for the future—even as you tend to this dedicated population. The biggest question we face these days institutionally is "how do we connect with new members/volunteers/visitors?" The answer is: communicate with them the way they communicate... and that is not through snail mail.

Websites these days are a good way

to share static information, photos, and links to other resources. Key to note: many people access websites on smartphones or tablets instead of desktops, so it is important that your website is mobile-friendly. A lot of smaller organizations have gone completely away from websites in favor of only using Facebook. I recommend keeping simple website set up so important information (hours, address, directions, etc.) is easily available to non-Facebook users. If you choose to keep a website, make sure you review it at least quarterly to keep information fresh, make sure it is easy to read and navigate and do NOT use it as a place for lengthy bits of content.

Websites provide 1-way communication (you to them); Facebook allows for 2-way communication. This creates community beyond your physical structure. Facebook is commonly used today and it is free. Many organizations fall into the trap of using a summer intern or excited volunteer to set up a bunch of social media accounts and get them active but then, alas the interns go back to school or your volunteer goes away. Your audience is fickle, they have limited time, attention and dollars and you will lose any inroads made if you go inactive. So a word of warning: do not go social media crazy. Know your goals, know your target, start small and keep what you have active.

Email is still very useful especially if you use a program like ConstantContact or Mail Chimp. These programs allow you to target your message to specific groups, interface with your database, track response and open rates and even see which links or articles get the most traffic via click through rates. Important to note, often programs like these have

a basic membership level which is free up to a set number of contacts saved.

In addition to communication tools, there are programs to assist in the management of administrative tasks. If you have not invested in an all-inclusive database, I recommend researching whether to add one. This can be a major investment, so be sure to calculate the cost/benefit analysis before jumping in. Many museums use PastPerfect, but there are others available. Having an all-inclusive database enables your organization to tie records together in one place that is searchable and therefore USABLE across many fields. If you invest in a database, make sure you budget for an investment in training too. If you don't know how to use it you have just wasted time and dollars.

I have volunteered with small organizations that still track revenue and expenses in a handwritten ledger. That is fine for small institutions; however, migrating to an accounting software like Quickbooks is advisable. With accounting software you can track how dollars are spent and map revenue streams across time. Trends are important when considering the future health of your institution. It is especially helpful when applying for grants to be able to pull and show historic data. In addition, using software keeps the accounts clear by incorporating explanatory notes and eliminating handwriting errors. These are especially important if your bookkeeper or treasurer changes relatively often.

Ultimately, the technology you incorporate should benefit your organization by saving resources and supporting future growth. Choose wisely, invest in training, and the initial costs will pay off. ■