

# THE CHALLENGE OF “VALUE”

## Engaging Communities in Why Museums Exist

A Museum Association of New York | Museumwise  
White Paper



MUSEUM ASSOCIATION  
OF NEW YORK



museumwise

BY JOAN H. BALDWIN  
PROJECT RESEARCHER  
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## PREFACE

This white paper is the culmination of three facilitated Focus on Value conversations held during the Museum Association of New York and Museumwise 2011 New York State Museums in Conversation Conference. These conversations were meant to highlight the critical importance of measuring the public impact of museums and heritage organizations and articulating it to a broad spectrum of stakeholders from the boardroom to the living room. About 80 conference attendees participated in one or more of the sessions – for many, the ‘value proposition’ was a familiar topic; for many others, it was a new and perhaps daunting way of thinking about their institutions.

We’ve never tried to organize multiple conference sessions that purposely build upon one another like the Focus on Value conversations did, and we could not have done it without the enthusiasm of Dr. Barbara J. Soren, the sessions’ content organizer and facilitator. Barbara was an intrepid and encouraging collaborator who was more than willing to think with us about how best to push the value envelope. Working with her every step of the way was Stephanie Lehner Rowe, Museumwise Program Coordinator, who was always at the ready with critical feedback and who managed the lion’s share of an infinitesimal number of logistics large and small surrounding the sessions. Stationed at laptops to capture the commentary and troubleshoot as needed were Alana Akacki, MANY intern; Michele Blakemore, Museumwise intern; and Joan H. Baldwin, author of this report.

A hearty thanks go to Marsha L. Semmel, Director of Strategic Partnerships at the Institute of Museum and Library Services, for setting the value stage with her opening keynote and for summarizing her observations during the final session, the Focus on Value Town Hall.

To Joan H. Baldwin we are deeply grateful for her unfailing ability to tame reams of flipchart and computer notes, pre-and post-conference evaluations and follow-up conference calls in order to synthesize what the audience had on its mind.

We could not have woven this all together without the support of the Corning Incorporated Foundation, whose funding defrayed the costs of the sessions and this white paper, and to the New York State Council on the Arts, which supplies critical general operating support to our two organizations.

We hope these conversations add a value of their own to the growing global dialogue about the role of the museum in contemporary society. Please be in touch with your thoughts about where we might take the value discussion next.

**Anne W. Ackerson**  
Director  
Museum Association of New York

**Catherine Gilbert**  
Executive Director  
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## THE CHALLENGE

How do we prove the value of museums? It's a big question with as many possible answers as there are museums. As museums and heritage organizations across New York State argue their cases for greater integration in an increasingly stressed educational system, for attendance and volunteerism in already time-constrained leisure hours, and for funding in a challenging economic climate, the need to prove the value of a museum's work to a host of stakeholders is more critical than ever. But what values do the state's 1,900 museums exemplify? And who will care unless New York's museum community compellingly conveys its impact?

Museumwise and the Museum Association of New York (MANY) made articulating and communicating museum value the theme of the 2011 New York State Museums in Conversation conference as a way to bring New York's museums into a decades old discussion that began with John Cotton Dana in the early twentieth century. A librarian and founder/director of the Newark Museum, Dana pioneered the transformation of libraries and museums into mission-driven institutions. "A museum," he explained, "is an educational institution, set up and kept in motion that it may help the members of its community to become happier, wiser and more effective. It can help them only if they use it. They can use it only if they know of it."<sup>1</sup>

In preparation for this white paper, Museumwise and MANY also jointly surveyed conference participants on the question of value via email and Facebook. The survey asked how articulate museums are about their various constituencies: individuals, cultural organizations, and communities. Interestingly a number of respondents, rather than seeing museums as organizations that struggle with communicating value answered that they felt the community did not value museums, something that may be true, but is not necessarily an answer to the question. The survey also asked "How we can communicate the value of museums to stakeholders? The answers were mixed. Some respondents saw it as a question of process, that museums that program effectively and involve their community communicate value. Others felt that "articulating a museum's worth" equaled value, while a few simply answered that they were not sure. When asked to describe a museum's value in three words or less, a third of the respondents described what a museum might do to create value by answering umbrella questions such as how the

**But an institution does not have to have Bill Gates on its board to be asked the value question. In times of tight money, everyone, millionaires to donors of modest means, county supervisors to statewide arts agencies want to know why their money matters and perhaps most importantly, why, when dozens of other organizations need money as well, a particular organization matters at all.**

<sup>1</sup> John Cotton Dana, "The Museum," a review in *The American Magazine of Art*, October 1917, p.466.

past affects the future or how they provoke thought and imagination, while another group (24 percent) seemed to suggest that museums create value by being: that their collections and/or programming equal value.

With the survey complete MANY and Museumwise jumped headlong into the conversation, opening the conference with a keynote address by the then-Acting Director of the Institute for Museum and Library Services Marsha L. Semmel<sup>2</sup>, titled, “Making a Difference, Making the Case: Museums and Public Value” followed by three working sessions, led by Barbara J. Soren PhD, designed to help attendees think about their own organizations in terms of value. Two linked sessions took place during the first day of the conference, culminating in a town hall meeting on museums and value with a take-home exercise on the second day.

Collectively, MANY and Museumwise know more about museums and heritage organizations in New York State than anyone else. Their Web sites tell us that New York has 1,900 museums of all stripes, some with living collections, a few with no collection at all. Collectively, the state’s museums employ 17,000 people, ranking the museum business seventh among New York’s private sector employers. Museums generate more than a billion dollars for the state’s economy annually and they are responsible for a robust 68 million visitors annually. But these broad brush strokes are just that: The portrait of a statewide industry that stretches from the south fork of Long Island to Fifth Avenue, up the length of the Hudson Valley to the North Country, Buffalo, the Southern Tier and back. It describes how museums contribute, but not necessarily why they should be valued. Nor does it answer the question of how individual museums and heritage organizations address questions of value. And that is what the MANY and Museumwise wanted to explore. Which museum, tiny or sprawling, upstate or urban, understood value in communicating with their donors and their audience? And if no one was talking about value, why was that?

