

Demonstrating Relevance

By Mark Sundlov

At the AASLH 2015 Annual Meeting in Louisville, AASLH's Field Services Alliance (FSA) affinity group hosted a Current Issues Forum to discuss the importance of, and the methods for, history organizations to demonstrate relevance to their various audiences. FSA "is an organized group of individuals, offices, and agencies that provide training opportunities, guidance, technical services, and other forms of assistance to local historical societies, archives, libraries, and museums in their respective states or regions." Through their interactions with so many different history organizations, FSA members are well positioned to see trends (both good and bad) in the operations of those organizations. One trend that FSA members have seen in history organizations is a lack of appreciation for the importance of demonstrating relevance to their many audiences. Many of the difficulties that history organizations face have their roots in their failure to demonstrate relevance to their various audiences. The forum addressed the importance of demonstrating relevance and provided some tools to help history organizations succeed in that endeavor.¹

The importance of demonstrating relevance in order to achieve success seems obvious. However, we often overlook that important work, simply take it for granted, or only passively pursue it. We all love history. We all love what we do, we naturally see its inherent importance, and we assume that others do as well. That is a dangerous assumption. Others do not always and naturally see the importance of our work. Or, if they do believe the work we are accomplishing is important, it quickly becomes irrelevant when compared to other things that they have given higher priority.

What do we mean by relevance? Relying on (but not going too deeply into) the *theory of relevance*, as developed by linguists Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, I'll provide a brief explanation. Foremost, relevance begins with communication. If we are not communicating, or providing *inputs* for a listener, we cannot create relevance. Second, when communication begins, both the speaker and the listener have a reasonable expectation of relevance. The speaker assumes she has something relevant to say, and the listener expects to hear something relevant. This is good news, for it means we start off on the right foot. However, once the communication has started, in order to prove the relevance of her message, the speaker must ensure two things about the message—it must be *helpful* to the listener and the message must be *easily understood*. If the listener does not perceive the message as helpful toward achieving her goals and/or if the listener has a difficult time understanding the message, the listener will perceive the message as irrelevant and will go about her day—she will not act upon the message.²

While this understanding of relevance seems rather straightforward, it is surprising how many of us fail to appreciate its importance and execute it in our daily work. If we imagine the creation of relevance as a chain, we can understand that every link in the chain is essential for the overall success. The chain will break if:

- We do not communicate our message
- Our intended audience does not receive the message we are communicating (we might be shouting into the darkness, failing to overcome the cacophony, or using the wrong communication platform)
- The message we communicate is not perceived as helpful by the receiving audience
- We are sending our message to the wrong audience
- Our message is muddled or difficult to understand.

We have all witnessed, experienced, and committed these failures.

To create relevance, our messages must create a positive effect in our audience (or excite them with the promise of future positive effects) and must be

readily understood. When crafting messages, we must understand we have multiple audiences and that those audiences have different goals and different styles of communication.

To create broad relevance and support for history organizations, we must craft multiple messages for these multiple audiences. We must consciously consider how we can help those different audiences and how we can most easily communicate to them. History organizations have seemingly countless audiences and serve many communities (and sub-communities). While accepting the fact that we cannot be all things for all people, if we want our organizations to succeed we can start by identifying a number of key constituent groups and begin communicating with those groups in ways that create relevance.

The participants in our session, through small and large group discussions, developed a list of proven or promising approaches to developing and demonstrating relevance to four audiences: Educators, Neighbors, Community Leaders, and Donors. The result of those discussions is the foundation of this technical leaflet. It is meant to assist organizations struggling to find paths to relevance and to support those who work in field services who are responsible for assisting them. There is a nearly endless list of different audiences, with different (sometimes conflicting) needs and interests, that history organizations serve. This technical leaflet, coupled with an understanding of the theory of relevance, establishes a pattern of communication (and action) that can be repeated with any audience. The remainder of this leaflet will address ways to demonstrate relevance to each of these audiences.

