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Chapter 1: Membership, Development & Participation Functions

In her introduction, Gail Lord has examined the relationship of membership and development to other management functions and to the broad mission of the museum. Now we can look in detail at the way in which membership and development activities are performed. In the process we will discover that participation is a silent but equal partner in the membership and development equation. Many of the most demanding functional requirements of membership and development systems derive from the need of management to increase client participation, and to benefit from that increase both in greater member activity and in growing degrees of client commitment. As a consequence, this report uses the formulation "membership, development & participation systems" rather than speaking solely of membership and development.

Acquiring Members

The focus of the activity of most museum membership and development offices is on identifying, enlisting, and retaining members from the potential membership pool. Members are those clients who contribute a fixed sum annually in return for the specific benefits of pre-established membership categories. It is critical to understand that members, in contrast to other clients, such as donors, volunteers, and visitors (who may also be members) are in effect making a specific contract for services in making their annual donation to the organization, and that they expect to obtain benefits in return and can usually be re-enlisted if they believe they have received such benefits.

Identifying target members is the first step in enlisting continued support. Defining the communities which the institution seeks to serve is a critical step in establishing a membership and development program. Some of these are communities defined by proximity to the museum. There are also overlapping communities of academics and educators from a broader catchment area. There are communities of those who create the artifacts in the museum which stretch beyond even those expanded boundaries. And there are researchers, both actual and potential, around the world. Each community has its own reasons to become involved and to contribute, and each has its expectations from membership.

Once the membership goals for each community are defined, the organization must both identify and recruit these members. Subsequently it must satisfy them, and remind them of their satisfaction, so that they will both continue as members and increase their level of support and activity.

As a first step, an information system can help define who already belongs to the community of the institution and how the potential for membership support from this community can best be realized. An information system that enables a museum to record its recruitment goals in demographic terms can subsequently report measures of success that will assist management in tuning future membership drives. An information system that

has statistical analysis facilities adequate to profile existing members will help refine membership goals and identify giving patterns that can be used to establish realistic solicitation objectives. And an information system that can compare purchased lists to current member and prospect lists will both expand the scope of recruitment efforts at a reduced cost, and provide a preliminary evaluation of the potential of purchased lists. Finally, an information system that has extensible facilities for interest definition of its clients and for maintaining records of how clients actually participated in the programs of the organization can be used to remind members of their involvement (and satisfaction).

The next step in establishing a membership and development program is to capture information on visitors to the museum in order to help define the kinds of communities the museum already attracts but does not retain as supporters. Clients who are already participating in programs of the museum but whose names are not yet known to museum development staff are both a potential pool of members and the best source of information on what membership benefits appeal to which categories of members. Analysis of the difference between the profile of the current membership and visitorship and that of the potential community can help target enrollment efforts. Learning what visitors and members with different profiles value about the experience can help sell the museum to similar constituents. An information system that can assist the museum to acquire visitor profile information will have a long-term value in any membership and development program. Systems may provide a convenient data entry screen for recording of visitor information by staff interviewers or ticket sellers at the door, or interactive terminals can ask visitors directly about their experiences and enhance their visits with answers to in-depth questions and personalized souvenirs, while recording their names and addresses for future solicitations.

The third step in the membership recruitment process is to identify sources of information on those in communities which the museum seeks to serve who may not yet have had interaction with the museum, but who are prospects for membership and support based on their demographic characteristics. Online marketing databases, targeted mailing and telephone lists, and analyzed census data will be required to launch a successful campaign to reach these populations. An information system that enables the museum to gain direct access to demographic and marketing data and supports the reprocessing of lists will help build a potential membership database more quickly and help exploit the information it contains more fully than a system that is unable to communicate with remote databases or import external data.

