



British Columbia
Museums Association
SINCE 1957

Best Practices module

STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

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The BC Museums Association gratefully acknowledges the financial assistance granted by the Government of Canada, through the Department of Canadian Heritage under the "Canadian Arts and Heritage Sustainability Program (CAHSP) - Capacity Building Component for Heritage Organizations.



Introduction

In the complex society in which we live, it is virtually impossible for a museum to make its way without establishing alliances and partnerships that work to strengthen its ability to fulfill its mandate. Museums establish short or long-term relationships with individuals, organizations, governments and businesses that contribute to the museum and, at the same time, provide some benefit to their partners. The details of these relationships vary, from direct financial or in-kind contributions in return for advertising or promotional opportunities, to cooperative ventures with other museums or community organizations. In all of these partnerships, there is recognition that museums are not alone and require allies and collaborators in order to better accomplish their own objectives.

One of the primary areas of collaboration for museums has always been within their own community. For decades, individual museums in British Columbia have joined together to meet and share ideas, to solve their common problems and to serve their constituencies more effectively. But, beyond this traditional coming together of the museum community, museums have only recently begun to explore areas of potential collaboration and partnership with other types of organizations or businesses.

In these times where funding for museums from the public purse is being more and more challenged and the “value” of the cultural sector is being questioned, museums are obliged to seek other sources of support. This may mean membership and involvement in arts, tourism or local organizations to achieve a stronger voice and to become more relevant to the community. But, it may also involve partnerships with the private sector that should force museums to examine what they have that would be of value to business. These partnerships with the business community, while having the potential to provide much-needed resources to the museum, can be fraught with danger if the museum does not carefully assess the benefits and hazards of such a relationship. Partnerships with the for-profit sector must, therefore, be strategic in the true sense of being a means for the museum to achieve its goals and objectives without compromising its values and the values of its community.

‘Strategic partnerships’, therefore, are ongoing relationships established with individuals, organizations, or government in which there is mutual benefit and in which there is a mutual commitment of resources in such a way that the objectives and mandate of the museum are furthered.



Types of Strategic Partnerships

The essence of strategic partnerships is developing relationships. In each of the general areas listed below, it is possible for a museum to establish ongoing relationships as opposed to one-time opportunities.

With Individuals - Museums can develop relationships with individuals who are committed to the same objectives as the museum or who contribute so that they can benefit from the tax incentives available.

TIP:

All one-time donors have the potential to become ongoing donors if they are provided with proper recognition and follow-up involving personal contact.

With Other Museums – Partnerships with other museums of like interest can be extremely beneficial for the exchange of exhibits, ideas, artifacts, and “tea and sympathy.” Two or more museums can also form partnerships for the purpose of joint marketing, sharing of personnel or expertise or exhibit production.

With Professional Organizations – A museum should be an institutional member of its national and provincial museum associations. In joining professional organizations, museums provide support for the organization’s activities on behalf of the museum, such as advocacy, standards development and lobbying. In return, the museum receives representation, access to information on advocacy issues and grant opportunities and forums for interaction with colleagues (conferences, training programs, etc.).

With Local, Provincial, National and International Governments – While many museums are funded or overseen by government, strategic partnerships with government more properly refer to partnerships established through programs where an objective of the government is furthered or met by the museum’s activities and the museum, in return, receives financial or other support. Programs such as “Reading the Museum” can assist government agencies to achieve their goals and, at the same time, benefit the museum.

With the “For Profit” sector – The “for profit” sector now recognizes that museums can provide opportunities for advertising its products or enhancing its image in the community. Very often alliances with the cultural sector provide a way for a business to receive brand or product exposure or to appear community-minded by being seen as a supporter of culture. In return for sponsorship or ongoing support, the museum is able to provide visibility and/or opportunities for museum facility use for the business’s events.

TIP:

Business partners treat museums similarly to an advertising agency; they buy a product or service with money from their advertising budget, not their charitable donations budget.



Types of Strategic Partnerships cont'd...

With Community Organizations – Partnerships within the community are essential and are a significant measure of a museum's relevance to its community. Local community organizations are often looking for meeting space, exhibit expertise, guest speakers, artifact loans or promotional support. If museum resources allow, the museum should welcome the opportunity to make itself more relevant and involved in its own community.

TIP:

Service clubs such as Rotary, Lions, Kinsmen, etc. are often looking for long-term relationships with museums. Service clubs are always looking for partners who can provide locations for fund raising activities and often want to become involved in long-term projects through funding or work parties.

With Educational Institutions – Local schools and educational institutions are frequently looking for ways to provide learning situations outside the classroom and museums are extremely well suited to accommodate them. Beyond the one-time class visit to the museum, are ongoing opportunities for learning such as job shadow, internships or work parties.

With Funding Agencies – Local, provincial or national foundations and institutions can be approached on a regular basis once it has been established that the museum is able to provide excellent return for their investment. The museum, in return for the foundation's investment, can help to further the goals of the foundation and, in many cases, provide unique ideas and projects that achieve the mandate of the foundation. Often, the museum's creative ideas for funding can help the foundation broaden its perspective for future projects.

With Information Sources – The media is always looking for stories and/or photographs of events. Regular press releases or photo opportunities allow the museum to establish relationships with reporters and photographers. Newspaper columns are an excellent way for the museum to be recognized as an important part of the community. Journals, newsletters, websites, etc. are all looking for material and, once it is established that the museum can provide what they are looking for, the articles, information pieces, photographs, or video can be an excellent way for the museum to increase its exposure.

TIP:

Museum workers should be careful not to make public statements on behalf of the museum without authorization. All media contacts should be referred to one designated person who coordinates these contacts.