The term “value” migrated to the non-profit world when a group of self-made gazillionaire donors began to see their tax-deductible gifts as investments little different from venture capital invested in a start-up company. Before they give, these investors want to know where their dollars are going and how an organization calculates the change a gift will bring. But an institution does not have to have Bill Gates on its board to be asked the value question. In times of tight money, everyone, millionaires to donors of modest means, county supervisors to statewide arts agencies want to know why their money matters and perhaps most importantly, why, when dozens of other organizations need money as well, a particular organization matters at all. Questions like this call for precise and authentic answers. In fact, everyone, from board presidents to curators to unionized staff to volunteers, need to know what an organization is about and be able to explain it cogently.

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2 Marsha L. Semmel is currently Director for Strategic Partnerships at IMLS.  
<http://www.imls.gov/about/staffdetail.aspx?StaffId=25>

## THE RESPONSE

In choosing Barbara Soren, a Professor in the Museum Studies program at the University of Toronto, the two New York organizations wanted someone who could come at the question of value at a macro level, asking the big questions, and at the same time engaging as many of the annual meeting's constituents as possible. Soren constructed three programs that functioned independently, but also built one upon the other, giving participants the opportunity to attend one or all three.

### Session 1: Museums as Community Contributors

The first session, Focus on Value: Museums as Contributors to their Communities, involved attendees working in small groups to answer a series of questions based on a fictitious profile of a small historical society. Created by Cynthia Robinson, director of museum studies at Tufts University, Medford, Mass., and set in a small city somewhere in Massachusetts, the imaginary Milltown Museum was stranded in the past, under-funded, understaffed and largely abandoned by a city coping with suburbanization and immigration. Participants seated themselves, creating a mix of experience and job titles, with the goal of working together to problem solve. (See addenda for a copy of the Milltown Museum profile.)

The first set of questions focused on what challenges a community museum in Milltown might face. More specifically, Soren wanted to know how Milltown might understand the museum's "value" if it demonstrated a commitment to social responsibility and interconnectedness. One group recommended Milltown sell its collections and dissolve, but others felt that it could have a role and therefore implicit value. While few of the participants used the word value, they did suggest that both Milltown's suburban population and its new immigrants needed ways to connect with the city's history. One group of respondents cautioned that the museum, long known for its traditional sheep-to-shawl type programming and small audiences, needed to understand that there is a difference between what a community needs and expects and what a museum wants to give. This echoed Stephen Weil's well-known maxim that, "Whatever worthiness a museum may ultimately have derives from what it does, not from what it is."

As each group reported on its responses, themes emerged: participants felt Milltown's museum needed to connect with the outside world, provide a forum for community residents and be prepared to listen, and get their community involved. Next Soren asked a series of questions developed by David Carr.<sup>3</sup> They probed ideas such as what history Milltown's museum presented and how it connects with future generations; whether the museum

3 David Carr. *The Promise of Cultural Institutions*. Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 2003.

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was respectful and welcoming to everyone; and whether the museum “felt” like a safe place, a place where visitors could feel free to express their opinions. Soren also asked questions about Milltown Museum’s programming and community development projects. As in the first exercise, few people specifically mentioned value, but several groups suggested the Museum revisit its mission statement and look hard at its collection to understand what was unique and different. Participants encouraged the Museum utilize the Web to help overcome its out-of-the-way location. Another group suggested looking for universal links such as “lost desires” and “change over time” that would guide visitors from past to present. There were additional suggestions including the idea that Milltown needed professional staff, and that it should utilize its board to establish links in its community through existing events or through other not-for-profits.

Last Soren turned to conference goers to ask how to create links between their own real-life organization and their communities. Some of the ideas that emerged from that discussion included asking families to document their own history and including it in the museum’s story; working to make the public understand that what happens in the past—in families and communities—influences the future. Near the workshop’s end, participants circled back to the imaginary Milltown Museum, suggesting it identify its desired audience and represent it on the board. That way, one participant quipped, the organization “isn’t flailing around trying to discover what ‘they’ want.”

Midst the discussion some key points floated to the surface. Although participants in the first session did not explicitly say it, the recommendation that the Milltown Museum hire professional staff suggests that the audience believes that professionally-trained museum staff gives an organization value. Participants also recommended that Milltown look for what they called “universal links” or big umbrella ideas that help 21<sup>st</sup>-century visitors with a museum’s story. Conference goers felt that museums should be welcoming places where visitors could speak their minds, and last, but not least, that what communities want and what museums are willing and able to give are often out of synch.



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## Session 2: Museums As Educational Institutions

Later that afternoon Soren turned her attention to museum education in a session titled The Value of Museums as Educational Institutions. After opening with a review of New York State's chartering process and the particular requirements from the State Education Department,<sup>4</sup> Soren asked, "Isn't education much broader?" She asked her audience to consider John Dewey's spiral of lifelong growth, suggesting ever so gently that force feeding museum visitors sometimes makes them shut down.<sup>5</sup> Soren posited that visitors who learn because they are curious leave feeling as if they know something, and added that just because learning appears haphazard, does not mean education is not happening.

Participants grouped themselves by audience type, either because a group represented an audience they had worked with before or one they were interested in cultivating. Groups focused on families, elementary school children and their schools, teenagers, secondary schools, college students, young professionals and lifelong learners. Soren asked three questions. First, how can museum learning be imbedded in the New York State curriculum? Second, how would participants identify the challenges to museum education in New York State and then how would they overcome them? And last, how to utilize best practices and implement ideas from questions one and two?



4 [www.nysm.nysed.gov/charter](http://www.nysm.nysed.gov/charter)

5 John Dewey. Education and Experience. New York: Colliers, 1938.



Here the word value found some traction. The group responding to family education used it in their opening statement, noting that there is value [in a museum visit] *when* families visit. There were suggestions about how to reach parents—blogs, other non-profits, Facebook and parent-teacher organizations—and discreet activities offered so that parents would not have to struggle to decipher a given museum. The lessons here: communicate directly through media already aimed at the child-rearing set, using a multitude of media. Make the experience manageable. Do not bombard parents with choices. Think like a parent and provide places to sit, to eat, and change a diaper. The group seemed to feel word of mouth for this group was extremely important.