Soliciting potential members will work best if the reasons for the contact and the specific pitch to be delivered are adjusted for each potential client and are available to solicitors. This requires not only that the museum determine the characteristics of different potential constituents that might lead them to become or remain members, but that it employ an information system that displays these talking points for the benefit of those involved in telephone solicitation. A similar capability uses the profile data to construct a targeted letter (bringing previously written boiler plate text together), if the museum is employing a mail solicitation. The ability to store boiler plate paragraphs and talking points,

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and to display (or appropriately print) these when a potential patron record is retrieved are essential functions of a good membership and development information system.

In order for membership recruitment efforts to improve, it is essential that the museum establish methods to monitor how different lists, different approaches, and different solicitors are working, and to use results of solicitation monitoring to adjust new approaches. Information systems with sophisticated and flexible reporting capabilities, which keep the data on each contact in a totally disaggregated fashion, can be used to generate reports that will make such fine tuning possible.

Every year members must be "re-acquired", which presents the museum with both the opportunity to "grow" its membership by nurturing its members to assume larger and larger shares in the institution, and with the risk of losing its membership. Unplanned requests to increase the level of subscription will not produce the best result and may even turn members off. Retaining information about previous contacts, especially about approaches (times of day, types of solicitations) specifically enjoined, would reduce risks. If the request to increase the level of support is favorably received, the solicitor needs to have the benefits of each increase in level clearly at hand, along with the target increase level determined by previous research, in order to provide convincing arguments for increases to the member. Imagine what great assistance in re-enlisting members could be provided by an information system that stores the benefits of each level of membership, and displays these to the solicitor in the order of importance which that member has previously indicated in surveys, prior solicitations, or through their participation.

As any development office knows, different levels of support require different information and levels of effort. Regular individual and family memberships are the measure of how widely successful the repository is and of its appreciation by the community as a whole, but special categories of patrons and sponsoring membership often make the difference between continued existence and the ability to deliver exceptional programs. Major donors may expect the repository staff to know their interests, wishes and even foibles, and even if they are not fussy, they deserve to be catered to as befits the magnitude of their support. One of the issues in development activity is how great a return, both financial and intangible, can be acquired for what level of effort. An information system that systematically tracks efforts made to recruit and retain members at different levels will help the museum invest its energies wisely. At the same time, an information system that helps members feel that they are getting the amount of attention that their level of membership deserves, or more than they deserve if possible, will reduce the effort and increase the ability of the museum to keep its members.

Acquiring Support Beyond Membership

Much of the financial support for the programs of the museum comes from sources other than membership. Some institutions are fortunate enough to receive regular base-level support from a parent organization, such as a university, corporate sponsor or government. Nurturing this support is, of course, critical to the survival of these organizations, but

will not be discussed here. Most cultural repositories in the United States depend primarily upon their endowment, programmatic grants and on-going fund raising, if not for their survival, at least for their excellence.

Fund raising, whether for immediate needs or for endowment, is typically accomplished through a combination of continuing efforts and intensive campaigns. While membership and development activity takes place year around, significant influxes of funds and members depend upon a number of special efforts each year. Membership campaigns, parties, auctions, telethons and other fund raising events use large numbers of volunteers, and require substantial planning and considerable follow through. They also involve the strategic handling of a great deal of detailed information about the fund raising activity itself, about prospects and donors, and about the uses of funds.

Every fund raising activity has specific income producing objectives. Long and complex activities may have multiple phases or increments which have discrete objectives. Membership and development information systems should assist staff in monitoring the progress of each activity with respect to its objectives. Many fund raising activities are large, complex, undertakings. In addition, they are discontinuous activities, often conducted only once in a year. They require substantial up front planning that can be greatly assisted by an information system that retains checklists of steps and reminds staff in advance of deadlines of tasks that need to be completed. An information system that manages the assignment of teams of volunteers and tracks the anticipated results from each team on an on-going basis can avert nasty surprises and help staff keep their focus on the big picture without fear of the details being lost. In these respects, good project management and monitoring tools built in to the development information system are an essential component of fund raising.

