



**Archives and Museum Informatics
Technical Report**

ISSN 1042-1459

No. 11

**Functional Requirements for
Membership, Development & Participation
Systems**

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Originally Archives and Museum Informatics
Technical Report Vol.3 No.3

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Functional Requirements for Membership, Development & Participation Systems

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Introduction: The Role of Membership & Development in Museums

"Our members are important to us!"

That's the message delivered by museum membership brochures, internal signage and countless special events. And it's true. Members are becoming more and more important to museums. What was once a marginal, mainly social group of museum supporters is becoming a mass movement. Large scale membership programs involve upscaled marketing, communications and service delivery-- all of which require automated data management. Hence this book. But before we examine membership and development systems, it's worth understanding just why members are so important to museums. There are six main reasons (not in order of priority):

- Development
- Marketing
- Advocacy
- Outreach
- Volunteers
- Participation

Development

Membership and development are so closely linked that many membership programs form part of the museum's development department. The membership program is seen as the basis of the museum's development or fundraising strategy. Some membership programs are intended to generate a surplus and succeed in doing so. A 1989 survey of museum membership programs* found that 7 of 9 science museums generated a surplus from their membership programs, one broke even and one required a small operating subsidy. The data also showed a wide range in membership size among those who made a "profit": from 1,500 memberships (estimated as 5,500 members or 2.3% of that museum's attendance) to 5,000 memberships (estimated as 87,000 members or 10.6% of that museum's attendance).

But the main role of membership in a museum's development program is to provide a base of people who are regular users of the museum who are most likely to donate to annual and special fundraising campaigns. The member's first donation may be made as part of the same check that pays for the membership-- and this fact must be recorded because it may be a significant indicator of a capability and desire to make further financial contribu-

*Survey conducted by LORD Cultural Resources Planning & Management Inc., 1989. I wish to acknowledge Ted Silberberg and Susan Dunlop who worked on this study and who contributed their knowledge and experience of membership to this introduction.

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tions. It is extremely important that the member data be cross-referenced with the donor database. When asking for a donation to the museum, it makes a difference if the solicitor knows how long an individual has been a member, his or her donation history and what activities or events he or she has attended in the last year.

From a development point of view, a large base of satisfied, renewing members is far more important than the "profitability" of the membership program itself. Similarly, an increasing intake of new members assures the future of the development program. A growing membership has become particularly relevant at a time when the success rate of direct mail campaigns is seen to be declining. Mailing lists are expensive to obtain, cull and use. The most likely market for museum support is the people visiting it-- particularly those who visit frequently.

A museum's visitor statistics will provide a good idea of the size of this market. For example, attendance at art museums tends to be based on a higher level of repeat attendance than other types of museums. This means that potential for membership in art museums is stronger than for museums which (although they may have high tourist and school attendance) have fewer repeat visits because they are perceived by the immediate community as unchanging. That is why it is not unusual for an art museum that receives 400,000 visits per year to have 21,000 memberships, while elsewhere in the same city a multi-disciplinary museum with a similar membership program has fewer memberships-- with two and a half times more visitors.

The capability of the development department to make contact with frequent visitors is important. This can be accomplished in a number of ways:

- obtaining addresses and phone numbers through pre-registered or ticketed events;
- obtaining addresses and phone numbers through on-site contests;
- inviting visitors to sign on to a free mailing list;
- requesting that members and supporters provide names and address of people they think would be interested in joining or in being on the museum's mailing list;
- through membership.

Of all these methods, membership gained on site is undoubtedly the most effective. Museum membership renewal patterns show that people who themselves join are twice as likely to renew as those who received their membership as a gift. And people who joined during a museum visit are more likely to renew than those who joined as a result of a direct mail campaign.

Corporate membership programs can provide a similar basis for future corporate donations and sponsorship. Corporate membership can be the first step for small and medium-sized businesses in particular, which have not yet developed a policy for "cultural" donations.

Expanding membership through providing a quality museum experience, membership services and value for money is thus fundamental to a museum's development strategy.

