



Relevance

Relevance: Is Not a Dirty Word

This session is intended for executive directors bringing their history museums forward as a crucial community resource in a STEM-focused world. We will look at big-picture issues (physical space, collections, content, funding, members, volunteers) and how they are driven by relevance perceived and real.

QUESTIONS

- What comes to mind when you hear the word relevance in context of our historical missions?
- What is biggest relevance issue at your institution?
- What were you hoping this session would cover?



Relevance is HUGE

- Complicated questions often don't have simple answers.
- Too big to cover topic in any real depth in 50 minutes, or even a day.
- Takes more than just conversation, because “Relevance” is individualized to each institution and community.
- Patience and humility—this is about turning the gigantic ship before/even as it hits the ice berg
- We will do our best to begin the conversation today.

DEFINE: Relevance

- the quality or state of being closely connected or appropriate
- relation to the matter at hand
- practical and especially social applicability : PERTINENCE giving *relevance* to college courses
- having significant and DEMONSTRABLE bearing on the matter at hand (relevant)

Case Studies

- **Space:**
 - Building firmly one time period
 - Building required to be one thing
 - Building is multi-use
- **Collection:**
 - Collection limited to specific era/people
- **Content:**
 - Content limited to specific era/viewpoint/people

Barriers

- Stakeholders (Board, Staff, Funders, etc.)
- Competing visions/missions
- Lack of key information
- Physical limitations
- Money
- Time



Imperative—Global Barriers

- Loss of market share due to focus on STEM by schools
- Pushback on “saving OUR history” vs. sharing unheard viewpoints
- Greying of stakeholders without new interest
- Change in how the next generations think/act
- Belief that public institutions should be neutral (article in Cincinnati Enquirer this week)
- Belief that public institutions should be all things to all people

Starting from zero

- Barriers often mean working around others or providing early “wins” that get others on board with a project.
- Start small to get folks on board and then dig deeper.
- Test out ideas/theories without major investment (lesson from tech world—learn to “fail interestingly”—Johansen (The New Leadership Literacies))
- Create real—not artificial—pathways to bring in new voices

Fast “Wins” to get you started

- These would fall under Simon’s concept of changing the room, not building new doors. Building new doors is the long term possibility but has to be based on true effort in understanding your mission, community and future.
- Fast wins can empower institutions to get the funding they need or quickly change a public narrative. The long game is making real change that solidifies your standing in your community.

Fast and Easy—Space

- Are you open to the public when the public is available?
- Are you locked into a specific course, topic, narrative based on your space? Perceived or contractual?
- What physical constraints have you hemmed-in and is there a way to turn these to a strength rather than the space you avoid?
- If you have seen it once is there a reason to ever come back?

Fast and Easy—Space 2

- Look at your policies and procedures, contracts and obligations, to determine the most basic “letter of the law” and find a way to stretch beyond.
- That corner you never use because the museum flow passes it over is sometimes the best place to do something outside the norm for your institution. Reading nook, breastfeeding room, database research station.
- Adding audio tours to your grounds might be a way to capture people that are on your grounds when you are closed.
- Take an online poll asking what memories people have or things they think are special about your site. Use the same platform to start a discussion about possible changes and see what gets people excited or upset. (be very non-committal)

Fast and Easy—Collections

- Review what you have collected
- What are the parameters of collection policy? WHY those parameters? Are they arbitrary? What do you need to start collecting NOW for the future? What have you already missed?
- What does your collection say about your values? The values of your community? Does your collection TRULY reflect your mission?
- Are you rigidly tied to telling the same stories with the same items?

Fast and Easy—Collections 2

- Create a staff/volunteer challenge: ask staff/volunteers to take an item from collections, share the current interpretation, and then brainstorm NEW stories that can be told from the same item
- Use these prompts on social media.
- Ask the community what X MEANS to them? Use their answers in modified interpretation
- Invite community to “help fill the gaps”
- We tend use same items over and over: what is in the collections unused because it didn’t really “fit” the story you thought you needed to tell? Revisit those items
- Use your collection policy to start identifying items to deaccession

Fast and Easy--Content

- What are your main content “lines/groups”
- Who’s stories are being told?
- Who’s stories are missing?
- WHY are they missing
- Are these individuals? Groups of people? Events?
- How does content connect OUT/IN with the larger story
- How does content tie in to the present

Fast and Easy—Content 2

- Re-print/add labels with fuller story
- Ask questions/have prompts within the space
- Create weekly interpretation “challenge” to keep staff/volunteers always thinking about the “why this is important” ask: who can connect one of our stories with something that has happened in the world in the last 7 days?
- Use these to look for trends vs one offs that can be used in interpretation
- Use these connections in social media to raise awareness of your content/facility

Work groups

- Take assigned case study
- Discuss facets of it
- How to pivot
- Challenges/barriers
- What are the easy wins to get it started
- Bring back to group

Recap/Challenge

- Work with staff or volunteers to set some bold goals and plan small wins in the meantime.
- Take the idea of relevance as a challenge for your board, and diversity to your steering/governance committee.
- Continue this conversation with your friends in the field.

Q&A

- Resources

