

GUIDE TO MANAGING HISTORICAL SOCIETIES

Involving People

Visitors and accessibility

Visitors

Whether the society has a museum, research rooms or both or does not have a collection but conducts meetings, walks etc., members will be working with visitors to the group.

It is important that the experience that the visitor has when visiting the organisation is a positive one.

The best publicity for an organisation is word of mouth. If someone experiences good friendly service when looking for information or is made to feel welcome at an exhibition they will tell their friends about the organisation and will also possibly make a return visit. They may even decide to become members of the group.

Make visitors feel welcome. The aim of having an organisation open to the public should be to encourage visitors and to ensure that visitors have a valuable visiting experience.

Museums

Ensure that all staff members (volunteers) are trained to work with visitors. All front of house staff should be familiar with the building and exhibitions available to the public. They should be able to answer basic questions about the organisation and the exhibitions or know where to refer people to the information required. Some visitors will prefer to walk around the exhibitions in their own time while others may like a guide, if available, to show them around.

Pamphlets should be available for visitors entering the complex providing a guide about the organisation and the exhibitions, including temporary displays. Guides to the history of an area may also be available.

Research collections

Visitors to a research collection normally arrive with a specific question, possibly about a member of their family who lived in the area or about the area where they now live.

Listen carefully to the question and then use the resources of the organisation to see what material is available to satisfy the request. A general history of the area may be provided for the visitor to read while specific material is collected for their use. Sometimes material may be available from a variety of resources including books, photographs, vertical file material, newspapers and or maps. At other times a member of the organisation may have knowledge of use to the visitor. If the person is not at the organisation when the visitor arrives a note of the visitor's name, contact details and enquiry may be passed on the relevant person to follow up the enquiry. If

information is not available at the organisation suggestions may be made to another organisation or resource that may assist the visitor with the enquiry.

Keep a record of research enquiries and name plus contact details of the enquirer in case further information is found at another time. It would also be useful to note where information answering the query was located.

Sometimes visitors are prepared to share their reach material with the organisation adding additional resources to the collection.

Collecting visitor information

(The information in this section was originally published in *History Victoria e-news* no. 2, 2005 – <http://mc2.vicnet.net.au/home/rhsvstate/web/issue2b.html>.)

Data collected about visitors to a museum or society can provide useful information when planning exhibitions, applying for grants, determining areas where additional publicity may be required and deciding which groups should be targeted to increase visits to the organisation.

A record of visitor statistics should be kept for times when the organisation is normally open as well as for special group or individual visits during the week. The statistics should provide an accurate record of the use of the organisation to become an important tool when planning activities.

A number of organisations have a book signed by visitors providing their name, address, and comments. To be useful this must be signed by all visitors. A more detailed record can be a simple form filled in by a volunteer where details such as number of visitors in a group, sex and approximate age of visitors (guessed by the volunteer) are noted. The visitors can be asked to supply a postcode and how they heard about the organisation. A note can also be made of any additional comments made about the organisation including why they visited if it comes up in conversation.

A selection of information that can be analysed from the collection of suggested data on a form is listed below. (The examples refer to a museum but could also apply to a research collection)

Depending on the data collected, visitor statistics can provide information about:

- The number of people attending the museum
- The age groups of visitors attending
- The age groups of people not attending
- The sex of museum visitors
- Preference to visit the museum in a group or as individuals
- Where visitors live in relation to the museum
- The areas in a local government area / region from which people are not visiting the museum
- Percentage of museum visitors from the local government area
- How many tourists visit the museum
- If one time of the year more popular for visits than another
- The effectiveness of publicity in attracting visitors to the museum

- What form of publicity is most effective
- The effectiveness of signage in promoting the museum
- The effect of festivals and celebrations in promoting the collection
- The special features / services of the museum that attract visitors
- The needs of the community in exploring / understanding their local history

It is necessary to know who the target audience is when designing displays and publicising the museum. Decisions need to be made whether to design displays and publicity specifically for those who normally attend anyway or to target other groups to encourage museum attendance by a wider community.

Collecting visitor statistics, especially when collected over a number of years, also provides valuable data (especially if usage of the museum or services increases) to demonstrate the importance of the collection to prospective funding agencies (especially local councils). A report of the analysis of visitor statistics for a year or number of years can be an important management tool for an organisation.

Accessibility

All visitors should be able to view and use the collections in our museums and research centres.

People who visit museums and historical societies tend to be older and may have a disability restricting their ability to use stairs and manage other obstacles they may encounter when visiting an organisation. Strategies need to be put in place to ensure that, wherever possible, all visitors can have access to the facility.

Although many museums and historical societies are located in older, often historic, buildings that were not built with ease of manoeuvrability in mind and heritage listed buildings may have restrictions regarding possible alterations of a building, this should not be an excuse for not investigating ways the buildings can be made accessible for all visitors.

Organisations need to develop a *Disability Action Plan* identifying possible obstructions to the use of the buildings and grounds and services of the organisation for people with a disability.

- Make a plan of the site and buildings and establish the key areas that may restrict visitor accessibility to the site.
- Identify the problems and list possible solutions.
- Develop a time frame to reduce the barriers preventing people with disabilities from visiting the organisation.

Possible solutions may be:

- Installation of ramps to allow wheelchair access where a step needs to be navigated to enter a building
- Provision of adequate car parking spaces, including disabled access spaces
- Provision of clear pathways to allow safe and easy access around the property, buildings and exhibitions
- Provision of clear signage to allow safe and easy access around the property and buildings

- Careful design of displays allowing space for wheelchairs or people walking with aids
- Installation of exhibition displays and signage at a height that someone in a wheelchair may be able to view and read
- Printing of exhibition signage in a type that can be easily read by all visitors
- Design displays so that many people may enjoy and appreciate them, not just those familiar with the topic
- Provision of additional resources relating to the display providing information, for example, in large type as well as ordinary type
- Consideration of use of audio materials
- Provision of toilets with disabled access

Assistance may be available from local councils or other organisations. Funding may be available to carry out projects improving the accessibility of the organisation.

Introduction to access – Museums & Galleries NSW fact sheet – provides a useful summary of points to consider.

<http://mgnsw.org.au/uploaded/Introduction%20to%20Access.pdf>

Improving access to heritage buildings by Eric Martin 1999, published by the Australian Heritage Commission provides advice on making sites and buildings more accessible. – <http://tinyurl.com/22kznsy>

Arts Access Australia – *Audience Development Resources* – provides a list of websites providing additional information on this topic.

<http://www.artsaccessaustralia.org/audience-development-resources-2>