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Museum Publishing:
Purpose, Management and Evaluation in Small History Museums
in the San Francisco/Bay Area

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ABSTRACT

This thesis studies the purpose, management and evaluation of publishing by small historical societies. In considering these issues three key research questions were posed. What are museums publishing? Why are they publishing? How can publishing and publications be assessed? Answers were sought by undertaking a literature review of museum publishing to situate the publishing activity of small historical societies within that of the wider museum community, interviewing the staff of two small historical societies in San Francisco about the realities of publishing, conducting a content analysis of a selection of their resulting publications, and using evaluation techniques to elicit the views of readers.

As a result the prevalence of newsletters and journals or magazines is apparent for small history museums, while books were a more prominent feature for larger history museums. The roles of the publications were also identified. Publications contribute to the museum's mission and goals. They record and announce museum activities and influence the museum's professional and public profile. The thesis also shows how publications reflect the museum's nature and priorities. Publications can therefore be an excellent way of evaluating the history museum and its interpretation of the past.

The thesis argues that successful publications have clear and specific goals and that their form and content match these goals, the museum's mission and the needs of readers. To achieve this it is suggested museums must carefully plan and evaluate their publications at a number of junctures using a range of methodologies that consider the desired image, the values portrayed, and the history to be presented. The methodologies used suggest themselves as pragmatic and useful tools that small museums can now use to evaluate and improve existing publications and ensure new ventures are purposeful, intellectually robust and more likely to meet their goals.

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INTRODUCTION

When thinking of a museum the art and artefacts displayed, the buildings they inhabit, and the experiences packaged during a museum visit most often come to mind. However, museums are active beyond their physical spaces through travelling programmes, digital access and print publications. Indeed print publications can be seen as more far-reaching and permanent than exhibitions, education programmes or a webpage which may be de-installed or discontinued and the associated records, if they exist, filed with limited accessibility (Tietz, 1980, p227). Printed materials are therefore an important avenue for providing access to the museum, its collections and a wealth of information.

That each publication reveals something about the nature of a museum and the image it has about itself and its subject sparked this thesis. Tietz notes that ‘...every publication is an extension of the museum and makes an impression whereby the institution is judged.’ (Tietz, 1980, p236). It was therefore hoped that museums approached publishing with forethought and an appreciation of the power of printed materials as an interpretation and communication tool.

Also of note is the abundance of publications produced by museums even though publishing is expensive and complex and, it has been suggested, the digital age of electronic communications will make print publishing obsolete (Rossen, 1993; Weil, 2002). It was therefore additionally hoped that notoriously financially challenged museums that compete for audiences, who have a plethora of leisure and education choices, approach print publishing with purpose and professionalism.

In conducting background research for this thesis it became apparent that much of the discussion on museum publishing involved large museums¹ and particularly art museums. Thus the history, changing focus, and production of art catalogues and books have received considerable attention (Cannon-Brookes, 1982; Quigley 1993).

¹ Budgets over \$500,000, large collections inventories, more than twenty staff, and personnel dedicated solely to publications.

Despite the fact that large history museums are prolific publishers (see figure 1.2) and small museums also engage in publishing at various levels, the publications of history museums have not received as much attention. Additionally, while noting publications are a legitimate museum activity, discussions on best practice in managing museum programmes rarely provide details specifically relating to publications (see Lord & Lord, 2001).

In response this thesis aims to accomplish three things: to establish the purpose and management parameters of publications produced by small historical societies; to show how publication and reader evaluation can be used to assess and align publications with the museum's mission, image, historical viewpoint and goals as well as professional and audience expectations; and to support and acknowledge the efforts of small non-art museums to produce professional, well-respected publications that are purposeful, considered, and intellectually robust.

Thesis Structure

To provide context for examining publishing by small history museums Chapter One reviews the different types of American history institutions, their backgrounds, features, purpose, and direction in the latter part of the 20th century. Chapter One also situates publishing by small history museums within the wider museum publishing community by discussing the literature, professional discourse and guidelines about museum publishing in America. These discussions highlight how publishing reflects the changing purpose and focus of museums including educational and interpretation aspirations, and financial and political influences. The discussions also identify the variety of professional and management issues that inform museum publishing including planning, teamwork and evaluation.

In Chapter Two, this material is given specific and local context and flavour by considering publishing by two San Francisco based historical societies. A brief organisational and publishing history introduces each museum. Their prominent publications are then considered along with the perceptions and perspectives on publishing and publications of those involved in the management, direction and

production of the publications. This exploration identifies publishing purposes for, and practices by, small historical societies, and situates this within the wider museum publishing milieu.

That these small historical societies have a clear idea of their target audience, have identifiable reasons for publishing, and seek to present specific images and histories is discovered and explored further in Chapter Three. Both museums seek to appeal to the 'educated lay person' through quality publications that move beyond the parochial and 'cheap backyard' produced newsletter of many small organisations. They want to produce substantial publications that enhance the professional standing of the institution, are attractive to a wide audience while also meeting the needs of key readers, their members. A content analysis of a selection of publications provides insight into each publication's success, issues and challenges. Chapter Three provides a methodology museums can use to carry out their own publication evaluation.