Educators

Throughout the historic trajectory of museums and history institutions, working with schools and educators has increasingly solidified itself as a basic and expected function of operations. Increasingly, museums have been expected to fill a role much more significant than the end-of-the-year, blow-off-some-steam, run-around-and-scream field trip. Teachers just don't have time for that nonsense anymore. This role has developed partly because some museums have successfully demonstrated relevance to what teachers are attempting to accomplish—mainly to educate children. Some museums have been able to demonstrate this better than others. Those that have demonstrated relevance to educators have crafted their communication with educators in a way that enables educators to quickly realize how museums can help them fulfill their own objectives (and, of course, the museums have successfully delivered that help).

Again, the first and most critical link in demonstrating relevance is the initiation of communication. Communication, open, two-way dialogue between

educators and museum staff (be they paid or unpaid, full- or part-time, single job function or multi-hatted), is the most critical step that history organizations can take to establish relevance with educators. Simply put, if your institution is irrelevant to local schools and educators, ask, “How am I communicating with those educators?”

- Have you called or written them and asked if you can visit them and explain how you can help them?
- Have you invited them to visit your museum and offered tours of your exhibits and facilities?
- Have you requested their advice (or asked them to participate in an evaluation) on ways to help them achieve their goals?
- Have you hosted a community open-house or an educator appreciation night?

If you haven’t initiated, or are not continually nourishing, open dialogue with educators—start now. If you’d like to be relevant to your local educators, you should be able to answer “Yes” to many of the previous questions. Opening conversations is the first link in demonstrating your relevance and will eventually make a significant difference for your organization.

Remember, it’s not just the teachers that will ultimately determine your relevance with educators. It will likely be necessary to open these educator-related communications, and to demonstrate relevance not only to frontline educators, but also to the school boards, to your own board, and to funders and other supporters. *It is critical to remember that to create relevance, the message must be clear and demonstrate to the receiver of the message how what they are hearing is going help them.* What educators find helpful to their cause may not be the same things other decision-makers find helpful to their cause. Be prepared to craft messages for all audiences involved—all of whom will have different, but related, goals.

When you start (or improve upon) communication with educators, you must *clearly communicate* how your organization can *help them* meet required content and skill development standards. When educators bring students to your organization, they are coming with the expectation that it can help their students learn content and skills that they cannot necessarily learn in the classroom. Students will likely be tested on skills and content they were expected to learn over the course of the year and will be expected to demonstrate a minimum level of proficiency. The results of those tests can ultimately contribute to a number of critical decisions at the school and school district. You help educators by helping them achieve their educational goals. This is how you are relevant. In other words, to become and remain relevant with educators, you must not waste their precious time.

Fortunately, history organizations are well positioned to help teachers educate students. You have a

variety of resources that educators cannot find in any other location, including your rich collections and an in-depth knowledge of your subject matter. Your organization has the collections that can lift the history out of the textbooks and place it directly in front of the students. You can enable students to learn skills and content in a unique way. Work with educators to make that a reality.

Once you have demonstrated an initial level of relevance to educators, you have made a significant step in the right direction. Here are some additional concerns that you should address in order to maintain that relevance.

- **Your educational offerings must match state standards in content and skill development.** If you have healthy communication with your local educators, they can help you make sure this is a reality.
- **Your organization must be accessible.** Sometimes even after you have demonstrated relevance there are legitimate financial and logistical hurdles that educators must overcome to get their students to your location. Creatively find ways to assist educators to overcome those hurdles (e.g., assist with finding funds for busing) or bring your programming directly into the classroom.
- **Design your programs to meet the time constraints educators face.** Again, clear communication with your local educators is necessary to make this a reality.
- **Understand the importance of true collaboration and avoid duplicating services.** Smaller organizations can especially benefit from collaboration with others to enhance their offerings. Duplication of services (two organizations offering similar programs in a single locale) will result in one of the organizations not being able to establish relevance to educators.
- **Consider the costs you impose on educators.** Have you created a financial hurdle that educators cannot overcome? Is that financial hurdle actually necessary to help you meet your bottom line or is it poorly conceived with overlooked implications? Answers to financial questions (and needs) will vary by organization, but you must consider them. Your goal should be to minimize the financial impact on educators who find your organization relevant and would like to visit.
- **Remember that educators also exist outside of the classroom.** There are educators in home schools, retirement homes, prisons, and many other locations who would find your work relevant. You may find that your organization is best suited to work with a particular set of educators. Expand your horizons beyond your local schools.
- **Consider the impact of different languages and cultures in your area.** You may be unwittingly closing yourself off to an entire neighborhood or community due to the creation or maintenance of barriers.