**The group advocating for college students encouraged museums to serve as social centers, offering food and drink, and more seriously, to encourage students to use the collection as a primary source. The young professional group was all about social media. They felt it was a way to communicate with this demographic, to foster the exchange of new ideas and create community.**

potential programs. They also encouraged museums to serve as social centers, offering food and drink, and more seriously, to encourage students to use the collection as a primary source. The young professional group was all about social media. They felt it was a way to communicate with this demographic, to foster the exchange of new ideas and create community. They, too, felt this group would enjoy the occasional happy hour, but also felt it was important that social events were coupled with opportunities for young professionals to see how museums fit into a given community.

The elementary school group's response was the most proscribed of any of the groups since programs and tours for children in elementary school need to meet State Education Department standards. This group advocated being bold about budget cuts and positioning museums and heritage organizations to step into the breach. "Most teachers are not aware of the treasure trove museums offer," one participant said, but they echoed the earlier group, advocating meeting teachers on their own ground and listening to them. "If they cannot come to the museum, take the museum to school in pre-packaged programs," one participant said, while another added, "That way teachers understand we're a resource even if students never come in the door."

Next came groups reporting on college students and young professionals. The group advocating for college students recommended reviewing upcoming course offerings and contacting professors personally about

The final group reporting was lifelong learners. Soren interjected here to remind participants that lifelong learners did not necessarily mean American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) members. She defined them as "anyone outside the bounds of formal schooling." Again, this group stressed the importance of being a host to community organizations and/

or partnering with them in an effort to tie history to life in the moment. Responding to the question about challenges in museum education in New York and how to overcome them, the lifelong learner group felt that to reach this demographic, museums need to be a resource; to be prepared to position themselves in what is likely a crowded schedule; and to be mindful of daylight programming, and once again, to offer the opportunity to socialize.

In addressing the second question the college group felt that one of the biggest challenges in dealing with 18 to 22-year olds is in overcoming the idea that if they can get it on Google, they do not need to see anything in real life. While they acknowledged that creating and maintaining a social media presence was expensive they also felt there were a number of low-budget things an organization could do to entice this demographic through the door, including treating them like adults, not like overgrown high school students as well as experimenting with co-teaching, utilizing on-campus advocates and artists as educators. “When you don’t have the resources, you have to be more resourceful,” one participant said.

- For the group discussing young professionals, they felt that there were two issues: time and money; that this was a group where there are a multitude of competing alternatives. They suggested museums and historical organizations create social opportunities whether parties or events, where participants have an opportunity to mingle, allowing young professionals to network with each other and museum staff.
- The elementary school group suggested that the biggest challenges were connecting with teachers and overcoming issues about transportation. They were one of the only groups to discuss best practices, suggesting that at this level evaluation is very important. Museums and historical organizations need to know if a particular school’s needs have been met.
- The group reporting back on family programming also stressed the importance of evaluations, pointing out that like young professionals, there are many activities competing for families’ attention. They underscored that an institution needed to understand the differences between everyday education and family education; to always evaluate and to listen to the answers.

Although this was a lengthy discussion with many different voices, there were some key take-away points. First, education doesn’t just happen during tours or special programs. Education happens whenever and wherever visitors and the museum come together, in programming, exhibits, in quiet reflection. Recognizing that and developing ways to quantify it will help museums and heritage organizations understand their value. Second, understanding your audience is key. That does not mean knowing the cognitive abilities of a given age group, it means knowing mothers with infants need places to sit. So do the elderly. It means college students see themselves as adults and so do some high school students. And that for many, museums are a shared experience so people need time to talk, to socialize and to reflect with one another. And third, evaluate, evaluate, evaluate. Talk to the audience and listen to the answers.



### Session 3: Town Hall Meeting

Soren's final program took place Tuesday morning as the last event of the conference. Subtitled a Focus on Value: Town Hall, the 90-minute session provided time for review and questions, a group activity and instructions regarding take-home questions. Participants were asked to sit at different tables named for a museum's different stakeholders.<sup>6</sup> In many instances participants took the opportunity to sit with groups they wanted to know more about.

Marsha Semmel, introduced the session along with Soren, with a summary of the previous day's key points. Next Soren asked how the audience finds out about its own stakeholders. The responses were as many and varied as the individuals in the room and ranged from the obvious: watch them; talk to them, listen to them. A second more nuanced set of answers included everything from comment cards, Facebook, survey and data collecting, focus groups. One group cautioned that reaching into the neighborhood should not mean preaching to the choir, and urged participants to go beyond comfortable answers.

The last question repeated the conference theme: How can you communicate your museum's value to your stakeholders? There were individuals who responded that value is found in a staff with passion and an understanding of mission. Others said clever marketing that is fun, engaging and reaches a particular demographic right where they live could create value. More

<sup>6</sup> Stakeholder groups included: Donors, members, trustees, visitors, elected officials, policy makers/regulators, museum staff, non-visiting public, funders, other nonprofits, education partners, businesses, community partners and families.

than a few groups—those speaking for families and educational partners in particular—held up social media as an important tool in creating value. While almost everyone emphasized the power of communication, whether it came via a Web page, a cocktail party conversation or Facebook, the group speaking for community partners talked about “casting our value [presumably their museum’s value] in terms of the community’s needs and then communicating appropriately.” It was not apparent at the time, but they were a minority.

As the meeting came to a close, participants were asked to identify one key action they would take when they returned home that would make a difference at their organization. Conference organizers collected the “plans” with the promise that MANY/Museumwise would email participants to discover whether they had been able to put them into action. Altogether 54 attendees left action plans with MANY/Museumwise staff. Of that group 21 or roughly 39 percent responded to a Museumwise email a month later asking them for an update. Predictably the answers ranged from one-line apologies to one-page single-spaced replies. For those who failed to follow through, many blamed the time of year and that old bugaboo time or lack of it. Opening seasonal museums or rushing through end of year school programs after an unusually difficult winter pushed everything deemed non-essential to the back burner.

