

STARTING A MUSEUM

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1. Write a One Page Museum Description

Write a one page description of the museum you would like to create. You can use my museum questionnaire as a starting point for your new museum description. What type of museum are you creating? science center?, art museum? local history? Then, purchase two books, Please Understand Me and Built to last. I am consistently surprised how the personality of the founder of a museum comes through in the opened museum. It makes sense, the founder, builds a Board of Directors, the Board of Directors hires an Executive Director and the Executive Director hires staff. We all tend to gravitate to people similar to us, so the personality of the founder is often similar to the staff of the museum 10 years latter. Roy Shafer led a workshop I attended, where we were each given a personality test, before handing out the results of the test, he asked us to look to our left and to our right and notice the people sitting next to us. We then opened the personality test and the entire room had organized ourselves according to our personality type. Be very honest, "is your personality the personality you want reflected in the opened museum?" If not, find Board Members to your weakness.

2. Community Meeting

The second step of starting a museum, organize a community meeting, invite politicians, "want to be politicians", parents, teachers, school superintendents and real estate developers and ask "what type of museum do you want?". DO NOT show drawings of the proposed museum, DO NOT describe the museum you are planning. Listen. Collect the names and email addresses of the participants and ask if they would be willing to attend future meetings. Do not fall into the trap of "if I build it they will come", find out what the community wants.

3. Visit 20 Museums

As part of starting a museum, visit twenty museums of the type you are interested in opening. Keep notes and take lots of pictures. What is their yearly attendance? What is their ticket price? Find out their operating costs, the National Center for Charitable Statistics is a wonderful resource. Notice the smallest details, what does the floor staff wear? Ask to do a "back of house tour", Do they have a museum store? What type of ticketing system do they use? Write a thank you note to any staff you meet during your visit. ^

Join a museum organization and get involved. Go back to your community and show them the findings of your museum visits.

4. Real Estate Developers are your friends

Make an effort to meet the real estate developers in your community. Every project of starting a museum, I have ever worked on has in some way been motivated by real estate. Make friends with real estate developers, tell them of your museum idea. You will be surprised how your plans will resonate with real estate developers. You are supplying a community resource. Do NOT make any agreements with real estate developers until after you have raised more than half of your capital.

5. Do the numbers

Starting a museum is very expensive, as a rule of thumb, the exhibition space is half of the overall space, a 4500 exhibition space becomes a 9000 square ft building at \$200 per square foot of new construction is \$1.8 million dollars, plus approximately, \$150 to fit out the gallery spaces, \$675,000, total \$2,475,000 in start up costs plus operating costs. If you use an average of \$40 per square ft for operating costs your yearly operating costs would be \$360,000 (salaries, utilities, maintenance), not including an endowment. Create a business plan, can you earn at least 50% of your yearly expenses? Be conservative with your annual attendance figures. Too many museums have gotten into trouble using optimistic attendance figures. Attendance in the second and third year of a new museum can fall off 20%-30% (or more). Plan to the third year of operation, too many museums only plan to the opening of the museum. Plan to your third year, not to opening.

6. Own the words

Research all of the words that describe your planned museum, the more specific you can be, the better. Use Google Analytics and purchase domains related to the words that describe the museum. Create a name for the organization, be very specific; San Francisco Maritime Museum, Techniquet, San Mateo County History Museum.

7. Non-Profit

Up to this point there is no need to form an non-profit, it is an advantage to wait. Get people involved, build a community around the museum need, then form the non profit. The best museums are those that grow out of a community need. Organize your Board of Directors. Your Board should include, politicians, business people, investment experts, real estate developers, experts in the field of the museum, teachers,

school superintendents and potential donors. A larger Board of Directors (20-25 people) is fine while you are raising funds. Form a 501(c)(3) .

8. Pre-View Facility

As part of starting a museum, create a preview facility, a smaller version of your yet to be opened museum. The preview facility may be very small and only temporary. The preview facility is great for talking with potential donors, now you can walk donors through a small version of the final museum. Speak to architects and exhibition designers. Tell them of your plans, select an architect and an exhibition designer, tell them “we have limited resources at this point, but if you help us with the preview facility (pay them a reduced fee) you will have the contract for the museum”.

9. Raise Money

Use the Board of Directors. A favorite story of mine is an Executive Director needed \$500,000 for a new exhibition, he called a meeting and said to the Board of Directors “I need \$500,000, each of you either needs to contribute \$25,000 or find someone who will contribute \$25,000.” at the end of the meeting a Board member wrote a check for the full \$500,000. For more information read my article “Museum Fundraising”

10. Share the Vision

The best fund raising tools I know of starting a museum;; a preview facility, an icon (The Discovery Science Center Cube, The world’s largest Brachiosaurus at the Children’s Museum of Indianapolis), and a museum preview booklet (including architectural illustrations and exhibition illustrations). As you start the design process walk potential donors through the preview facility (with museum preview booklet in hand) and discuss with them potential icons of the facility, your exhibition plans and involve the donors with the building architecture and exhibition design. Try not to make any promises for naming opportunities until you are confident that you will reach your capital campaign goals.

If you are wanting a more in-depth treatment of how to start a museum, you can purchase my book Museums 101 which is written to be an A-to-Z resource for those looking to start a museum.

For more information about starting a museum read my articles, “Museum Exhibition Design” and “Museum Fundraising”