Neighbors

In my professional life, there are few things more disheartening than a history organization irrelevant to its neighbors. This happens for a number of reasons. However, like all instances of irrelevance, communication (or lack thereof) is often at the root. The assumption and expectation of relevance on behalf of the history organization often accompanies (and sometimes is erroneously justified by) the lack of communication. History organizations that suffer from irrelevance all too often also suffer from some level of hubris. We hear expressions of disbelief from organizations who just don't understand why their communities don't appreciate them more. Typically, these organizations are sitting back, expecting the community to come to them in what would amount to a one-way relationship. These organizations are often paralyzed by stagnant boards, low volunteer participation, low attendance, little community participation in programs, and a general lack of involvement and excitement in the organization. They become irrelevant to their neighbors.

So, what can history organizations do to become relevant to their neighbors? Institutions have three significant responsibilities:

- Know audiences.
- Be open (physically and mentally) to neighbors.
- Support neighbors (collect and preserve their objects and their stories; open your space to your neighbors) and be an active participant in neighborhoods.

1 Know Your Audience

The idea that history organizations must be sincerely involved with their communities underpins all of these responsibilities. Organizations should encourage staff to be actively involved with other community organizations and efforts. That involvement can lead to staff members serving as ambassadors for their museum and to their participation in meaningful, selfless work with and for their communities. Additionally, all of these responsibilities reveal the core tenets of relevance theory. Organizations must be openly and clearly communicating with their neighbors while offering something meaningful to the neighbors.

Knowing your audience can happen in a number of ways. Formal evaluation programs like AASLH's Vistors Count! can provide your organization with a better understanding of your current audience and can help you appreciate what your audience considers to be your current strengths and weaknesses. Conducting such an evaluation will not only help you know the audience that is participating in your organization's offerings, but you can also learn who is not engaged with your organization. You may discover that your neighbors are not coming at all, thus confirming your fears that your neighbors consider

you irrelevant. When you discover your weaknesses through an evaluation, you can gradually begin to turn those around through the development of new programs and a realignment of your priorities.

Another way to get to know your audience, and more specifically your neighbors, is to go outside your walls and visit the community. Organizational neighbors are much like the neighbors in your personal life—if you want to build a relationship with them, you must be willing to knock on doors and introduce yourself. It is through introductions and visits that you can enter into the conversations that lead to friendships and relevance. In the professional world, knocking on your neighbors' doors can take a lot of different forms, including attending community meetings and getting involved with the efforts of other organizations in your neighborhood. Sure, this type of relationship building takes time. But ultimately, once an institution builds and nourishes healthy, reciprocal relationships, new opportunities will open up that can lead not only to the betterment of your organization but to the betterment of your neighbors and your community as well.

Like any relationship, getting to know your neighbors will take time and commitment. However, if you are not willing to get to know your audience and build relationships, you run the risk of your neighbors perpetually considering you irrelevant. That irrelevance will leave you without their support and participation, and this could leave you vulnerable when difficult community decisions, especially funding decisions, are being made. That lack of involvement in your community also increases the difficulty of successfully preserving historic properties, important efforts many history organizations commonly undertake.

2 Be Open to Your Neighbors

The second significant responsibility is to be open to your neighbors—both physically and mentally. Being physically open simply means that your doors must be open when your neighbors are able and likely to visit. The most obvious example of this is the importance of opportunities for your neighbors to visit during the evening and weekends—when they are generally not working. Physically open also means physically accessible—your facility must be accessible for all members of your neighborhood. Mentally open primarily refers to issues of interpretation in your exhibits and programs. Are you inclusive? Do you share stories that are of interest to your neighbors? Are you engaged with your community when you develop new exhibits and programs? Answering “No” to any of these questions increases the chances of your irrelevance to your community.

3 Support Your Neighbors

The third significant responsibility is all about serving your neighbors. By supporting your neighbors and

validating the importance of their history by collecting, preserving, and sharing their objects and stories, you will build upon a relationship of communication that leads to relevance. Additionally, you can serve your audience by opening your space to them. If you have meeting space or other useful facilities, ensure your neighbors know that that space is open for their needs. Perhaps you can offer special rental rates for organizations who need meeting space but have limited budgets.

