
The Absolute Basics of Collection Management

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Managers of local history museums know that connecting to your constituents is critical in remaining relevant. Losing connections with the community will almost certainly result in closure. One of the most effective ways to stay connected with your community is to have great knowledge of the collection. The ability to show people what you have, and to tell the stories behind your collection is a basic operational value of all museums.

Here are some tips that cover **The Absolute Basics of Collection Management**.

KNOW WHAT YOU HAVE

- Using a paper or digital format, capture information when the donor is present.
- Give each object its correct name. If an object has more than one name, record each as part of the record. A garment with two legs, worn on the lower half of the body is sometimes known as pants, trousers, or slacks. While the formal name may be trousers, people may search for the other names as well.
- Get the story behind the object(s) first-hand. These oral histories will form the basis of your interpretation.

KNOW WHO GAVE IT TO YOU

- Capture the who, what, when of donations.
- Record the name of the donor. If the donation is made by more than one person, record the proper name of each individual. This is especially important with spouses – Mrs. Frank Smith deserves to live on in your collection under her own name – Mary Elizabeth Jones Smith. These little details can help when trying to determine which object you're looking for.
- Record the details surrounding the donation. Include the day, month, and year of the deposit, and who actually brought the materials to you (if other than the donor).
- Make a complete list of the materials at the time of deposit, or very shortly after. Don't rely on your memory to sort through what was left, by whom, and on what date. Write it all down.

KNOW WHERE YOU PUT IT

- Having a collection is one thing; finding any object is another. Being able to find and show the one thing a family has requested goes a long way in solidifying trust in your museum.
- Record object locations consistently. Make a list of Buildings, Rooms, and Storage areas, including cabinets, drawers, and boxes.
- Assign locations for each object, regardless of it being on exhibit or not.
- If an object location changes, record the new location. Doing so consistently helps you maintain control of the collection.
- Plan for, and implement inventories. It's great if your collection can be inventoried completely each year. If this is not feasible, annually choose an area or a collection type to inventory.
- Inventories and locations are invaluable should something dire happen at your museum. Recording pertinent information at the beginning of the donation process will make disaster recovery much easier.

While not by any means comprehensive, these tips will help you formulate procedures and methods to manage your museum collection. Below are some resources to guide your processes. Remember that you can always contact the State Historical Society of Iowa for detailed help in collections management.

The following resources can help guide efforts to unlock the What, Who, and Where of your collection.

Collection Trust - SPECTRUM

<https://collectionstrust.org.uk/spectrum>

Museum organizations in the United Kingdom have made great progress in consolidating useful information under one organization. The SPECTRUM Guide is a step-by-step process designed to place museums on the right path toward total collection management.

State Historical Society of Iowa's Field Guide

<https://iowaculture.gov/history/research/collections/collections-care/objects/field-guide-museums>

Developed by State Historical Society of Iowa staff with input from museum professionals around the state, the Field Guide offers an overview to managing museums.

Connecting to Collections Care

<https://www.connectingtocollections.org/>

Begun in 2010 as an online community at the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), Connecting to Collections Care is now part of the Foundation for Advancement in Conservation. They focus on serving small and mid-sized cultural institutions to help them care for their collections in the best way possible.

National Park Service

<https://www.nps.gov/museum/publications/handbook.html>

The NPS Museum Handbook is a comprehensive guide to managing, documenting, accessing and using museum collections. Written in three parts, it covers museum collections, records, and collection use.