Up to this point the thesis has concentrated on publications from the point of view of the museum and museum professionals. Chapter Four considers the role and view of readers, the intended beneficiaries of publications. Drawing on literature and research on evaluation of museum exhibitions and education programmes, this chapter identifies a number of ways readers influence, contribute to and can be involved in the success of publications. The chapter also presents examples of how reader evaluation provides valuable information that can contribute to the success of a publication and future publishing decisions and successes.

Chapter Five brings the discussions together. It identifies the key purpose, management and evaluation parameters and influences for publishing by small historical societies. The impact of the museum's history, environment and management are reviewed along with some perspectives highlighted by the research on historical interpretation and publishing trends.

Chapter Six concludes the thesis with a summary of the key purpose and effects of museum publishing. It also suggests further research and discussion on reader expectations and outcomes, community collaboration, and interpretation through publications. It promotes careful planning and evaluation of publications at a number of

junctures using a range of methodologies to ensure publications match both the mission of the museum and needs of readers, have clear and specific goals, and aim to, if not enhance, at least maintain the reputation and image of the museum.

A CD Rom is enclosed that contains a copy of the December 2003 issue of *The Pioneer* and selections of cover images of *The Argonaut* and *Panorama*. Readers can view this in conjunction with reading the content analysis commentary thus providing a more immediate context for the items and examples discussed. Readers may also consider undertaking their own interpretation using elements of the content analysis format.

Methodology

Context and Background

This thesis commenced with a literature review on museum publishing to ascertain historical and current issues, concerns and trends in museum publishing. Attendance at the May 2003 National Museum Publishing Conference in Pasadena, California gave insight into the most pressing issues and newest developments of interest to attendees as well as contact with key commentators on museum publishing. A literature review and consideration of museum websites was undertaken to obtain an overview of the history of history museums, management and interpretation trends, and publishing activity both nationally and locally. This helped situate the case study museums within the wider museum and museum publishing community.

As a result the scope of the thesis became apparent. The day-to-day and technical aspects of publication production, while taking up a large proportion of time for editors, staff and contractors, is well discussed and documented with a number of handbooks and templates to provide guidance. The decisions at this level are specific to the publication under consideration and the contracts and participants involved. It was therefore determined that the thesis would limit itself to the purpose, management and evaluation of publications.

It was also noted that in its basic definition publishing is the production of information for distribution to the public. Publishing ranges from small promotional photocopied leaflets to communication through multi-media devices such as videotape, CD-Roms, DVDs, electronic mail and web pages. While comment on the use of the Internet and digital technology is made, this thesis concentrates on publishing in its traditional guise of printed matter and with a particular focus on catalogues, books, journals, and newsletters.

How these selected publications relate to the wide variety of print publications museums produce is shown in the typological table below. Table 1 draws on the work of Tietz (1980) and Cowan (1993) and the sixteen categories in the American Association of Museums design competition. Publications can cross functional areas depending on the purpose, intention and the views of the recipient. For example, a museum may classify a gift card depicting an image from the collection as a commercial endeavour, or a monograph as a serious contribution to ongoing research. The reader could however view these as entertainment or a memento. The specific content may also mean a publication crosses functional classes. For example a magazine may include elements of an annual report, newsletter or research journal.

Table 1: Typology of Museum Print Publications

Functional Area	Type of Publication	Type of Content
Research	Monograph	Authoritative, comprehensive dissertation on a subject.
	Research Paper	Exploratory, introductory or summary discussions of a subject.
	Professional Journal	Record of scholarly research by, or under the auspices of, or using the collections of a museum.
	Bibliography	History of available material on a collection/subject, or by an author or publisher.
Education	Information Sheet	Concisely interprets an exhibit, exhibition.
	Programme Materials	Quizzes, puzzles, games, instruction sheets, classroom materials.

	Study guide/Handbook	Overview of a subject with exercises or reference materials for further learning.
	Instruction Sheet	Description of an activity or question to consider during an exhibition.
	Exhibit Label	Description of an individual artefact.
	Text/Didactic Panel	Overview or introduction to an exhibition, section, or group of exhibits.
	Exhibition Catalogue	Description of items in an exhibition. May be accompanied by additional essays providing history, context, or exploration of themes.
	Books	Explore a topic and may be based on research, collections and may be designed for a specific audience such as text or tradebooks.
Public & Member Relations	Press Release	Important and topical news about museum events, exhibition or book reviews, projects, acquisitions.
	Newsletter	News of exhibitions, activities, acknowledgements.
	Magazine	Articles and less time sensitive items.
	Annual Report	Administrative and financial activities, can foster knowledge and support for the museum.
Publicity, Advertising, Marketing	Posters	Basic enticement and information about the museum, exhibitions, events.
	Pamphlets/Brochures	More detailed information on programmes.
	Fliers/Postcards	Ephemeral widely distributed notifications of programmes, invitations.
	Gimmicks	Bookmarks, stickers to bring attention to, and awareness of the museum.
	Publication Catalogue	Listing of available publications for sale.

