

Raising the Dead
Ideas to pick & choose among for
stirring up interest in your Historical Society
~Linda Day, April 2006~

- ◆ **Brainstorm.** Get your core support together (serve food) and generate a list of all that is overwhelming you. Once the list is generated, it can be prioritized. A good spark for any time spirits are flagging.
- ◆ **Identify your goal.** For example, “getting more members” is different from “getting members more active.”
- ◆ **Take small steps; set achievable goals.** You may envision 100 members, but be sure to celebrate a rise from 10 to 12! Perhaps you have 12 boxes of textiles. Rather than plan to catalogue and conserve them all, set a goal (for example) of wrapping them in acid-free tissue paper by the end of the year. When that's done, you'll feel good. Another year you can get archival boxes (\$), or catalogue 4 of the 12 boxes, or... Structure the goals to reflect the help you can expect.
- ◆ **Write up “Job Descriptions.”** See if you can describe what it is you want to achieve and the steps necessary all on a 5x8 card. Once you know exactly what you are talking about you will be able to ask for help more clearly and others will be able to answer more fairly.
- ◆ **Have something specific** for people to do. “Join the Society” is less inspiring than, e.g., “box textiles,” or “list books,” “label artifacts,” “be our Internet liaison,” or “train to be our PR person.” You may even find it advantageous to be specific as to date and time--“next Saturday from 9 to 11” for example. Mary Phillips of [Salisbury](#) is an expert at this.
- ◆ **Call people; speak to them personally.** Admittedly, this requires one of two things—either a thick skin or a naturally gregarious personality. There are two approaches:
 - ✓ *Canvassing* is calling everyone you can think of to ask them to help with specific tasks for the Historical Society. The response rate is perhaps 1 in 15. The caller must repeatedly be cheerful, regardless of the response because the same person who turns you down this time may be able to help next time.
 - ✓ *Target calling* is calling a specific person who has a specific skill or interest to ask her to donate her skill, as it were. For example, suppose you know someone who keeps an herb garden. You think having a historic kitchen garden outside the door of your H/S building would be a nice touch. You ask the herb gardener if she would be willing to research a late 1700's kitchen garden (whatever the date of your bldg) and put one in. If she says “yes” it happens; if she says “no” it doesn't. The task and the person are matched 1:1 (unless you later meet someone else with the same interest).

- ✓ Notice that you do not have to actually do the calling. You can make up the list of names, numbers, tasks, as the case may be, and ask someone else—not even necessarily a member of the H/S—to do the calling for you. You may be able to find someone who is out-going, or “out there,” such as a teacher or the town clerk, someone active in church, the dump overseer, or a local police officer. There are lots of people whose work involves regularly dealing with the townsfolk.
- ◆ **Put out a newsletter.** Even a one-page flyer. Grantham's membership shot up to 60 following their first newsletter.
- ◆ **Bond.** It is acceptable to have events that do not directly support your mission statement if they bring people together and generate a good feeling relative to the H/S. Hampton hosts a successful pig roast every year.
- ◆ **Focus.** A fine line, I admit, in contrast to the previous note. Have a mission statement and be unabashed about sticking to it. You may lose some, but you will draw others who find they can support something if they only know what it is. Krista Katz of Mt. Kearsage Indian Museum can do a workshop with your officers, board, members, on the development and application of a mission statement.
- ◆ **Coordinate, Part A.** The H/S wants to woo children; schools serve children; what can come of teamwork? The H/S wants to improve its landscaping; the Garden Club knows how to garden; what can come of teamwork? The H/S wants to waterproof some (non-archival) storage boxes by painting the outsides; would the hardware store donate some of their “oops” paints?
- ◆ **Coordinate, Part B.** Looking for help? Tap “service organizations.” If there is a job you want to do all on one day, look for an organization that can rally its members. Women's Clubs, Elks, Rotary, Scouts, sport team, honor society, ski mobile club. They are not necessarily connected to the H/S, but they have enthusiasm and can be given directions.
- ◆ **Serve food.** Something as simple as grapes and ice water, if it comes to that, but do serve something any time you ask people to help. My father used to say (in his retirement), “If it's not fun, don't do it.” The corollary is, “If you have to do it and you don't want to, make it fun!”
- ◆ **Brag.** Take photos; issue press releases; put an easel up in the bank. Find a public way to say thank-you. The Poore Family Farm has a user-friendly photo distribution system with which they circulate pictures whenever they have events. Press releases issued after the event actually help draw people to the next event. Counter-intuitive, but effective.
- ◆ **Draw them in.** Chichester had a great teacup exhibition once. They invited everyone, not just members, to lend teacups for display. In the process they collected some good oral histories. And the up-shot was that oodles of people came in who didn't ordinarily, to see Aunt Elva's teacup on display.
- ◆ **Variety, the spice of life.** Most of your exhibitions will be of a permanent or long-standing variety. But set aside a focal point and change it as

