

## **Getting to Know a New Community: Traveling a Two-Way Street**

Each ethnic group has preferences, a history, and a communications systems you need to learn. The best way to get to know them and the community as a whole is by making visits, preferably with a community member as your guide.

Become familiar with the means of transportation available to people who would be making the trip to and from the museum. Noticing how you feel as you arrive in a new place can make you more sensitive to the experience a new visitor may encounter at the museum.

Exploring the neighborhood acquaints you with various channels for local communication as well as the written and spoken languages that are used. Community newspapers, radio, and cable TV stations as well as neighborhood meeting places, community service agencies, bulletin boards, leaflets and posted flyers can all be used by the museum as means of communication. Your wanderings are likely to put you in contact with an agency or group that is compatible with your museum objectives.

Perhaps you learn about them from one of the papers you pick up, or an announcement you hear on the radio while browsing in a store, or a poster you notice at a coffee shop or during a conversation with a neighborhood resident.

This exploration gives you a direct, tangible, personal sense of the day-to-day environment of the community. They are only initial impressions, however. Regular contact with the people who live in and lead the community gives you the depth and breadth of knowledge upon which productive partnerships are built.

Attracting a new community requires finding and persuading its leadership that your museum has something to offer. Keeping in mind that you're traveling down a two-way street, determine which particular churches, agencies, or community groups are already working with the people whom you want to come to the museum. If you are focusing on developing a preschool audience, look for networks of child care centers, such as Head Start programs; church-based, or community agency-run day care centers; and local child care referral agencies. If your first phone call doesn't connect you with the person you are looking for, ask for a suggestion and follow that lead.

When you have found a person who is interested in collaborating with the museum and has the resources you have been looking for, it's time to set up a meeting and another trip to the neighborhood. View this initial meeting as a resource exchange. Listen for the perking of interest as you describe the available museum resources and let that interest guide you in this budding collaboration. It is useful to identify a modest joint venture such as participating in a local festival, or being a distribution spot for one another's fliers, which can readily establish a feeling of joint success. Clarify what each party's expectations of the collaboration are, and mention the ways in which this community is presently reflected in the museum as well as how you want that presence to evolve.

Developing a relationship is a dynamic ongoing process. Each community has its own ecology, and a successful collaboration requires flexibility, clarity, and responsiveness. Once people from the community become comfortable users of the museum, they may ask for more and sometimes the seemingly impossible. Consider this a sign of success and continue communicating the needs of both collaborating partners. This museum community partnership requires the respect, consistency, risk-taking, and caring that nurtures a mutually satisfying relationship.