Along with those three significant responsibilities, there are a number of other important considerations for establishing neighborhood relevance.

- *Be involved in the events and associations that are part of your community.* For example: staff can serve as volunteers, have an interactive booth or display at events, or financially support events. There are countless other ways to get directly involved.
- *Establish yourself as an anchor for neighborhood stability and safety.* Perhaps you can create afterschool programs for latchkey children, enabling them to come to your organization where they can be safe from potentially dangerous neighborhoods. Or offer programs such as “Safe Trick-or-Treat” for children in neighborhoods where trick-or-treating might not be a safe option.
- *Serve as a place for the community to congregate.* Open your doors to community forums, community events, or other activities.
- *Collaborate with organizational neighbors.* Find out what other organizations are doing in your neighborhood. Are there avenues for you to collaborate and use your strengths in those activities?
- *Develop visual and oral exhibits based on the community’s history.* Let your neighbors see themselves and share their stories through their exhibits.
- *Take the time to gain a deeper understanding of your neighbors.* Shed any previous stereotypes and develop your understanding of who they are, what their concerns are, what their strengths and weaknesses are, how you can serve them, and how you can work together to enrich your community. Listen and learn from your neighbors.
- *Use your immediate space to discuss and interpret your larger neighborhood space.*
- *Utilize micromarketing.* Rely on community-based platforms to market to your community—placing less reliance on larger market platforms that may be less relevant to your immediate community.
- *Be nimble and well positioned to react consistently to contemporary concerns.* Remove or diminish overly burdensome bureaucratic systems that inhibit your ability to be flexible.
- *Know the needs and concerns of your audience.* Don’t jump onto a national bandwagon for the sake of jumping on a bandwagon—especially if it is irrelevant to your audience or neighbors.

- *Work with and support your local schools.*
- *Invite your community to assist with the development and curation of exhibits.*

Donors

Generally speaking, our best intentions cannot be fulfilled without at least some financial support. While history organizations have multiple revenue streams, typically they all rely on philanthropic donors, foundations, or granting organizations, at some point. Foundations and granting agencies typically have well defined missions and goals they are attempting to achieve with their donations and/or grants. In procuring this financial support, institutions must demonstrate relevance to these donors. Unlike demonstrating relevance to educators and neighbors, demonstrating relevance to donors can be more formal and sometimes more challenging.

But don’t forget demonstrating relevance always begins with communication! When working with foundations and granting agencies, communication often begins with thorough research. Before approaching a funding source, know what the funder is interested in funding. What is the funder trying to achieve? What types of organizations does the donor support? Many funders only fund specific types of projects with specific goals. Pursue funders that find your work relevant to their own. One source to locate appropriate funders is the Foundation Directory Online, a service of the Foundation Center (www.foundationcenter.org). Although you can use the Foundation Center basic tools to find foundations in your area, the directory has powerful search tools that can help you locate foundations that will find your work relevant to their goals. (To access the full capacity of the database you will need a subscription; your local library may have a subscription and may be able to provide you with access.)

For granting organizations such as the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Institute of Museum and Library Services, search their websites to learn about their missions, the different grants they offer, eligibility requirements, and ultimately whether or not your proposed project will be relevant and eligible. At Grants.gov you can search for federal grants appropriate for your organization and subscribe to receive messages when grants become available.

Begin all of this work with the development of a fundraising plan. The plan will give your organization direction while contributing to the efficiency and effectiveness of your fundraising. The plan should identify and communicate how you can deliver history-connected impact through measurable, specific outcomes and compelling narratives. The plan should also set a path for you to establish relationships with diverse funders according to priority projects.

Once you've determined appropriate funders for your projects, initiate the communication that will enable you to demonstrate the relevance of your organization and programs. That demonstration of relevance, coupled with a solid project plan and other financial or community support, will help ensure you successfully receive funding from your targeted organizations.