The success of a fund raising activity depends upon the match that is made between the interests of prospective donors and the "pitch" they receive. The contents of the approach, the format of the approach, and (especially for substantial gifts) who makes the approach and its timing, all contribute to success. As indicated earlier, massaging target or prospect lists, and exploiting known information about present members and supporters and their interests is necessary but not sufficient. Tailoring the information "boiler plate" or the telephone solicitor's pitch is the next step. What information systems designers frequently do not realize is that repeat giving often depends on how the donor feels about their prior gift, so that an information system can greatly help future fund raising by notifying donors of the uses being made of their prior donations. Major donors to the general fund can be notified from time to time of activities that would likely not have been possible without their gifts, and donors to special funds should be informed every time the special fund is tapped.

Indeed, raising money to support specific programmatic objectives, such as an exhibit, conservation or the continued documentation of collections, imposes other requirements on membership and development information systems. The potential donors will often be corporate sponsors or foundations, so the information system will need to record at least the same knowledge of the interests of these prospects as it allows for individuals. In addi-

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tion, the requirements for making the approach for grants and the requirements for documenting the use of funds after they have been acquired, may be substantially more rigorous. While some of these needs will be met by accounting systems, actually maintaining the long-term relationship between the donors and the repository is an on-going concern of the development office and cannot be left simply to the regular bookkeeping function. Thus the development system will need to be able to track uses of funds for special grants.

Providing Services

Services of a typical museum include regular and special exhibits, walk-in museum shops and retail mail/phone order fulfillment, food services, and photographic reproduction. In addition, most museums provide scheduled access to curatorial knowledge for object identification and conservation advice, scheduled or screened access to library, archives and curatorial research facilities, and access by reservation to lectures, tours, film showings, special performances and special exhibits. Plus there are openings, fund raisers, behind the scenes viewings, and guided tours. Not surprisingly, most clients experience some difficulty simply keeping up with the range of services. Newsletters containing the full calendar, like advertisements in local newspapers, are not fully adequate. Individualized letters and invitations to a variety of events must, at a minimum, be generated by the information system. Individualized calendars should be considered a desirable option. Interfaces between the events database and push-button telephone information services should be explored by development office staff. Interfaces between the events database and on-site public information kiosks are also highly desirable, but although implementing these is likely to be the responsibility of another office.

The most visible service of the museum is exhibits, and it is exhibits that attract the largest number of new and casual clients. Development offices can invent many clever methods of identifying these visitors so that they can be added to a database for future contact; information systems must be designed to assist in the process. If the museum staff is recording the information, all that is required is a data entry screen, perhaps with machine-readable card input for capturing membership card data. To get non-member identification data at the parking lot or the front desk, the membership office may need to resort to gimmicks like a free parking permit or free passes for the next visit that will be mailed to the visitor. A different kind of gimmick, such as a drawing for an exhibition catalogue or gift certificate, or a notepad for visitor comments and requests for additional information or services, could get visitors to enter their own names and addresses if the information system was designed to be attractive and simple for them to use. Whatever methods are to be used, the information system should provide an easy and secure way to capture basic identifying information from prospects. This function needs to check for duplicate names and validate city, state, and zip code automatically.

Membership, development and participation systems should also help the museum to provide courses, lectures, tours and other events targeted to attract specific subsets of the constituency. Planning for these services needs to take into account visitors' expressed in-

terests and previous participation. Opportunities for member participation in the life of the museum need to be planned around what members find convenient or valuable. An information system that could help determine how the time, the venue, or the presentation of the event influenced turn out, would greatly assist in the planning process and in the subsequent advertisement of the function. A system with sophisticated statistical analysis features could also help determine whether the reputation of the speakers, the content of the lecture, the quality of the space, or the ancillary events proved most attractive, and whether knowing the event sponsors or the names of others planning to attend are important to prospective attendees.