For those who did reply, many had action plans that involved improved communications: brown-bag lunches for staff and volunteers; new questionnaires; new ways to deliver questionnaires; surveying new demographic groups. For some it involved re-training. One upstate science museum began re-training its entire front desk staff in order to give visitors a different and presumably better experience. Several organizations made plans to plan, organizing boards and staff for strategic and other forms of planning. And several more returned home thinking about visitor evaluations and how to make them more meaningful. But once again—and to be fair—the email responses were often brief, few respondents connected their single action to the question of organizational value.



**A museum’s value statement cannot be a mushy string of patently obvious facts: We have an 1820 building; our collection numbers 5,000; 42,000 people visit us annually including 10,000 students. Does that conjure one mental image other than old stuff in an old building? Where is the unique and compelling story? Where is the universal link that puts all of us under this museum’s umbrella?**

## WHAT WE LEARNED

So for MANY/Museumwise, an answer to the conference's central question remained elusive. How do we prove the value of museums? Is it something that changes with each site, but as visitors we can feel it, something like Justice Potter Stewart's famous comment on pornography—we know it when we see it? But what good is it if as a community of almost 2,000 museums and heritage organizations, we cannot make a case for ourselves beyond the obvious quantitative measurements of how big the audience, how much money did they spend, how many individuals were employed to serve that audience or how as a community we are responsible for increased social capital, not to mention growth in many communities?

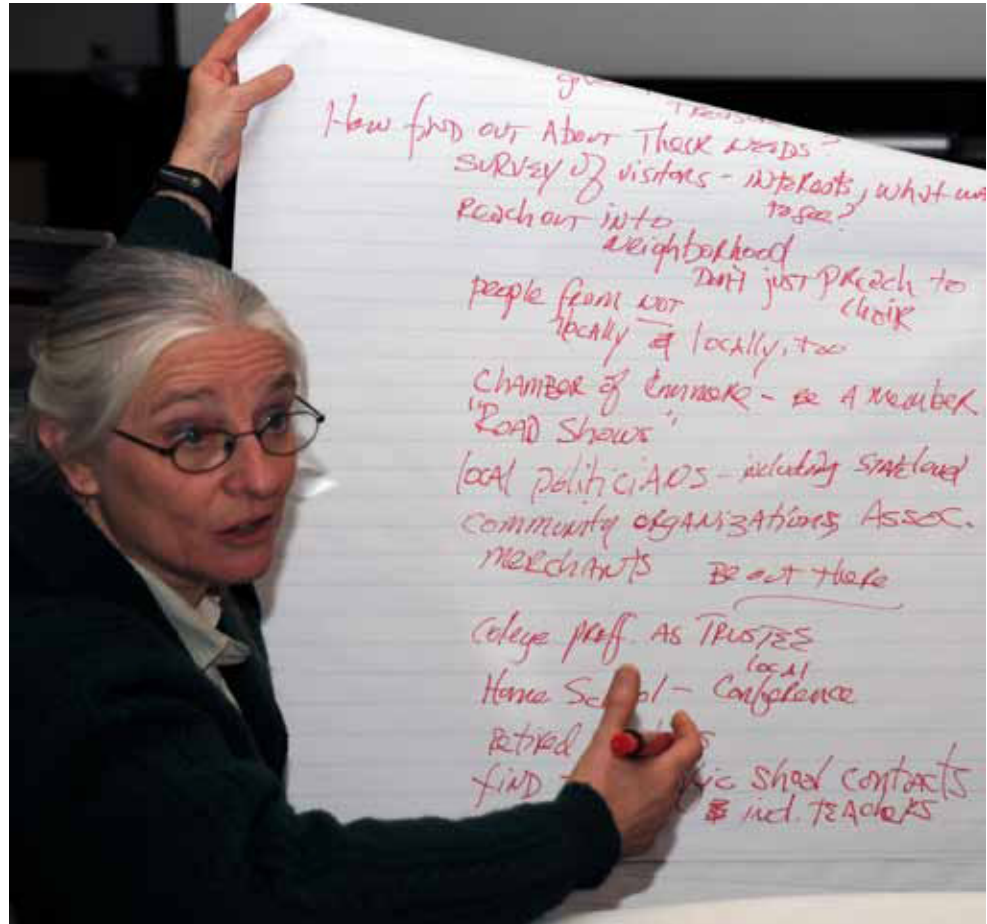
Surely a museum, botanical garden, zoo or history organization is more than just the lines of school children coming through the door, families doing crafts on a weekend, or singles crowding a Friday night opening. The Six Flags organization serves these demographic groups and it does not describe itself as a museum. Why does New York's museum community struggle to make a case for itself that does not mimic Six Flags' list of exciting family fun, but rather one that speaks of museums as places filled with unexpected, unanticipated moments of revelation—the tiny piece of local history that sets a visitor thinking, the interactive exhibit that allows a quiet student to be successful for the first time, or the way the breath-taking beauty of a living exhibit ambushes visitors?

And if we can't describe the intangible to each other how will we explain it to an overworked county supervisor, a stressed out Senate aide or a corporate leader? A museum's value statement cannot be a mushy string of patently obvious facts: We have an 1820 building; our collection numbers 5,000; 42,000 people visit us annually including 10,000 students. Does that conjure one mental image other than old stuff in an old building? Where is the unique and compelling story? Where is the universal link that puts all of us under this museum's umbrella?