Additional items that support you as you demonstrate relevance (or help you sustain that relevance) are:

- Develop a carefully constructed, well thought-out case statement. Referencing back to the relevance theory, this case statement should clearly and concisely communicate your need and how fulfilling that need will be mutually beneficial to your organization and the funder.
- Prepare narratives, stories, and examples that demonstrate your need and your relevance.
- Develop measurable, specific outcomes that demonstrate how proposed projects will help you meet your mission, serve your audience, and meet the mission of the funder.
- Successfully steward the funds you have received and the relationships with the donors who contributed those funds.
- Develop methods to publicly recognize and show appreciation toward funders who have supported your organization.
- Demonstrate your ability to use the power of history to transform lives and benefit your community.
- Build relationships with other organizations with a goal of accomplishing significant programs or events for the community.
- Develop a portfolio of other donors and be prepared to demonstrate the investment of other funders in your work.

Community Leaders

The final audience the forum examined was community leaders. This audience is comprised of the political leaders who make decisions at the different levels of government—city council, county commission, state and federal legislators, government executives—and the leaders of other government-based or -funded organizations and departments: convention and visitors bureaus, tourism departments, and the like.

Many history organizations receive (or would like to receive) funding from local, state, and federal governments. In order to do that, organizations must establish a strong argument for a portion of limited tax-based funds and clearly demonstrate their importance and relevance within their communities. If organizations have previously established relevance to educators, neighbors, and other funders, demonstrating relevance to community leaders should come easier. However, if organizations are still seen as irrelevant by local educators and the people and other

organizations within their community, it will likely prove very difficult (or impossible) to gain the support of community leaders.

Three significant actions are necessary to demonstrate relevance and importance to community leaders. The first is economic. One of the primary actions is to demonstrate the key role you can play in the local economy, more specifically, the multiplier effect that museums and other tourism destinations create. Economists define the multiplier effect as “the total sales, output or other measure of economic benefits generated once the initial visitor spending has worked its way through the economy...through inter-industry transactions (the ‘indirect impact’) and through employee consumption expenditures (the ‘induced impact’).” In simpler words, when tourists visit your institution, they spend money at the museum. That money enables the museum to create and maintain local jobs. It also enables the organization to contract with local businesses to sustain operations. Those contracts enable local business to sustain their business (and pay their employees) and also reinvest in the local community. This is “indirect impact.” Museum employees spend their money in the local community on living and recreation expenses. Through that, the museum employees support other businesses and sustain other jobs. This is the “induced impact” wherein a dollar an out-of-town tourist spends at a history organization sets off a multiplier effect that sustains jobs and local businesses. The impact of that one dollar is multiplied as it works its way through the local economy.³

While it is widely agreed that it is very difficult to accurately measure the multiplier effect in any given industry and locale, economists have proven the principle. So while you may not be able to supply accurate multiplier figures to community leaders, you can definitely argue the principle of the multiplier effect. Additionally, many museums have found creative ways to determine where visitors are spending their money while in town. (The use of front-desk surveys and the distribution of coupons is one way to track visitor spending.)

Although you may not have the capacity to conduct your own economic impact study, collaborating with other humanities or tourism organizations can enable the completion of such a study. Minnesota museums banded together to complete such a study and clearly demonstrate their significant economic impact. “In 2011, Minnesota’s museums directly infused \$337 million in spending into Minnesota’s economy. Including indirect impacts, museum wages and spending contributed \$690 million to the state’s economy.” Additionally, Minnesota museums “directly employ an estimated 1,700 full and part time workers, paying \$80 million in wages.” These numbers speak volumes to community leaders who are making important funding decisions.⁴

The second action is political. Make the point to community leaders that your institution serves their constituents. Our institutions play an important role in the development of the social and cultural opportunities in a community. We help create holistic communities that generate pride of community within its citizens. Additionally we improve student education through our work with schools. When we make community leaders aware of these additional, positive impacts, we help them understand that we are helping them by helping their constituents—we demonstrate our relevance to their goals.

The final action is active participation. We must be active community participants and assume leadership roles within the communities we serve. Our active engagement demonstrates we understand that

our organizations are part of something larger than ourselves. That selflessness can ultimately benefit our organizations.

Among the importance of demonstrating our economic impact, stressing our service to their constituents, and our active participation in the community, other factors help organizations build and sustain relevance in the eyes of community leaders:

- Connect and serve the goals of the community and its leaders and not always (or only) our own organizational goals.
- Open dialogue and nurture relationships with community leaders and their staffs. In that relationship, as in any relationship, remember to ask, “What can I offer you?” And remember to offer support as often as you ask for support.