The requirements for making small events work are not the same as those for mass affairs, but a good information system can be of substantial assistance in either case. Select events often require invitations addressed differently on the envelope and in the salutation. Small events such as dinners may require seating plans worked out with a knowledge of who has previously been seated next to whom. They can demand that the host be provided with biographical notes or reminders of events that will be of significance to the guests. Data on allergies, disabilities, and religious prohibitions may need to be forwarded to planners since it would prove embarrassing to the host if such restrictions were overlooked. All this requires an information system which allows detailed biographical data to be stored in a form sufficiently open-ended to account for many different kinds of facts. Making large events work usually requires some quite different tools. The information system may need to issue tickets and/or print name tags, but otherwise will require little information about individuals invited to attend. On the other hand, information about the clientele may be searched to identify those who might be most interested in attending. In addition, large events, like any large scale project, involve many steps, many staff and contractor tasks, and many opportunities to miss critical timing deadlines, and will benefit from the support of project management software.

Marketing and Promoting Services

Providing services implies sales, and selling is not a passive function. Like all selling activity, museum sales depend both on attractive content (programs and products) and marketing. Marketing consists of product packaging and presentation, and targeted promotion.

Marketing begins with the most basic museum service: membership. Membership in a museum is a contract for services between the museum and its supporters. The services provided may be more or less tangible, and the "deal" may be more or less comparable to what the member could get on the open market, but each member must in some way feel that he or she is receiving a service in return for membership and that the service being provided is worth the fee being charged. Marketing this service requires information systems that enable sales staff to correlate features of the membership benefits options with information the database has on clients.

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In practice, the number of services provided by a museum will exceed the number of membership categories since several benefits will typically be provided even with the base level of membership. Because individuals (and corporate members) will each value these benefits differently, the value they place upon each benefit is important information to a marketing function. An estimate of the relative value assigned by a member to a service can be gained by tracking the advantage that member takes of a particular service. Further hints can be discovered in interviews for renewals, or conversations surrounding making reservations for events, or in other relatively non-obtrusive ways. An information system that makes it easy to record the explicitly articulated value members see in benefits will help to establish appropriate levels of benefits as well as to re-enlist members. A system that documents member participation in events (an indication of implicit value) will also pay for itself. Imagine how useful it would be to know which members received discounts at the museum shop equal or greater than the cost of their membership for the year. Such information could both help to establish realistic benefit levels and assist in the re-enlistment of each member for whom this pattern prevailed. Those members who regularly partake in receptions or free lectures could also be reminded at an appropriate time. Potential members likely to make similar uses of services could be attracted by systems that used this data wisely.

Membership and development offices usually have little input to the content of programming, but those responsible for content would be smart to consider what data about client responses to their programs would be of value to them in planning future programs. Development staff in turn need more strategic data on programs and products. Both staffs will need to work together to develop "interest" codes that can be assigned to clients and to all programs and products. Such interest codes will need to be hierarchical with respect to subjects, but also need to capture preferences for types of activities or events. If the information system can accumulate interests based on client participation and on declared interests, such codes can play a significant role in packaging and presenting programs and marketing museum services.

Promotion of services costs a substantial amount of money, whether they are exhibits or museum shops. Mailings that now are sent to the general community could be targeted using demographic criteria if the information system supported importing such data. Mailings that currently are received by all members could similarly be sent only to subsets of clients who have previously attended certain types of functions. If the information about what appeals to which clients is kept and used, special mailings can be assembled that reflect each clients interests with little or no human intervention simply by combining the mail merge capabilities of word processing, with sophisticated desktop publishing systems and flexible mailing packages. Printed end products can have paragraphs arranged in different order for different clients or even have special text inserted.

Mailings compete with advertising (print and broadcast media), signage and other means of promotion. The way that attendees at events ultimately learned of the program needs to be monitored to identify the most effective means of promoting different types of activities. If their information systems permit recording and analyzing this data, member-

ship and development staff will use special coded return addresses, tear off coupons and other well known techniques to monitor the productivity of a variety of media employed in advertising campaigns.