A community museum that owns a very old fire-fighting vehicle is not necessarily a museum that has value. Ownership does not confer value; ownership can be a burden. Knowing what the fire engine means and being able to explain it in a way that ties it to the community might deliver value, but even when organizations do it successfully, balancing the utilitarian values

Why does New York's museum community struggle to make a case for itself that does not mimic Six Flags' list of exciting family fun, but rather one that speaks of museums as places filled with unexpected, unanticipated moments of revelation—the tiny piece of local history that sets a visitor thinking, the interactive exhibit that allows a quiet student to be successful for the first time, or the way the breath-taking beauty of a living exhibit ambushes visitors?

against the spiritual and intellectual ones is a delicate dance. In his article, “A Success/Failure Matrix for Museums,” Stephen Weil wrote: “There is probably no more important task in the museum field today than trying to establish some middle ground—something less than a numerical scale, but also something more than blind faith—between those funders and others who demand that museums provide them with hard evidence about



their effectiveness and those members of the museum community who argue that the work of museums is of such self evident value that no justification of that work is necessary.”<sup>7</sup>

In 2004 the Getty Institute commissioned Maxwell Anderson, from the Center for Arts and Cultural Policy Studies at Princeton to write an article about art museum goals and values. Some of Anderson’s ideas are specific to art museums, but there is meat for the broader museum community as well.<sup>8</sup> In the first 10 pages he dispenses with what he terms the “trinity” of traditional exhibition, attendance and membership metrics, believing that at best they provide problematic figures and at worst deceptive ones. Instead he suggests museum leaders should develop new metrics rooted in institutional value and mission that reliably indicate an organization’s long-term financial health, along with values that museum management can easily verify and report. He wants museums to quantify the visitor experience, not only in terms of what happens inside their walls, but in comparison to other community resources. He asks museum educators to assess not just the number of school visits, but the time senior staff spends on research, the number of digital images available to the community, and the number of Google hits an organization gets. Anderson’s vision is for a nuanced 360-degree organizational portrait that leaves readers convinced of the ways an organization kindles excitement in its community.

7 Stephen Weil. [http://www.aam-us.org/pubs/mn/MN\\_JF05\\_SuccessFailureMatrix.cfm](http://www.aam-us.org/pubs/mn/MN_JF05_SuccessFailureMatrix.cfm)

8 Maxwell Anderson. [www.cgu.edu/pdf/files/gli/metrics.pdf](http://www.cgu.edu/pdf/files/gli/metrics.pdf).

Why, when the state's 1,900 heritage organizations and museums tout the number of objects they care for don't they also talk about the stories they nurture? After all, it is those stories, whether about an artist's risk taking or a family helping to sow the seeds of the Revolution that allow visitors to participate? Isn't it necessary for visitors to see themselves as participants in a museum's story or they will always feel like they are on the outside looking in?

One of the things that remains confounding about Soren's final question to conference attendees and their resulting answers is how they concentrated on details and explained lack of action with lack of time. Perhaps it is an indication that in the day-to-day slog of opening the doors, greeting the audience, caring for collections, it is too easy to focus on minutiae instead of the big picture. Why, when the state's 1,900 heritage organizations and museums tout the number of objects they care for don't they also talk about the stories they nurture? After all, it is those stories, whether about an artist's risk taking or a family helping to sow the seeds of the Revolution that allow visitors to participate? Isn't it necessary for visitors to see themselves as participants in a museum's story or they will always feel like they are on the outside looking in? Nina Simon the blogger-turned-director who still writes about museum issues wrote recently about visitor participation in its most basic form—the comment board, “For me, a professional who is pushing every day to make a struggling museum relevant

and sustainable, I find incredible joy in these simple visitor comments. Scanning the comment board is one of the few activities in my workday when I'm confronted with unbridled creativity and optimism about the future of our institution. The comments provide me with some mental uplift, and they inspire me to keep pushing. And yes, they've served our organization in all kinds of tangible ways--introducing us to new interns, volunteers, and program ideas. But I have a new appreciation for the intangible now as well.”<sup>9</sup> Again, not a big thing, not an expensive thing, but an opportunity for one community to talk to another.

One organization that attended the MANY/Museumwise conference has been thinking about value. Recently staff at Historic Cherry Hill, a historic house museum once the home of five generations of a single family in Albany, N.Y., wrote an op-ed page for *The Times Union*. What prompted the piece was a session at the April conference in which an upstate historical society reported on its interpretive transformation through paranormal investigation. Following the conference presentation, a *Times Union* reporter wrote an article suggesting that many historic houses might want to adopt the paranormal as “the best sort of branding imaginable.” Needless to say, Historic Cherry Hill disagreed. In its op-ed, Cherry Hill referenced the MANY/Museumwise conference, suggesting that rather than using “How Do We Prove the Value of Museums?” as its theme, it should have been “What Is the Value of Your Museum?”

Bemoaning the fact that all too often the press lumps original and imaginative historic houses together with mediocre organizations and collections, the Cherry Hill staff wrote, “We endeavor to use our history and collections to tackle relevant, contemporary issues and harness technology, social media, theater, and the best of human interaction to produce compelling programming and maintain a presence in the community all the while we struggle against the stereotype of what a historic house museum is. Our effort to articulate our value is too often swallowed up in the din of anachronistic living history, anecdotal tours and gimmicks, such as paranormal investigation, which are the bread and butter of so many historic sites.”

In a paper titled “Advocating the Value of Museums,” which Carol Scott formerly of the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney, Australia, delivered at the International Council on Museums in Vienna Austria in 2007, she suggests that museums have use and non-use value.<sup>10</sup> By that she means that when the public spends money and time to visit museums, visitors give them value (use), but she also suggests that even people who do not visit museums, may still value them. Even among non-museum goers Scott discovered that “Museums are perceived as the honest information broker, presenting information in a disinterested and balanced way that enables the visitor to freely choose his position on the subject.” Scott also writes about intrinsic value, which she defines as “providing inspiration, through access to the communal archive of ideas.” Through her research, she says museums are “revealed to be a rich and layered experience offering different ways to interact and intersect with objects and the stories that lie buried within them.”

Thinking back to the historic house and its branding itself as the “home” of the paranormal, can that really be about intrinsic value? Or is it simply a way to increase foot traffic, make visitation go up, reducing the why-we-matter discussion to a game of numbers. In a 1998 paper written by Greg Baeker at the University of Toronto, he suggests that the value-for-money argument is necessary, but insufficient, adding that “the

For Baeker, that is where the rubber meets the road. He writes, “Cultural planning in communities becomes a means of engaging diverse stakeholders in collaborative work and problem-solving.” In other words: engage, engage, engage. Engage in learning. Engage in teaching both inside and outside the museum. A staff needs to learn just like the audiences it serves. Look for new ways to tell the story and then ask people to take part. And find the story’s core: Is it about invention, parenting, revolutionary behavior? Again, these big umbrella topics speak to a 21<sup>st</sup> century audience.

