

2011

Blogging: An Introduction for Museums

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Why Should a Museum Start a Blog?

The answer to this question will be different for different types and sizes of museums, but for all museums, realize that a blog can be a way to amplify and add interest to the “message” you want to send to your audience. It’s also a great way to build that audience by helping a museum link with people who are interested in the topics that they are blogging about. For example, a blog written by a curator of an old train depot museum may be indexed according to the topic “steam trains” and end up catching the eye of someone passionate about old trains. Also, it’s a great way to have content on the web that is changing – more quickly than your museum website will likely change, but less minute-to-minute than Facebook or Twitter (automatic ‘feeds’ can be set up so that when a new blog is posted, it will appear on your museum’s Facebook wall (and similarly, Facebook posts can be ‘fed’ to Twitter)).

There are myriad approaches to a blog. There are museum blogs, such as this one from Wilton House Museum in Richmond (<http://foundinthecollection.blogspot.com>), which focus on collections. Others focus on events and are a tool for outreach and marketing. Still others are more programming-related. Regardless of your blog’s focus (and it *should* have a defined focus), a blog allows you to lend a personal aspect to the museum’s online presence. Your museum website likely does not have a ‘personal face’ – a blog can give you that. A great example of this is the blog for the Edith Bolling Wilson Birthplace Foundation and Museum in Wytheville (<http://edithbollingwilson.org/?p=1485>). Leslie King, former director at the museum, did a wonderful job lending a conversational voice to the topics of her museum’s blog, and making it “fun” to visit. For example, when the museum began a twitter account, they called it the Cyber Canary (based upon some history related to Edith Bolling Wilson), and held a “contest” to come up with an appropriate name for the museum’s “canary” (they chose Cecil). Read the post here, and you’ll see what I mean: http://edithbollingwilson.org/?page_id=1026.

Developing a purpose and voice for your museum blog should be first and foremost as you plan its development. A blog with no consistent purpose or voice will flounder. Because VAM is such a diverse association that represents museum professionals doing a wide variety of jobs in many different types and sizes of museums, we found this area challenging. So, we focused our blog’s purpose around “Perspectives from the Field” (the tagline in the blog header - <http://vamuseums.blogspot.com>). This allows us a great deal of leeway in the types of posts we share, and it invites participation – from professionals who may want to author a blog post as well as from readers who may want to comment and join the discussion.

Blog Content

Who is going to write for your blog? How often will posts appear? How will your organization plan out the blog posts as part of its greater communications plan? These are questions to consider prior to getting started as well. While you want your blog to develop its own “voice” (usually much more casual and conversational than, say a website page describing a program or a newsletter to members), it will become stale before too long if you don’t “mix it up a little” with guest bloggers, various perspectives, and just a little of the unexpected.

Whatever you do, don’t develop a blog because it seems like “the next big thing” or because “everyone else has a blog.” Take stock of your overall communications plan, your organization’s mission, and your resources. So many professionals in museums today are over-extended as it is. If a blog is not a

possibility for your museum at this time, or doesn't fit with your organizational focus, then don't start one, and don't feel badly about it!

If, however, you have an interesting collection and a curator who loves to discuss pieces in it, perhaps a great way to tell those artifacts' stories would be through that person spearheading a collections-focused blog. Or, perhaps your museum is focused on creating richer programming for families. A blog can not only alert people to upcoming events and exhibitions (and tell them a little more detail than a website calendar or an email blast can), but they can extend programming by adding an online component. Perhaps you want to whet your audience's whistle prior to an upcoming exhibition of new art – if you can post some images online and discuss them, or give some background about the artists, then your blog can be a great teaching tool as well as a PR tool.

Blog Platforms

This is a moving target. What I write about blog platforms in 2011 will likely be obsolete by 2013. Blogger.com* (owned by Google) and WordPress.com are currently the most popular. Blogger is more user-friendly for a novice, while WordPress offers a more 'rich' environment in which to add tools and "widgets" to your blog for the ultimate in customization. Nina Simon's popular "Museum 2.0" blog (<http://museumtwo.blogspot.com>) is on the Blogger platform, while The Virginia Historical Society's blog is on WordPress (<http://vahistorical.wordpress.com/>).

Both of these platforms are highly functional and do not require an IT professional to create them (I have created both. I have an MAT in Elementary Education and – in addition to 8 years of teaching & administration experience - 7 years of experience working in communications – I have no IT training or skills to speak of). A newer platform that is quickly becoming popular is Tumblr, which seems to lend itself more to shorter blog posts and photo blogs.