The ability to follow-up on members who do participate in events, whether to thank them for coming or to remind them in a subsequent invitation that they came to a previous event, will make members feel personally wanted. Unfortunately, systems that can track participation without being more intrusive than is generally acceptable in a cultural repository require membership cards that are machine-readable (magnetic strip or bar-code), or ticketed events, except for those few events which are very small so that the guests are well known to the hosts or are announced at the door. Management will make a decision that will set a fundamental course for membership and development in determining whether to employ "intelligent" cards and ticketing.

Some services provided by museums are income producing even if they are provided to members as a benefit. In addition, they are often made available to non-members on a reimbursable basis. Because some such services and most products sold by the museum may be offered to anyone for a fee, the fee schedules associated with them can be quite complex. Variable pricing of events, including pricing by various discount levels, pricing by date and performance, pricing by seating choice and pricing with fixed discounts, quantity discounts, and total cost discounts is typically required. Usually products, such as those sold in museum shops, by mail order fulfillment or by slide and photo reproduction services, have less complex discounting structures, but here one needs to be able to add in a variety of taxes and handling fees. Although the membership, development and participation system need not serve as a point-of-sale cash register, it does need to be linked to sales functions to validate discounts and to record the ways members take advantage of museum services.

Collecting and Administering Income

Most gifts to museums are promised before they are received. Simply recording the parameters of a pledge presents challenges that many development information systems are unable to meet. Pledges may be made for any account or purpose and the gifts received in fulfillment of these pledges will need to be appropriately restricted. A single pledge may be divided between gifts to different accounts or purposes. Many pledges may be active for any one person or corporation at the same time. Pledges are usually paid in more than one installment and the number of installments as well as the dates on which payments are to be considered "due" are usually dictated by the donor, and the amounts to be paid in each installment need not be equal. Gifts received from individuals may trigger pledges (matching gift obligations) by employers.

Assuming the information system is able to record the variants in pledges adequately, it needs to help the membership and development offices capitalize on outstanding pledges. Museums generally do not treat pledges as receivables to be managed by the regular accounting office billing system even though invoices must be sent and "overdue notices" are

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frequently required. Membership and development offices feel that invoicing donors for the appropriate incremental portion of their gifts requires more judgment and finesse than is usually provided in billing systems. Policy decisions need to be made about how and whether to re-invoice, when to credit gifts made independently of pledge invoices against outstanding pledges, and how and when to write off pledges that it appears may not be honored. Each of these policies usually requires case by case judgments to be made by the development staff and the provision for such intervention must be reflected in the way that the information system processes pledges.

Supporters who have decided to give substantial donations to a repository need assistance in order to make their donations as effective as possible, and potential donors need to be shown the possible tax advantages of structuring gifts in particular ways. Planned giving programs provide this assistance with significant support from tax consequence analysis and amortization packages. Separate programs analyze the real costs of gifts of appreciated property, both real estate and stocks, and assess the real costs of giving when it is concentrated into one tax year or spread across many years. The management of gifts made under specialized tax circumstances is a highly specialized and exacting part of the development function. Assistance in keeping up with, and then properly executing, complex financial and legal transactions must be provided by systems designed to assist in administering gifts. These tools will be virtually essential for any development office interested in collecting large, multi-year, gifts from trusts, insurances or real estate sales.

Accepting gifts of property that will be accessioned into the collections is a separate problem for museums because even though these will be treated as accessions through a collections management system it is useful in order to have a full picture of the support provided by clients to record them in some fashion in the membership and development system. Links from the development information system to collections management are required to enforce terms for loans or use imposed by conditions of gift, or insurance requirements imposed by initial valuation. Links from the collections management system to the development information system will provide the ability to report to donors on exhibition, loan, research and conservation of their gifts, which will forge stronger bonds between the institution and its donors and could lead to further gifts.