Administration	Funding Solicitation Annual Reports Membership Documents Tickets Manuals	Applications, certificates, cards. Staff, volunteer, procedures, policies.
Collections Management	Collection Catalogue Directories/Bibliographies	Systematic list of collection items with descriptions, provenance.
Commercial/ Entertainment	Trade Publications Gift and Postcards Prints Posters	Cookbooks, calendars, diaries, travel guides, general interest topics.
Visitor Services	Orientation Guide	Provides information for navigating the layout of the museum, general overview of exhibitions and services available. May provide brief information on the museum, staff, sponsors, or benefactors.
	Museum Brochure	Overview of museum history, scope, collections, programmes, hours, contact information.

Case Studies

The case study museums were chosen based on their small budget and staffing (less than \$500,000, fewer than five full-time employees), independent status, the stability and depth of their publishing programme, and their willingness to be accessible and available. It is posited that with less funding and fewer staff who may not have specialised publishing skills, the publications programmes for these museums provide different challenges and issues than for those faced by larger museums with a staff member and sometimes whole departments devoted to publications. Independent status was chosen over those history institutions attached to larger organisations such as universities or city and government agencies that may have greater access to resources or specialised skills (printing presses, scholarly research, marketing and advertising outlets) that a small stand alone museum does not.

The publishing history, practices, and issues for the case study museums was established by interviewing key individuals responsible for or involved in the publications programme: presidents, editors-in-chief, and executive directors. A review of organisational documents such as Board minutes, web pages, budgets, annual and other

reports, and policy and procedure statements where publications were mentioned was also undertaken. Visits were made to the museum buildings and exhibition sites. Searches of databases managed by major libraries with important holdings of publications of historical institutions including the Bancroft Library, Alice Phelan Sullivan Library, University of California at Berkeley, and the San Francisco Public Library History Center occurred.

These activities provided the institutional view of publications, background to decisions, and the views of a wide range of stakeholders including Board members, a subset of members-at-large. Information on management structures and issues, and how publications sat in relation to other programmes and activities was obtained. Insight was gained about the image, priorities and interests of the museum.

Publications

The current key publications for the small historical societies were identified as journals and newsletters. It was also identified that the museums had specific views about and goals for the publications, but that they were not evaluated or reviewed to determine if the publications met these views or goals. A content analysis methodology was therefore developed to determine if the form and content met key intended goals, themes or views. The content analysis was developed following a review of a range of methodologies used in the study of material culture, texts, design and communications. The content analysis format is limited in that it provides only a sampling of the possible themes, formats, elements and factors that form part of any communications interchange. It is noted that museums can choose to adjust the format to suit their particular needs or priorities and that it is intended to be a starting point for those whose resources may not extend to more elaborate or detailed content analysis research.

Readers

The thesis recognises that readers are an important stakeholder in museum publications. Their perspectives and role in the communication cycle and ultimate determination of the success of a publication is incorporated through a discussion of museum evaluation practices involving the public and identifying the appropriateness of front-end, formative, and summative evaluations for publications. An existing member survey that included questions on publications was thus analysed and a focus group convened to

evaluate one of the case study publications: *The Pioneer*. These methodologies identified reader views, use and perspectives. The case study shows the value of these approaches in evaluating existing publications and providing information useful for future publishing decisions.

The advantages of using an existing survey and its data were that recent data was able to be used from a geographically dispersed and statistically robust sampling of members. The limitations were that some questions of interest to this thesis were not canvassed. This was recompensed by convening a focus group where follow-up questions were able to be asked. However, it should be noted that this group was more geographically limited and of smaller representation.

The more concerning limitation is that the views of potential readers were not canvassed. The survey and focus group involved current members who already have some degree of commitment to and knowledge of the museum, its services and programmes, including publications. It should be noted that this is not unusual in current museum evaluation practices and occasions some discussion and admonishment. There is also currently little discussion of reader evaluation practices. Existing published studies provide scant information on the purchase of museum publications by non-museum visitors, book buyer demographics, or the use made of publications during a museum visit. These may be areas for further research by the wider museum publishing community.

An additional limitation of the research is that the publications and publishing of small historical societies with less well developed publishing programmes has only barely been touched on. However, this thesis will, I believe, have something to offer them in considering, developing or extending a publishing programme.

Conclusions

In the course of the research and as a result of these methodologies I have been able to establish that the role of publications for small historical societies mirrors that of larger museums. They establish the image, value, and nature of the museum with members,

stakeholders, and the museum and wider community. They reflect and support the museum's mission and goals: record and announce museum activities; and present, promote and interpret specific histories and views, values and ideas about history. Small historical societies tend to focus on a very specific audience largely comprising members. In some cases publications are the major activity and offering of a small historical society, particularly where the collection is small or negligible. In other cases publications are part of a larger set of programmes.

The research and methodologies have also helped establish that content analysis and reader evaluation of publications are easily adopted and useful ways of assessing the messages expected and received by readers and the alignment of publications with goals, the museum's mission and professional practices. Additionally the research and methodologies have provided a platform for bringing the publications of small history museums from behind the skirts of the publishing activity of large art museums, and identifying and suggesting areas for further professional investigation and debate by the museum publishing community.