With Umbrella Organizations – Just as a museum needs to establish and maintain partnerships with peer organizations, it is valuable to belong to tourism, arts and festival or event organizations.



Key Elements for Partnership

Types of Support from Strategic Partners

- **Political** – Member driven organizations can have a strong voice on the political level through representation and advocacy.
- **Financial** – Many individuals or for-profit businesses are happy to provide annual financial assistance in return for recognition in the museum or to sponsor specific events or exhibits.
- **In-kind** – Businesses often are more willing to provide their products or services to the museum as a type of sponsorship rather than cash.
- **Marketing** – Businesses and organizations are often able to promote a museum or a special event through their own publications or advertisements.
- **Volunteer Help** – Sometimes partners are able to assist the museum by providing extra people to help with a project or event.

Need for Mutual Benefits

“Win-Win” situations are the best type of strategic partnerships. Both parties should benefit in some way from the relationship. Museums need to ask, “What can we do for this partner to help them achieve their objectives?”

Ethical Considerations – It must always be recognized that museums and museum workers should be guided by ethical considerations. At all times, the concept of the “public trust” should guide strategic partnerships, especially in the area of collections. Museum collections consist of natural or cultural property as well as intellectual property that are held as a public trust on behalf of the society that the museum serves. These collections are not to be seen as resources that are directly available to serve financial obligations through sale or as security for loans and they should not be “on the table” when negotiating partnership agreements.

In the same way, museum workers, whether paid or volunteer, should not be committed to undertake work that does not relate to the mandated activities of the museum.



Key Elements for Partnership cont'd...

Museum Standards

- **For artifact use** – The loan of artifacts, or their on-site use by partners, must be strictly governed by a loan policy that spells out the level of care that is expected. The loan policy must be part of the institution's collections policy and should clearly define the conditions under which artifacts may be used.
- **For facility/grounds use** – Often the use of museum buildings and/or grounds by strategic partners may be considered in establishing an ongoing partnership. Once again, the use of museum facilities should be guided by an overall concern for the collection and the environment in which it is housed.
- **Staff/board commitment** – There is a danger in committing staff or board members to undertake activities or assignments that take them away from their designated activities. Specific personnel or board members should be identified to act as the liaison with strategic partners.



Partnerships with the Private Sector

The old way of thinking among museums was “Businesses will give us money and support because we do good work and provide valuable services.” In this day and age, that attitude is fatal. We need to realize that businesses will “invest” in our museum because we are a vital part of the community and because we provide quality programs and educational products that meet their needs. Ways that the museum offers business partners opportunities to meet their needs without compromising the museum’s objectives include:

- **Advertising** in newsletters and on-site;
- **Premiums** – using free passes or discount coupons to the museum for their customers or distributors;
- **Direct mail** – Inclusion of information or promotion for the museum enhances the business’s own direct mail piece;
- **Enhancing the image of for-profits** amongst community members and, therefore, gaining public support.

Not all partnerships are beneficial to the museum and fall within the strategic objectives of the organization. Of particular concern are partnerships with businesses whose products are not compatible with the public or community wellbeing. Partnerships with these businesses can be detrimental to the stated purpose of the museum. Museums should also avoid partnerships where the organization, business or individual want access to or use of items from the collection that may endanger the artifact. Every proposed partnership should be carefully assessed in terms of its potential to harm the museum’s image or good standing in the community.



Memberships and Partnership Agreements

Many of the partnerships listed above are established through formal membership or simply the development of an understanding over time. While membership in a peer organization, a tourism association or a community organization such as the Chamber of Commerce brings certain membership benefits, active participation in the organization is necessary for that the partnership to be truly strategic. Other types of partnerships may require some form of more formal agreement for a more concrete definition of the terms of partnership. Especially where there is an exchange of money or where expectations on either side need to be spelled out, a formal partnership agreement is recommended.

- **Verbal Agreements** – Sometimes partnerships can be established simply through a “handshake agreement.” While these agreements are based upon trust, there is always a danger for misunderstanding if details are not outlined in writing.

- **A Memorandum of Agreement** – The most common form of partnership agreement is the Memorandum of Agreement or Understanding. In most cases, these do not require a lawyer as long as the details of the agreement are outlined and both parties sign the document.

- **Contracts** – Long-term agreements where there is a significant exchange of money and/or resources may require formal contracts drawn up by or at least reviewed by a lawyer.



Nurturing Strategic Partnerships

- **Recognition of Partners** – In most cases, strategic partners appreciate some form of recognition, through signage within the museum, acknowledgement in a brochure or catalogue, or in advertising. Even other non-profit or peer group organisations like to see the museum's membership acknowledged through some sort of visibility.
- **Follow-up** – Strategic partners should receive thank you letters for successful events or financially successful years as well as regular newsletters or invitations to openings.
- **Ongoing Monitoring of Partnerships** – Museums should assess their partnerships regularly to determine whether they are still relevant.
- **Communications** – A staff member or member of the Board of Directors should act as the liaison with a strategic partner, either as the representative to the specific organisation or the point of contact with a business or agency. Regular communication makes for better partnerships.



Resources

- Shawn Van Sluys. “*Cultural Collaboration: Art and History Interfacing with Communities.*” December 2003. Available on the Canadian Museums Association website. See:

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- James E. Austin. “*The Collaboration Challenge – How Nonprofits and Business Succeed through Strategic Alliances*”. The Drucker Foundation. 2000.

- Peter F. Drucker, et al. “*Meeting the Collaboration Challenge Workbook: Developing Strategic Alliances Between Nonprofit Organizations and Businesses*”. Foundation for Nonprofit Management Paperback, March 2002, Jossey-Bass. See:

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