THE HISTORY RELEVANCE CAMPAIGN

From the micro level of institutional relevance to the macro level of the relevance of our discipline, community relevance is a key theme of our work. The History Relevance Campaign (HRC) is a diverse group of history professionals posing questions about what makes the past relevant today. The campaign serves as a catalyst for discovering, demonstrating, and promulgating the value of history for individuals, communities, and the nation. It is building on past conversations and attempting to bring together groups across the history spectrum.

The HRC recognizes the continuing need for the entire history field—history professionals, academic and public historians, historic preservationists, educators, archivists, filmmakers, everyone engaged in the history enterprise—to use a common language to articulate why history is relevant and to demonstrate how historical research teaches skills vital to the future of our communities, our states, our regions, and our nation.

To that end the HRC led a series of national conversations about history’s value, and the result is the Value of History statement (<http://on.aaslh.org/EndorseHRC>). Our hope is that various components of the history field will widely embrace and adapt the seven values in their own work. So far, more than 100 organizations have endorsed the statement.

The HRC has selected three initial target groups on which to focus: history organizations, the K-20

education community, and funders. All of these groups have potential for widespread impact. The HRC created task forces to focus efforts toward each audience.

Three projects are at the forefront of the HRC’s work:

1 The Impact Project is an effort to find examples of history organizations who are not only doing impactful programming that demonstrates history’s relevance in the community, but also collecting and analyzing evidence of that impact. By identifying and documenting these best-practice projects, others can learn from them. This project can also inform the efforts of funding agencies desiring to require documentation of impact.

2 National Governors Association. The HRC has begun work with the National Governors Association Education and Workforce Committee to help administrators at the state level articulate and promote the value of connecting the past to the present.

3 The HRC Tool Kit project is an ongoing crowd-sourced resource that will help organizations of all sizes better articulate the value of history to their many different audiences, from Chambers of Commerce to prospective funders, community leaders, visitors, local students, and the press.

Together we can increase the volume of our conversation and make the case that the study of the past is vital to healthy communities in the future. As we’ve written in the HRC Impact Statement, “People value history for its relevance to modern life, and use historical thinking skills to actively engage with and address contemporary issues.”

- Find out how community leaders perceive your organization. Is it the perception you want? How can you work to change it if need be?
- Demonstrate to community leaders that you have the potential, through creative collaborations and leveraging, to increase the capacity of cultural organizations in your locale.
- Remind community leaders that you serve a critical role in protecting things that their constituents care about. You are entrusted as the responsible steward of the community's treasured objects and stories.
- Act as a venue for engagement where dialogue can occur that shapes the future of the community.

Conclusion

A history organization must actively demonstrate relevance if it is to successfully meet its mission. The theory of relevance informs us that to demonstrate relevance we need to actively communicate. In that communication, the receiver of the message must easily understand the message and the receiver must readily be excited about how the message (and expected follow-up actions) can benefit them. History organizations have multiple audiences to which they must demonstrate their relevance. Those audiences receive messages differently, and each is seeking different types of assistance. To create relevance among different audiences, museums must:

- Begin (or sustain) communication with those audiences.
- Craft an easy-to-understand message for each audience
- Include in that message how the museum can help or support the needs of the particular audience.

Once an institution demonstrates relevance to an audience, it must deliver on the help that the original message promised.

This technical leaflet is meant to assist history organizations with their demonstration of relevance to four key audiences: Educators, Neighbors, Funders, and Community Leaders. However, history organizations have many more audiences than these four. Following the model presented here, organizations should examine their own audiences and how they can best demonstrate relevance to each of them. The days of assuming relevance, and being accusatory towards those who don't understand our relevance, are long past.

Acknowledgments

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¹ American Association for State and Local History, Field Services Alliance, community.aaslh.org/fsa.

² See Diedre Wilson and Dan Sperber, *Meaning and Relevance* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

³ See Endre Horváth and Douglas C. Frechtling, "Estimating the Multiplier Effects of Tourism Expenditures on a Local Economy through a Regional Input-Output Model," *Journal of Travel Research* vol. 37, no. 4 (May 1999): 324-332.

⁴ American Alliance of Museums, *Sample Economic and Educational Impact Statements*, www.aam-us.org/advocacy/resources/economic-impact-statement/samples.