10 Carol Scott. [www.intercom.museum/documents/CarolScott.pdf](http://www.intercom.museum/documents/CarolScott.pdf).



danger is that the more complex and intangible facets of organizational performance will be ignored because they are more difficult to measure.”<sup>11</sup> He likes performance measurements, believing that they support management decisions, underpin restructuring and sustain planning; however, he also believes that unless organizations tie the numbers to the ways an organization serves the public good, then institutional value does not change. He believes that the museum world needs to shift its focus from individual organizations and their collections, exhibits and programs to the relationship between organizations and community. For Baeker, that is where the rubber meets the road. He writes, “Cultural planning in communities becomes a means of engaging diverse stakeholders in collaborative work and problem-solving.” In other words: engage, engage, engage. Engage in learning. Engage in teaching both inside and outside the museum. A staff needs to learn just like the audiences it serves. Look for new ways to tell the story and then ask people to take part. And find the story’s core: Is it about invention, parenting, revolutionary behavior? Again, these big umbrella topics speak to a 21<sup>st</sup> century audience. Remember the American Visionary Art Museum, whose mission is simply to “expand the definition of a worthwhile life” by presenting and encouraging creativity in untraditional venues or the Denver Museum of Contemporary Art that describes itself as an activator, content provider and immediate research vehicle of culture in the making—a museum without a front door—a place for public engagement.

Baeker also says something else, something even riskier. He suggests museums reject growth and permanence as inherently desirable, asking them to abandon the model that associates growth with success and the assumption that once a museum comes into business it should be in business forever. Scary, but freeing too. A sort of what’s-the-worst-that-could-happen philosophy that might lead to a different organizational behavior.

One organization that embodies many of Baeker’s principles is the Gage Foundation which operates the Matilda Joslyn Gage Center in Fayetteville, N.Y. Responding to Soren’s end-of-conference prompt regarding a mini-action plan for her organization, director Sally Roesch Wagner seems focused on two things: her audience and communication. Her goal: turn “all our signage from ‘us’ into ‘them.’” Her response did not tell MANY/Museumwise how busy she had been; instead, she told them she had “brainstormed” [her word] with her staff about temporary participatory exhibits. Wagner reported that she and her staff were “trying out” feedback sheets and a response board. She also re-wrote the sign that greets visitors entering the museum. While she did not share the “before,” the revised sign now says, “Welcome to the Matilda Joslyn Gage Center where Matilda Joslyn Gage lived with her husband Henry and their four children and carried out her work for social justice from 1854-1898. Rules of the house: 1) Check your dogma at the door; 2) Think for yourself; Please dialogue with us about the challenging ideas you will find within these walls and together let us envision the world we want to create. Please feel free to take photographs, pick up books, play with the toys, sit on the furniture, and most of all write on the walls!”

While it is clear that the Matilda Joslyn Gage Center is not your average historic house, after all how many museums let visitors write on the walls, it is also clear that Wagner is willing to experiment, that she is not afraid to fail, that if something does not work, it is likely she

11 Greg Baeker. [http://www.utsc.utoronto.ca/~coopam/Performance\\_Measures/Great\\_Performances/PMConcepts.htm](http://www.utsc.utoronto.ca/~coopam/Performance_Measures/Great_Performances/PMConcepts.htm)

will stop. She and her staff have created an unorthodox welcome sign, but one that provides the who, what, when and where, and then gives visitors every bit of autonomy they could ever wish for in a museum setting. It treats everyone like adults and suggests that the experience is predicated on participation. It is a setting that offers respect and asks for creativity both ingredients in great teaching.

Few museums are like the Gage, however, and many are almost hamstrung by collections that are the result of accretion rather than mission. And why should value matter anyway? Isn't it just one more thing for a museum director to worry about—after the museum shop deficit, the roller coaster of visitation, the balancing of public money and private gifts, does value matter if all the numbers are in the black? Perhaps not, at least until an important donor suggests that she could write a check to your organization or to the hospital, and asks why it should be you. That is the moment when an organization needs to know exactly where and how it contributes. Museumwise and MANY work hard to maintain and collect data about the field, but it is just that: data. To date, value remains the missing piece. As a community, New York's museums, heritage organizations, zoos and botanical gardens have to be prepared to stand up and speak to why they matter. To quote Stephen Weil one more time, "Whatever worthiness a museum may ultimately have derives from what it does, not from what it is."

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## THE VALUE AGENDA

As the Focus on Value discussions repeatedly underscored, the museum community must work together at all levels to support data collection and analysis as well as the development of tools that put a face on why collecting institutions and historic sites are critical to national identity and community vitality. In this regard, libraries, the performing and visual arts, and environmental nonprofits are both leaders and models for the museum field as it shapes its understanding of value. The following agenda recognizes this need.

### National Organizations:

- > Continue to collect and disseminate data on museums and value.
- > Support best practices in the creation and underlying conversations of vision, mission and values statements.
- > With input from regional associations and institutions create a list of value metrics for use by a variety of museums.
- > Support the inclusion of questions about value in funding applications.

### Funding Organizations:

- > Support research and data collection about museums' value and support the creation of a research framework.
- > Ask the value question of all applicants.

### New York State's Museum Service Organizations:

- > Participate in and support values data collection, best practices, and metrics development with a variety of partners.
- > Collect value statements and disseminate to make a state-wide case for museums.
- > Facilitate learning opportunities that help institutions deepen the values discussion for themselves and the field as a whole.
- > Create online and face-to-face opportunities to share the value of the state's museums with a variety of stakeholders.

### New York State's Museums:

- > Be willing to take risks and be willing to experiment.
- > Go beyond the process of evaluating value to actually doing something.
- > Recognize that language translates into behavior.
- > Turn the internal mission of preservation, collection and interpretation inside out. Understand your institutional context.
- > Turn surveys and process pieces into ideas and actions.
- > Be willing and able to answer the question: Why does my community care about my museum, zoo, botanical garden or heritage organization?