regularly as possible. Consider having “guest curators,” (rotating) members who are invited to set up the focal exhibition. Your (*bona fide*) curator would invite the guest curator in to explore the collections, train the individual in handling and displaying, guide the signage, and so forth. But the topic, selection of artifacts, and style of presentation would be decided by the guest curator. This can also be done as an annual project with schoolchildren if you have a good partner in the system.

- ◆ **Include music.** It doesn't have to be the whole program; it can be “openers” or background music. But have it. Let young people have a venue at your events, or local musicians. Why not?
- ◆ **Have handables.** Have a collection of “extras” or reproductions that are set aside specifically to be handled. This is a draw not only for families with children but also for the sight-challenged community. They can all be kept at a particular place or they can be tagged yellow and distributed throughout the displays, with a sign at the entrance that reads, “Yellow-tagged items may be handled with respect.” (Thank-you to the Mariposa Museum for the expression.) (I suggest yellow for these reasons: It's cheerful; it is a light color, so requires care, symbolic of respect; it is the color of the sun and handling items enlightens the experience; if we all use the same color it will have a standardized meaning.)
- ◆ **Offer training.** People may be reluctant to be thrown to the wolves, as it were, but an offer of training before the task may set their minds at ease. This is most common for docents, but also applies to pretty much any work event.

Addendum

Suggestions for engaging the community, generated at an event hosted by
Arts Alliance of Northern New Hampshire

- ◆ Invite school field trips to your society. Create a study sheet for teachers to distribute prior to the visit. Visit the schools in August before students arrive; arrange to do a presentation of 20 min or so at a staff meeting; invite staff to tea at H/S.
- ◆ Treasure/scavenger hunt through the museum or the community.
- ◆ Host workshops of mutual interest to homeowners; e.g., how to preserve linens or photos, how to display historic items, etc.
- ◆ Host lectures. Humanities Council *Humanities To Go* as resource. Also, members/townfolk may have a focus of expertise they would share if asked.
- ◆ Column in newspaper with meeting dates. Press releases before & after events.
- ◆ Themed exhibitions.
- ◆ Genealogy services/resources for people and properties.
- ◆ E-mail & mail newsletters. Distinguish between “newsletters” (for members only) and “flyers” (for advertising purposes, town-wide distribution).
- ◆ Videotape and/or transcribe lectures for future generations. Publish an index thereof.
- ◆ Video or tape oral histories of community members. Hold a storytelling event; use artifacts to prompt memories; precede with a workshop on interviewing techniques; team with local reporters and/or teachers. Publish an index.
- ◆ Host Bring-A-Book/Item event. Read a short passage or tell story associated with item.
- ◆ Team with libraries: Libraries feature local history books; H/S complements with small exhibition.
- ◆ Create a time line; can be lent to schools; top of line show national events; bottom of line show local events.
- ◆ Host art exhibits and music events, in addition to focus on artifacts.
- ◆ Use volunteers in need of Community Service Hours (high school students).
- ◆ Take advantage of archaeologists looking for dig sites; stay in touch with area colleges/universities, history departments.
- ◆ Design traveling exhibitions: Culture Trunks can be borrowed by or taken to schools and retirement communities. Consider small exhibitions at banks, visitor centers, supermarkets, antique stores, etc.
- ◆ Encourage giving memberships and historical books as presents.
- ◆ Talk up the idea of bequests. Make your mission known.