“Is Your Museum Ethical?”
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Chair: Rebecca Smith, Assistant Curator at Chatham Marconi Maritime Center, rsmith4048@gmail.com
Panelists: Julie Hart, Senior Director, Standards & Excellence Programs, American Alliance of Museums
Dennis Stark, First Vice President, Preservation Society of Pawtucket
Jim Welu, Director Emeritus, Worcester Art Museum
Holly Smith-Bové, President, Springfield Museums
Laura Howat, Trustee, Brattleboro Museum and Art Center

1. “Just Google It”
A small museum focused on local history hires its first full-time, paid director. As part of the director’s vision to professionalize the museum, she describes to the board her goals for the organization during her first year of service. When she mentions creating core documents, such as a Code of Ethics, several board members start to visibly squirm in their seats. Finally, one says aloud, “We never needed these documents before, and we’ve run this place just fine for decades. We have much more important things to worry about right now, like fixing our roof that is about to collapse. You should concern yourself with getting money for that. That’s why we hired you. Besides, can’t we just Google these things and just sign something taken straight off the web? We don’t have time for this nonsense.”

2. “Communication Breakdown”
The wife of the director of a children’s museum is an executive at an insurance firm that generously supports the museum. She greatly admires the museum’s marketing materials, which she finds strewn about her home as her husband reviews them. One night at a fundraising gala, she pointedly asks the museum’s communications director, “Can you design and print a thousand holiday calendars for my firm to distribute to our clients? In exchange for the calendars, I’ll arrange a large donation from my firm to the museum’s capital campaign.” The communications director assures her he will “follow up on her request and see if something can be worked out” and politely excuses himself to freshen up his wine.

3. “Treasures”
A slightly eccentric major donor at an art museum has amassed an eclectic collection of art over the course of her lifetime. Acquiring certain pieces of the donor’s collection would allow the museum to enhance its holdings and fill in important gaps; however, the donor collected a mishmash of works, wildly varying in artistic and cultural value. Most items are gifts from her artist friends, but a few are tchotchkesque, antique-store finds she loves. The donor has a warm relationship with the museum’s staff and stops by to visit with the director one afternoon. She confesses, “My heart is really set on donating my entire collection the museum. I can’t bear to see my treasures go anywhere else. After spending so much of my life here, I can think of no better home for my art. I know you’ll take excellent care of everything after I’m gone.”
4. “Have I Got a Consultant for You”
At a meeting of the advisory group for a botanic garden, the group discusses the programming goals for the upcoming year created by staff members. One advisor is the CEO of a consulting firm that regularly and generously donates money to the institution. He blurts out, “We really need to hire my team to consult for the botanic garden. The firm has been doing in-depth analysis of the area and can make sure we market our programs effectively. I enjoy serving on this board and lending my expertise pro bono, but putting my team on this would make such a difference here. What channels do I need to go through to make this partnership official and negotiate fair compensation? I’d love to have them start on this right away.”

5. “Not an Exact Science”
A mid-sized museum of science and industry with waning attendance decides to rent a blockbuster exhibition to generate some buzz and admission sales. The director chooses an exhibition about computer technology in popular animated children’s films. His marketing director is thrilled, but his head of exhibits is despondent. Her voice trembling at bit, the head of exhibits points out, “This exhibition is heavy on cute, animated characters and very light on technology content. Why don’t we just turn ourselves into a movie theater while we are at it? Families will be coming here in droves, but will they learn anything?”

6. “A Painting is Worth a Thousand Programs”
A history museum owned by a city calls together a meeting of its governing body and constituency to discuss how it can best serve the community. The city’s mayor, a former educator and administrator in the public school system, suggests the museum sell off some of its paintings to be able to pay for more programming with local schools. She makes an impassioned plea to the crowd: “If we can auction off those paintings, a thousand classrooms can connect with the rich resource of our city’s museum. Those paintings equal real money, which can be transformed into programs essential to supporting our public schools and enriching the lives of our children.”

Resources for Working with Institutional Codes of Ethics:

AAM’s Developing an Institutional Code of Ethics Reference Guide:

AAM’s Code of Ethics Activity Guide:

AAM’s Information Center Sample Documents (tier 3 museum members only):
http://www.aam-us.org/resources/information-center/sample-documents

NEMA’s Museum Document Exchange Program:
http://www.nemanet.org/documentexchange/index.htm