**To confirm my 'moving target' assertion, Google is planning on re-naming Blogger "Google Blogs" as part of its Google + "push" this summer. Indeed, by the time you read this, it may have happened. (Read an article about the changeover from Mashable: <http://mashable.com/2011/07/05/google-blogger-picasa-rebranding/>)*

10 Blogging Tips + 1

1. Starting a blog is easy and free – the platforms I've already mentioned – Blogger, WordPress, and Tumblr, are all free and user-friendly.
2. Strive to post once a week. If this seems unlikely, think twice about starting a blog.
3. Turnaround is fair play. If you want to establish readership in your blog, take some time to visit others' blogs. Leave comments and participate. You can recommend your favorite blogs in your blog's "blogroll." (If you find a museum blog you like, check out their blogroll – you may find more blogs that interest you).

4. Keep your posts short. No one wants to read your thesis on blogger. Focus on being clear and succinct – a good rule of thumb is 200 - 500 words per post.
5. Blogging is not a sprint – it's a marathon. You will not begin getting feedback immediately. Don't get discouraged. Keep up your blog, and keep the content interesting and the voice engaging, and your blog will develop a readership.
6. Encourage your readers to comment. Think about ending some of your posts with a question, giving an opinion and inviting reactions, or asking for advice.
7. Remember that readers want information. It's certainly not difficult to find information on the Web. But it is difficult to find it from a trusted, reliable source. Your museum likely has some expertise in a specific area that will be of interest to your readers and followers.
8. Develop your own style. What keeps readers coming back is you—your voice, your style, your point of view and your clear, polished writing. Don't be afraid to let your personality shine through.
9. Have occasional guests. You *DO* want to develop a consistent “voice” on the blog, but guest bloggers and outside ‘experts’ offer fresh perspectives and may entice new audiences to your blog. Plus, it takes the burden off of the ‘default’ author. I try to schedule guest bloggers during weeks when I know I'll be extremely busy putting together a newsmagazine, or when I'm going on vacation.
10. Use visuals. It is easier than ever, with tools such as Google's Picasa or Yahoo's Flickr, and YouTube, to embed images and video into your blog.
11. Keep it fun. You should be having a good time with your blog (if you're not, ask yourself why you're doing it). If you are having fun and your passion shines through, then people are going to enjoy reading it and will come back for more.

There are Good Ones Out There!

As stated by Nina Simon of the popular *Museum 2.0* blog,

*“I believe that the museum blogosphere is still underdeveloped
and there's lots of room for people to share
their inspiration, experience, and ideas.”*

Check out the rest of her post, where she outlines six museum-related blogs that show promise (December 2010: <http://museumtwo.blogspot.com/2010/12/six-museum-related-blogs-you-might-not.html>).

We did our own research and found successful and innovative museum-related blogs. Here are just a few:

Wilton House Museum's *Found in the Collection*: <http://foundinthecollection.blogspot.com>

Hermitage Museum and Gardens' *Hermitage Collection Connection*:
<http://hermitagemuseum.wordpress.com>

These are two innovative blogs that use the museum collections to give life to the blog posts. The blog posts reciprocate by giving life to objects, telling their stories, and discussing the overall story the museum has to tell in the process.

Library of Virginia:

Multiple Exposure: Catablog of the Prints and Photographs Collection at the Library of Virginia http://www.virginiamemory.com/blogs/multiple_exposure/

Out of the Box: Notes from the Archives at the Library of Virginia
http://www.virginiamemory.com/blogs/out_of_the_box/

The LVA has two blogs. They've used the first, their "Catablog," to post prints and photographs from their collection. The second is similar to the Wilton House and Hermitage blogs in that it focuses on collections from the LVA archives. I think these collections-focused blogs are great because they not only enrich the experience of learning about the collection for visitors, but they extend the museum's reach and 'flavor' well beyond their walls by hosting 'conversations' about their collections for a worldwide audience.

Gari Melcher's Home and Studio at Belmont: *Special Events blog*
<http://belmontevents.umwblogs.org/>

This is a smart marketing move, aimed at people who may want to rent facilities at Belmont for a special event such as a wedding. Chocked full of great pictures and stories, I'm sure it's enticing for those looking for such a venue!

Smithsonian's National Postal Museum's *Pushing the Envelope*:
<http://postalmuseumblog.si.edu/>

This is an interesting blog in that it highlights the history behind various stamp designs, and it shares the content of letters written at different times in history. It's a smart move for this museum to have a blog, since they have a lot to offer the very-niche-but-also-very-passionate audience of stamp collectors around the world.

The Uncataloged Museum: <http://uncatalogedmuseum.blogspot.com/>
Museum 2.0: <http://museumtwo.blogspot.com>

These are two great blogs to follow if you are interested in timely museum topics in general (in addition to the VAM blog at <http://vamuseums.blogspot.com>). They offer up interesting topics that museums across the country and world are grappling with. They are great resources for museum professionals!