

In Tough Economic Times, Networking Provides Great Benefits

by Stephanie Weaver

In August 1998 I faxed colleagues at San Diego museums, asking if they'd meet at a restaurant to talk about museum visitor studies. Seven of us met for dinner, swapped stories, and learned more about each other's museums. Since then, we've met regularly, created a steering committee, gained a website, and have over 200 people on our email list. Here's how and why we did it, and why you might want to create your own museum networking group. Networking gains importance with the economic challenges facing everyone.

Logistics and history:

I had been involved in three museum groups in Chicago. Having valued getting to know other museum professionals and the chance to get out and see exhibits, I was looking for something similar in San Diego. There were two existing groups here when I arrived, the Balboa Park Educators' Council and the San Diego Museum Council. Each group was excellent, and had a specific focus that wasn't quite what I was looking for. So I decided to set up a dinner meeting to gauge interest in a group focused on evaluation.

At first, we tended to attract educators and exhibit developers, but over time drew in designers, marketers, interpretive specialists, and consultants. We had 25-30 members for the first couple of years, until a super-connected state parks interpreter named Karen Beery joined the group. As Karen began spreading the word, we grew exponentially.

We've nearly always had our meetings at museums to evaluate or review exhibits. Sometimes we've looked at new exhibits—or ones in development—and offered our feedback. Occasionally we've hosted special guest speakers or promoted local workshops (web site usability, interpretive writing, visitor experience) of interest.

Initially we met fairly frequently, once a month throughout the school year with the summer off. We soon found that we had lower attendance when we met monthly, as people's schedules were simply too busy. We did a short survey two years ago (using Zoomerang), and now have a set schedule of bi-monthly meetings beginning in September. We sometimes add social events on the off months (a Holiday Candlelight Tours at Old Town San

Diego State Historic Park, seeing Night at the Museum when it opened), but have found that five meetings per year is enough to have solid attendance and keep group momentum without getting burned out. We have met at museums focused natural history, art, anthropology, and archeology as well as state parks, the zoo, the aquarium, botanical garden, and Sea World. Institutional involvement is totally dependent on staff interest, and ebbs and flows with staff changes. We set up a diverse program for the year, and a mix between exhibit reviews and evaluation discussions.

We've taken three field trips—out to Anza-Borrego desert to see their new visitor center, and up to Los Angeles to attend MESC events. MESC (Museum Educators of



Some of our most valuable networking happens after the meetings end, when we adjourn for happy hour.

Southern California) is a nonprofit, now more than thirty years old, hosting a daylong institute and special speakers. It's a great example of a successful formalized museum networking group. We have chosen to stay simple, with just an email list, no dues, and a steering committee to help plan the meetings. This is a structure similar to the Chicago Museum Exhibitors Group (CMEG). Exhibit developer Barbara Becker manages their email list. CMEG charges \$7 per quarterly meeting. All funds go directly to the hosting museum, to cover the costs of the snail mail invite (300+) and refreshments.

Impacts of the group:

For Greta Brunschwyler, now Vice President of Programs

continued on page 19...

...continued from page 18

In Tough Economic Times, Networking Provides Great Benefits

at the High Desert Museum in Oregon, our group was a chance to meet with like-minded people and talk about evaluation, at the time relatively new to her. It was "exciting to see people engaging in that line of thought. The synergy of the group amped up my interest in evaluation and my further study of it," in some ways providing a mini-conference experience at no cost and without leaving town. Increasing professional development opportunities at no cost to staff is even more valuable now than when we began.

Despite being based in Chicago, museum evaluator Beverly Serrell has utilized the group several times over the years, to test a theory for an article, to test her Framework for Judging Excellence (the subject of her latest book), and to recruit data collectors for a study of the traveling exhibition Memory.

Brian Cahill-an interpreter with California State Parks out in the desert-volunteered as a data collector for the chance to work with Beverly Serrell. He valued the group for the feeling of connection-being two hours east of San Diego-and also for the many resources it provided: books, fabricators, and other professionals to query. He found it most valuable when people shared their problems during meetings, as it was "oddly comforting to hear how other people overcame their challenges."

Kathleen Hamilton, former Director of Education for the San Diego Museum of Man found the group "definitely helped us get grants. We would mention it in grant proposals as a way we were both educating ourselves about



The San Diego Museum of Man hosted SDEEG's 2nd Vendors Showcase in March.

evaluation and collaborating with other museum professionals. It also satisfies the best practices defined by Excellence in Equity, which I always appreciated for our museum."