## DETERMINING YOUR MUSEUM'S VALUE

### Step #1: Examine Your Impact in Your Community

- > In what ways does your museum serve the public good?
- > If your museum routinely met its stated mission every day, what impact would it have on its community? If your stated mission doesn't lead to definable community impact, your mission is not externally focused enough – rethink it; rewrite it.
- > If your museum were to close its doors, who would care and why?
- > Make time at board meetings, staff meetings, and membership meetings to talk about the value your museum creates. This could be a 15-minute discussion that gets revisited regularly.

### Step #2: Walk the Talk

- > Understand that an institution's value goes far beyond finances.
- > So, get clear on what definitions mean, e.g. value, life-long learning, community impact, results, etc.
- > Listen to your audiences and community stakeholders to understand what they're telling you and what they want from you.
- > Revisit your mission statement: Does it use strong, engaging language that is focused on audience and public benefit?
- > Take a hard look at your collections: do they support an audience-centered mission? Are they used as primary resources in service to the mission?
- > Recognize that the educational impact of your institution is broad, touching all stages of life, then figure out ways to quantify that impact beyond just counting the numbers of participants.
- > Shift your institution's focus to growing and sustaining relationships between the museum and its audiences, and among audiences. Go beyond who you know; always be thinking about how to widen the circle.
- > Meet audiences where they are (literally and figuratively).
- > Take the first step in reaching out to collaborators, potential audiences and users of services.
- > Engage, engage, engage! This is your new mantra.
- > Develop and use well-thought out strategies for engaging and communicating with audiences.
- > Understand that there is a big difference between the message and the medium (just because you use social media doesn't mean you post anything that builds relationships).
- > Get over old misconceptions about the Internet and social media dampening interest in face-to-face interaction (it's quite the opposite).
- > Evaluate, evaluate, evaluate! This is your other new mantra.
- > Develop critical success factors for every aspect of your mission and monitor your progress using them.

### Step #3: Communicating Your Institution's Value

- > Know them and they will come.<sup>12</sup>
- > In order for both your closest supporters and the public to understand the impact of your organization they need to be able to recognize how it touches their communities and their own lives.
- > Communicating impact often requires someone with passion who can help people see where and how a museum or heritage organization shapes their lives. Communicating value is often best conveyed through stories and in the voice of the people who are served by you. Stories bring your institution's value to life. Use words and images that offer strong positive connotations.
- > Passion needs to be paired with hard data that is recent and relevant. Data needs to show how and where your organization intersects with the local economy and how it affects how individuals – even neighborhoods – connect to each other.
- > Take every opportunity to communicate value: in member and prospect mailings, annual reports, brochures and newsletters, on websites and social networks; at ongoing programs and special events and at stakeholder and board meetings.

### Step #4: Repeat

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12 Will Phillips, Linking Objects with Audience. Qm2 for Nonprofit Organizations Management Briefing. <http://qm2.org/mbriefs/46.html>

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## ADDENDA



**New York State's Museums in Conversation:  
How Do We Prove the Value of Museums?**

**April 3-5, 2011 – Hyatt Regency Buffalo**

Sponsored by Museumwise and the  
Museum Association of New York

**Focus on Value: Museums as Contributors to their Communities**

Monday, April 4, 2011, 11:15 – 12:30 pm

*What do our communities want? How do we find out?*

**1. What do we know about what people want and need today?**

**A Fictitious Community - Milltown Profile**, a fictitious community<sup>1</sup>

Milltown, Massachusetts, a community of 16,000 residents, is located along the banks of the Connecticut River, 20 miles from a major city. The first settlers arrived in 1674 and the town was incorporated in 1702.

Until the mid 1800s Milltown was a farming community. Following the Civil War, manufacturers took advantage of the town's riverside location and 8 textile mills were in operation by 1885. This industrial expansion brought Italian and Portuguese mill workers to the area. These new immigrants enhanced the existing labor force of English and German descendents of the early settlers.

By the 1960s, all but one of the mills closed, and many laborers were forced to seek work elsewhere. The population dropped to 12,000 people, and many downtown businesses were boarded up. But by the late 1970s, with increased government funding and the influx of commuters from the Springfield area, Milltown was revitalized. Abandoned mills were renovated for residential and commercial use. This attracted skilled craftsmen and artists as well as two small technology companies, which were drawn by the increasingly diverse community makeup.

Although Milltown is still 79% white, 12% of the residents are Hispanic, 5% are Asian, 3% are African-American, and 1% is Native American. Recently opened Main Street businesses include a Vietnamese restaurant and food store, a vegetarian cafe, an artists' cooperative, a bookstore of used and new books, a video rental establishment, and a Greek pizza parlor. While the 19<sup>th</sup>-century houses that line Main

<sup>1</sup> Cynthia Robinson has provided the Milltown material. She co-authored with Gretchen S. Sorin *Going Public: Community Program and Project Ideas for Historical Organizations* (1999), was executive director of the Bay State Historical League, a statewide association of Massachusetts history organizations, worked at Worcester Historical Museum and Old Sturbridge Village in museum education, and is Director of Museum Studies at Tufts University, MA.

Street are still in the hands of long-time residents, newcomers, especially the families of commuters, have moved into new suburban neighborhoods. Low income families live in the old mill housing units at the south end of town.

Milltown has two elementary schools and sends older students to a regional junior and high school in the next town. The town's recent rapid growth, and its attraction as a bedroom community for Springfield have inspired its state representative to lobby for a new Massachusetts Turnpike exit to Milltown (the closest exit is now 20 miles away).



## Focus on Value: Museums as Contributors to their Communities

Museums in Conversation, April 4, 2011, 11:15 – 12:30 pm

### Roundtable Discussion #1

#### *Questions for Discussion:*

1. What might people in the communities of Milltown want and need today, in 2011?
2. What challenges would a community museum in Milltown face?
3. *A socially responsible museum* demonstrates a commitment to idealism, intimacy, depth, and interconnectedness as tests of genuineness and quality<sup>2</sup> ...

*Idealism* Thinking about the ways things could be, and not simply accepting the way things are

*Intimacy* Providing communication and quality of contact in the physical museum and on its Web site

*Depth* Ensuring deep and enduring commitments to the maintenance of human relationships

*Interconnectedness* Making connections between families, organizations, the environment, and the whole of humanity

What innovative strategies could demonstrate to people living in Milltown the community museum's commitment to idealism, intimacy, depth, and interconnectedness?