Marketing

Although membership is yet another of the museum's programs marketed to target audiences, it is a program which also functions as an effective marketing tool for the museum. The best advertising is "word of mouth." Members are satisfied museum customers. The more they attend exhibitions, participate in events, and obtain value for money spent on their annual membership fee, the more they will talk about the museum.

The museum marketing department and the membership department need to work together. For example, if the major hotels in town are corporate members, the marketing department should make sure that all front desk staff-- especially the concierge-- have benefited from that membership so that they want to talk about it. Or, the marketing department may consider developing a special campaign aimed at encouraging local residents, especially members, to bring visiting friends and relatives to the museum.

Advocacy

Members are people who have "bought into" the museum as an organization. In some museums, the members have a direct voice in the organization by electing representatives to the Board of Trustees or to an advisory body. In most museums, members' influence is less direct, but their support is direct and measurable. Members are regularly informed, usually through a special newsletter, not only about museum events but about issues affecting the museum's future.

Members are a body of museum supporters to whom the Board and Director can appeal for moral as well as financial support. Members may be asked to call on legislators over issues, to sign petitions or to respond in other ways in matters of urgency. Normally, the Board and director need only point to a growing membership as an indication of public support for the institution. For politicians and corporations the membership figures may be more important indicators of museum support than attendance figures for the following reasons:

- membership is primarily local while visitors may include a large proportion of tourists and other visitors
- membership signifies support while attendance figures include schools and one-time visitors
- members can be contacted between visits; visitors cannot
- membership numbers respond directly to museum performance and service; visitor numbers are subject to many factors beyond the museum's control, such as tourism levels and school visit policies.

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Outreach

For museums and collecting institutions generally, the term "outreach" is used to refer to the process of attracting special populations to use the museum who would not normally do so. Since membership appeals to frequent visitors, it would seem to be an unlikely outreach program. However, museum membership can be an effective way of involving new and non-traditional groups in the museum. Whether these individuals will remain members will depend on whether the museum can actually meet their needs as promised. For example, a special exhibition about an ethnic minority presents an opportunity for recruitment of members from that minority group. The membership program then has the challenge of sustaining that commitment after the exhibition has closed or moved on to its next venue.

Corporate membership has the potential to involve new "non-traditional" members if it extends membership privileges (most importantly free admission) beyond the executive suite to clerical and line workers. The museum's outreach staff may wish to work with the membership department to try to achieve outreach goals in this way.

Some museums have developed membership packages for not-for-profit organizations such as tenants groups or anti-poverty organizations. This represents another way that membership can be used to extend the museum's reach to non-traditional audiences.

As with all other aspects of a membership program, the effectiveness of outreach must be monitored against goals and policy objectives. One advantage of membership programs is ease of evaluation: the use of different types of membership cards can be more easily monitored than can attendance.

Volunteers

For many museums, volunteering is a "privilege" of membership, that is, only members can be volunteers. In other museums, volunteering is seen as an aspect of the museum's public service role and the volunteer program is entirely separate from the membership program.

In both scenarios, the membership is a source of volunteers. It is therefore important that the museum's data management system be capable of cross-referencing volunteer rosters and membership files.

Two important areas of voluntary work which are almost always exclusively the preserve of members are the membership and development programs. A large membership program could not be managed cost-effectively solely by paid staff. The time required to provide most membership services, to organize social events, to staff the membership desk, to recruit new members and to obtain renewals is mainly contributed by member volunteer for two reasons:

- effectiveness-- a member is more credible in selling a new membership or a renewal than paid staff
- efficiency-- volunteers make it possible for membership programs to show a surplus or break even.

Participation

Museums continue to be relevant cultural institutions because they present the public with the opportunity for self-directed learning, and for contact with "real objects" with social, aesthetic and scientific meaning. These opportunities are available and accessible to anyone and everyone, usually at a modest cost, sometimes for free.

Museum membership represents an opportunity for the public to participate more frequently in what the museum has to offer at a lower per-visit cost. It offers the public a closer relationship with the museum than can be experienced during a casual visit.

Museum membership is positioned somewhere between holding a library card and being enrolled in an institution of higher learning. It is part of "life-long learning," but requires annual renewal. As museum membership is expanded beyond the traditional groups, "participation" may well emerge as the most significant and enduring product of membership programs.

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