New museum professionals have also utilized the group to find jobs and make connections. Megg Sohn, now the group's e-vite designer and webmaster, learned about the group through an informational interview with museum designer David Krimmel. She's found it "critical for my professional development, providing a hands-on conversation. I can hear from all types of professionals at one meeting, and I draw from that experience now when designing museum exhibits." Megg was the co-organizer for our first-ever Museum Vendors' Showcase, a mini-exhibit hall that drew a dozen vendors and nearly 60 people. We recently repeated the event, adding new vendors and drawing additional attendees.

Groups like ours raise awareness of best practices, and good meetings provide the benefits of attending a conference without leaving town. You can also find museum jobs or employees (we send around all job postings to our email list for free), as well as swap spare exhibit materials like cases. This keeps items out of the landfill and helps out small museums with limited budgets.

How to start your own group:

Begin with a specific focus, whether that's exhibits, education, marketing, or evaluation. Set a realistic schedule; each meeting needs an agenda and a strong facilitator to work. Create a small group who will act as the steering committee, choosing venues or topics and helping with logistics and hosting. Create a structure for the exhibit review, which can be as simple as four questions to consider while walking through. Otherwise, as several people noted, meetings can feel like "brag sessions" that aren't helpful as professional development opportunities.

You need one person who keeps your membership list updated. At least one email address bounces with each mailing, so this is a task that takes some time and dedication. We use a reasonably priced bulk mail program (Max Bulk Mailer-\$50) to send out notices; it sends each one out individually so we don't look like spammers to museum firewalls. We send out a welcome email whenever someone joins, and ask them to add our two key email addresses to their whitelist or address book, so our emails

continued on page 20...

...continued from page 19

In Tough Economic Times, Networking Provides Great Benefits

come through without a problem. We try to limit the number of emails we send out, grouping announcements together.

We produce an annual meeting list with dates, times (generally 3:30-5:30 pm), and locations, and choose a post-meeting happy hour location nearby. This allows us to continue the discussion informally while socializing with colleagues who have become friends. While not necessary, a listserv or blog is also a great way to keep members updated. And, we always take the summer off, so we can begin fresh in the fall.

Conclusion:

The seven of us who sat down to dinner ten years ago never dreamed that this group would have offered us so much. Those who volunteer our time to keep the group going enjoy the synergy it provides, as well as the connections it makes in our museum community. I'd like to thank the Steering Committee members, past and present for their time and effort in achieving this milestone: Karen Beery, Jeri Deneen, Erica Kelly, David Krimmel (our new Chair), Julie Lawrence, Rebecca Lawrence, and Megg Sohn. Feel free to send us questions if we can help you start your own group. Visit our website: <http://web.mac.com/meggs23/iWeb/SDEEG/SDEEG.html>

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A Few Useful Resources...

Books

Grace, Kay Sprinkle. *Beyond fund raising: New Strategies for Nonprofit Innovation and Investment*. New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1997.

Hopkins, Karen Brooks, and Carolyn Stolper Friedman. *Successful fund raising for Arts and Cultural Organizations*. 2nd ed. Phoenix, AZ: The Oryx Press, 1997.

Klein, Kim. *Fundrasining in Times of Crisis*. San Francisco and New York: Jossey-Bass and John Wiley, Inc. 2004.

Kotler, Neil and Philip Kotler. *Museum Strategy and Marketing: Designing Missions, Building Audiences, Generating Revenue and Resources*. San Francisco and New York: Jossey-Bass and John Wiley, Inc., 1998.

Sturtevant, William T. *The Artful Journey: Cultivating and Soliciting the Major Gift*. Chicago: Bonus Books, Inc., 1997.

Tempel, Eugene R., ed. *Hank Rosso's Achieving Excellence in Fund Raising*, 2nd ed. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2003.

Wagner, Lilya. *Careers in fund raising*. San Francisco, CA, Jossey-Bass, 2001.

Wagner, Lilya. *Leading Up: Transformational Leadership for fund raisers*. San Francisco, CA, Jossey-Bass, 2005.

On-line Papers

Anderson, Maxwell, "Measuring Success in Art Museums." Getty Leadership Institute 2004 www.getty.edu/leadership/complete_leader/downloads/metrics.pdf

Bell, Jeanne, Richard Moyers, and Timothy Wolfred. "Daring to Lead 2006: A National Study of Nonprofit Executive Leadership." A joint Project of CompassPoint Nonprofit Services and The Meyer Foundation. http://www.meyerfoundation.org/info-url_nocat4241/info-url_nocat_show.htm?doc_id=360663.

Havens, John J. and Paul G. Schervish. "Why the \$41 Trillion Wealth Transfer Estimate Is Still Valid: A Review of Challenges and Questions." *The Journal of Gift Planning* January 2003. [research/swri/features/wealth/](http://www.swri.org/features/wealth/).

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http://www.irvine.org/assets/pdf/pubs/arts/Critical_Issues_Arts.pdf.