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<sup>2</sup> Based on the Introduction to Janes, R. R., & Conaty, G. T. (Eds.). (2005). *Looking reality in the eye: Museums and social responsibility*. Calgary, AB: University of Calgary Press & Museums Association of Saskatchewan

## **Focus on Value: Museums as Contributors to their Communities**

Museums in Conversation, April 4, 2011, 11:15 – 12:30 pm

2. **What innovative exhibitions (on-site and online), special events, programs, activities, and/ or special events could Board members and staff volunteers at Milltown Museum plan that will appeal to interests in Milltown’s communities today, and how can they get feedback on strategies?**

### **Milltown Museum Profile**

The Milltown Museum was founded in 1896. Its collections, library, and archives are housed in an early 19<sup>th</sup>-century farmhouse on the outskirts of town.

#### **Mission**

To collect and preserve Milltown’s history for future generations.

#### **Facility**

Three rooms of the farmhouse—kitchen, parlor, and bedroom—are furnished and set up for museum tours. The library and archives are located in what was once the sitting room. Collection storage and office space take up the rest of the house. The house and library are open to the public on Saturdays and Wednesdays, 1 to 4, and by appointment.

#### **Collection Highlights**

- Military uniforms and weapons, wedding dresses, buttons, farm tools, toys, 19<sup>th</sup>-century kitchen tools.
- Portraits of town notables and a few landscapes by a local artist.
- Natural history collection including bird eggs, stuffed and mounted songbirds, and butterflies.
- Photographs taken by a local resident in 1910 featuring houses and streets of Milltown, as well as a newspaper clipping file, scrapbooks, maps, and pamphlets from town businesses and manufacturers.

#### **Collection Organization and Preservation**

80% of the archival collection has been housed in acid-free containers. All textiles have been cataloged, cleaned, folded in acid free tissue paper, and housed in acid free boxes (or hung on padded hangers and covered by sheets). Volunteers have been working steadily for the past two years to create a computerized database for the collections.

#### **Board, Staffing and Membership**

Board of directors (12 people), and all volunteer staff. Volunteer positions include curator, librarian, site overseer, four hospitality coordinators (all of these positions are filled by board members). Board officers – the president, treasurer, membership coordinator, and secretary – play an active role in the administration of the Museum. The Museum has 105 family members. Dues are \$10 per family per year.

#### **Public Programs**

The Museum holds a public program once a month (Sunday evenings) in a nearby church hall during the school year. In past years programs have included performances featuring historical characters, presentations by members on aspects of local history, and lectures by staff members from other area

museums. The Museum holds an ice-cream social in the spring, and has a table at the town's fall harvest festival. Each October, 2<sup>nd</sup> graders from the two elementary schools visit to learn about colonial life. They churn butter, tour the house, and play children's games on the lawn.

#### **Finance**

Dues, investment income, sales of books and jellies, and the annual ice-cream social provide income to cover the annual expenses of roughly \$2,500.

## Focus on Value: Museums as Contributors to their Communities

Museums in Conversation, April 4, 2011, 11:15 – 12:30 pm

### Roundtable Discussion #2

#### *Questions for Discussion:*

#### 1. Questions to consider related to Milltown Museum's mission, facility, collection, and board/ staffing/ membership:<sup>3</sup>

- What is the 'history' the museum is presenting and what can that history do for future generations?
- How could the museum be more 'respectful' to gender, race, and class, welcoming of everyone regardless of their background?
- How could the museum feel like a 'safe place' in the community, a space and place in which people can contemplate and express their opinions about issues presented?

#### 2. Questions to explore about Milltown Museum's programs and community development projects for its publics:

- How could stories that are told in the museum reach people's hearts, and give the stories a pride of place? In what ways could artifacts/objects be supportive of the stories, and changes of the people in the community over time?
- How would labels, didactics, tours, programs, and special events represent 'good storytelling,' and invite visitors' questions and stories?
- How could exhibitions, programs, activities, and special events engage and challenge people who visit the museum?

#### 3. What innovative strategies for exhibitions (on-site and online), special events, programs, activities, and/ or special events could Board members and staff volunteers at Milltown Museum plan that will appeal to interests in Milltown's communities today?

- How could Board members and volunteer staff seek feedback from Milltown's communities on these strategies?

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<sup>3</sup> Material from a case study about the Lower East Side Tenement Museum in Manhattan by Abram, R. J. (2005). History is as history does: The evolution of a mission-driven museum. In Janes, R. R., & Conaty, G. T. (Eds.). *Looking reality in the eye: Museums and social responsibility* (pp. 19-42). Calgary, AB: University of Calgary Press & Museums Association of Saskatchewan.

### Focus on Value: Museums as Contributors to their Communities

Museums in Conversation, April 4, 2011, 11:15 – 12:30 pm

#### 3. How can you find out about issues important to people in your community today and the role your museum could play in addressing these issues?

Key community people can help you identify what exhibits, education and public programs, activities, and special events address issues and needs that are important to people in your community. Through, for instance, town halls, focus groups, and one-on-one conversations with individuals who do and do not visit your museum, people in your community can help you make decisions about how your museum can, for example:

- Showcase and interpret artistic and cultural expression valued by groups in the community
- Raise awareness of contemporary implications of your exhibitions and programs
- Stimulate dialogue among diverse groups
- Encourage and assist people to participate fully in political, civic, and social life of the community.
- Plan, promote, facilitate, participate in, and evaluate the success of programs in fulfilling your museum's mission, planning objectives, and anticipated outcomes for visitors.

#### Developing an Action Plan ...

##### Think/pair/share activity and Roundtable Discussion #3:

- *Think about* and write your preliminary ideas about a strategy that you would like to take forward to staff at your museum, which will help you plan an innovative approach to addressing an issue or need important to people in your community.
- *Talk about* your strategy with someone beside you to further clarify your approach.
- *Share* your strategy with others at your table and talk about how to ensure that each strategy will meet with success.
- *Refine* your strategy based on the group's discussion and take it with you as an action plan that you will begin to implement when you return to your museum next week.