

Citizen History Projects

Making decisions about technology sometimes feels like an extended whitewater rafting trip with all white-water and no stretches of calm water. At the AASLH annual meeting in Richmond, I chaired a roundtable session of Web and new media experts who talked about this wild ride of adopting technology. We discussed technology trends and challenges as listed in the *2010 Horizon Report: Museum Edition* (<http://j.mp/HorizonRptMuseum>) published in September. The report, produced by an international panel of museum, education, and technology experts, focuses on technology within a context of museum education and interpretation. It also identifies the top technologies that we can

expect to see in a wide market in the next few years. Most of my colleagues agree that the report accurately reflects the current state of museums and technology. Granted, there is a wide spectrum of technology adoption and many factors affect adoption rate, including funding, expertise, and a leader's vision. Yet, any institution, no matter its size and budget, must decide how many scarce resources to devote to technology projects.

The *Horizon Report* identifies the number one significant challenge as "the lack of a comprehensive technology strategy at most museums." I asked the audience (representing approximately seventy-five organizations) how many of their organizations have a strategic plan that includes technology. The panelists and I were shocked at the near-unanimous answer. Only one or two hands went up.

Closely connected to this lack of strategy are the following two challenges: "Funding for technology is too often done outside of operational budgets" and "the lack of understanding or priority placed on online resources." A small

show of hands in the audience also supported this point—few organizations set aside large segments of their operational budgets for technology. I'm certainly no prophet and can barely keep up with the swiftly changing technology landscape. But I do know that no organization can afford to ignore technology or fail to recognize that it is transforming our world. Our audiences are increasingly savvy with technology and expect us to meet them where they are.

Over the past fifteen years, I have had the opportunity to explore the fascinating intersection of education and tech-

nology. I've worked for history museums willing to ask challenging questions and to take the time to try to figure out the Web and other new media. I've rolled up my sleeves to work on all kinds of Web-related proj-

ects. I'm not a techie and do not own the latest high-tech gadgets. I see myself as a big-picture person who tries to observe trends and find ways to help history organizations meet the tremendous technology demands they face.

So, keeping the *Horizon Report* in mind, here are my top ten suggestions for history organizations struggling with adopting technology.

1 Read the *Pew Internet and American Life* reports.

This organization provides great data to support funding proposals of all types. Find out how your audiences use technology. For example, if 80 percent of your audience owns a mobile phone, you may want to invest in a project for that medium. <http://pewinternet.org/>

2 Make technology part of your organization's strategic plan.

Poll your audiences and find out what they want from you. Do you know how teachers are interacting with your materials? How people use your digitized col-

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lections? Use an easy online survey tool to find out what your audience needs. Identify how technology can support your strategic goals.

3 Make technology a healthy part of your operational budget.

Perhaps you have the funds for a digitization project, but what about the funds to provide users with the tools to use those digitized assets to their fullest potential? Anticipate that technology demands are not going to go away, but will increase.

4 Recognize that your audience has changed.

The world is shrinking and you must think more globally and acknowledge that your online users might not live in your geographic region. Be creative about ways to connect your content with a worldwide audience.

5 Embrace the social media revolution.

Social media is here to stay and is rapidly transforming our world. Your audience expects access to social media. Do not be alarmed by user-generated content or think you must give up your voice of authority. You don't need to do that, but you do need to start thinking of ways to involve your audience in the conversation and create opportunities for them to participate. It is about facilitating and offering your audiences various ways to explore your collections.

6 Never stop evaluating.

Usability testing is key with new media. For example, learn how to easily and quickly identify problem areas in your

website. One great feature of the Web is that changes can usually be made quickly. While quality is harder to evaluate, many tools today help evaluate quantity. Many analytics tools are free and there is no excuse not to use them.

7 Look for creative partnerships that will help you achieve your technology goals.

Many universities and colleges have academic programs that would benefit

from working on projects at local history organizations. Some local tech firms might be happy to consult on a pro bono basis or partner on a project.

8 Explore the many funding opportunities available for technology projects.

More than ever before, many funding organizations have specific grants for technology upgrades and creative uses of technology.

9 Be willing to try new technology projects. Experiment.

There are many open source programs these days and so many ways to experiment without spending a lot of money. Consider trying a crowdsourcing project that allows you to tap the expertise of the crowd.

10 Most important: it's about your content, not the medium.

Do not be overwhelmed or paralyzed by technology. Yes, technology changes at a dizzying rate and it's impossible to predict with certainty what is around the corner. But content is the key, not the medium of delivery. Technology needs to be transparent. If you concentrate on your content, you can often repurpose it to meet new technology demands. For example, if you produce a series of short two- to three-minute video segments, you could use them with QR codes, with mobile phone tours, in an online exhibition or online curriculum.

Read the *2010 Horizon Report: Museum Edition* and by the time this column comes to print, the 2011 report will be available at www.nmc.org/publications/horizon-report-2011-museum-edition. For those who feel overwhelmed I'll state what has become a mantra. **Don't feel alone when making decisions about technology because we're all in the raft together.** Learn from others, ask questions, and by all means hold onto your paddle. There is whitewater ahead. ●

"History Bytes" is a forum for discussing Web issues facing all types of historical institutions. Tim Grove can be reached at grovet@si.edu.

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