

Is your organization a good neighbor?



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Everyone from Mother Theresa to Benjamin Franklin have encouraged us to be good to our neighbors, but what does that mean for a local history organization? While community engagement is not necessarily a new concept for some institutions, (corporations, hospitals and universities) it is still gaining traction in the history and museum community. Community Engagement is broadly defined as organizations connecting with the intent to learn from and collaborate with one another. When properly implemented, community engagement can expand an organization's audience, catalyze new ideas and fundamentally redefine how historical societies and museums serve their local communities.

In 2014, the Ohio History Connection updated our core values (along with the name of the organization) to include inclusivity alongside authenticity, relevance, stewardship and working together. We did this because we, as an organization, knew that it was our mission to preserve and tell the stories of all Ohioans, not just those with whom we traditionally partner. We are now working to engage with those Ohioans whose past is as much a part of Ohio's history as any other, but hasn't been collected in a meaningful way for a myriad of reasons. We live in a state with a rich and ever-evolving people and history. Engaging with our local communities is the best way to uncover and tap into those stories, neighbor-to-neighbor. When done with sincerity and an open mind, it is massively rewarding work.

The good news is that community engagement does not require huge sums of capital or space to be effective. Some of the best community organizing originates from a home or coffee shop. What meaningful community engagement does require though, is time. If you are willing to put in the time to connect with your community's families, neighborhoods and other institutions you will not only better inform your collection, but you will be creating new audiences and friends of your institution.

Taking the time to visit your local civic associations, churches, community and recreation centers, schools and social groups can lead to unexpected growth and new ideas that can only be generated by the mixing of two different agendas, ethnicities or socio-economic backgrounds. Go meet your neighbors with open minds, hearts and ears to learn how you are seen (or not seen) in your community. You will find that not only is it free marketing and goodwill building, but that when you partner with outside groups you can open up an entirely new role for your organization as a community anchor.

Remember that this sort of outreach and connection with those in your area relies on trust. Meaningful connection, understanding, ideas and partnerships can only develop through sustained engagement. While going to a meeting once to introduce your organization is better than not at all, community engagement and inclusivity must be committed to as full-time ideals, rather than a one off touch-point or program. Ohioans have a keen eye for insincerity (conditioned from years of politicians making promises in exchange for votes). If your organization says it will come to a meeting ask if you can bring a dessert, go early to introduce yourself to those at the meeting and stay to hear what others have to say, even if it may not seem to be entirely pertinent to your organization. It shows that you are willing to put in the time and effort to learn about those you want to work with and aren't there simply to advance your own agenda, only ask for something, or "check the box" so you can say your organization is present in the community. Not to mention, listening is the best way to discover community-based needs or challenges that your organization is uniquely able to address.

Connecting with the myriad of groups and people that make up the fabric of your neighborhood is the most meaningful way to serve your mission. All while increasing your network, creating opportunities for new learning and earning some free good will. Take the time to go to your community; don't wait for them to find you. It's what good neighbors do. ■