Building Community Engagement: Events and Post-Project Publicity

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One of the most important reasons your organization or community has decided to share its collections and local history on Maine Memory is to improve access to, celebrate, and educate people about that history. This can take two forms—direct engagement of the community at various events during the life of the project, and multi-faceted forms of publicity that take place as the project is winding down and even well after is it over.

EVENTS

Any organization or team participating in a Maine Memory project is encouraged to hold events to announce the beginning and/or culmination of their work. The Maine Community Heritage Project (MCHP) is the only program required to do so but even groups doing smaller projects can benefit from this face-to-face opportunity to let the community know about their activities.

COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

The Community Conversation (or meeting, or gathering) is an opportunity to bring members of the public together at the beginning of your project to announce it, facilitate a brainstorming or feedback session, and perhaps draw new volunteers. This should be done as close to the start date of your project as possible. For MCHP, this means September (or early October if necessary), but for other groups it will be at various times of the year depending on when your project gets started.

The idea is for each team to host an open conversation about the project for the local community. Invite the general public by announcements in the paper, on websites, via email invitations, via Facebook and Twitter, on posters around town, and any other means of publicity available to your team. How to organize and carry out the event should be on the agenda at one of your earliest team meetings.

While MHS staff may or may not be present to help guide the conversation (MHS will, by necessity, be present at MCHP events, and will attempt to attend as many others as possible), this community event is an opportunity for the team—led by the project coordinator—to introduce the project to the general

public and welcome feedback. Be sure to develop an agenda for the evening and go over the flow of it with your team prior to the date to work out any kinks. Set the date early enough in order to secure your ideal venue, arrange for food, and publicize it far and wide.

A community conversation should include many, if not most, of these components:

- Introductions of the organization's or team's members and an explanation of the project and intended product
- General overview of the work entailed
- The group's goals and specific topics the group is interested in
- A guided conversation (someone in your group should be designated the facilitator/moderator, and someone else a note-taker) about possible additional topics and/or historical resources in your community. Use questions to prompt thinking such as: What is important about our community and its history? How do we understand ourselves and what do we communicate to the rest of the world? What historical collections are most important for the public to have greater access to? What stories—about individuals, businesses, events, or eras—should be told about your town? Who are the best people to talk to about those stories? Don't forget to write down responses on poster paper, a white board, etc.
- ***Note:*** If the scope of your project is small and/or already set in stone, you might forego this part of the evening and simply ask for written feedback on slips of paper, anonymously, or for brief comments, rather than engage in a lengthy brainstorming session so that you don't feel compelled away from your chosen topic or topics.
- A display of historical items and/or other resources related to your project; handouts about the project, Maine Historical Society, and/or Maine Memory Network
- Explanation of/invitation to any other public events related to the project, and/or information about when it will be completed
- A call for volunteers, if applicable
- Refreshments!

You can then spend time at a follow-up team meeting reviewing any feedback or suggestions generated at the event and how—if at all—you want this to impact your original plans.

Add any resource material gathered at the meeting—additional information on collections, local experts, books, landmarks, etc.—to your **Community Inventory** so the team can refer to these resources throughout the life of the project. (Or start one if you haven't already done so. See **Creating a Community Inventory** on the Maine Memory Network Resources page.)

Compiling this inventory can itself be a helpful way to engage the community if you eventually choose to distribute it (either on your website if you are doing the MCHP, or simply as a handout). It will help serve the "creative economy" or your local Chamber of Commerce by showcasing the breadth and depth of historical richness within the community.

COMMUNITY CELEBRATIONS

Once your organization has completed its project, you may want to consider a much splashier event to celebrate. Again, the Maine Community Heritage Project is *required* to hold a culminating celebration to unveil its website to the community, but any group putting time and effort into putting their organization's or community's history onto Maine Memory is justified in wanting to shout it to the world!

The MCHP culminating community event will take place in June—the end of the project/academic year. For other groups, you will simply choose a time convenient for everyone that follows the end date of your project.

Think of this year-end celebration as a book-end to the public gathering you held at the beginning of your project (if you held one). Back then, you introduced community members to the concept and invited suggestions. Now, you will be showing off the results of that work, and thanking those who made it possible. And, in looking to the future, you will be encouraging everyone to access the newly public historical material now on Maine Memory.

Planning for this project-ending celebration should really start quite early; for MCHP participants, it's on the agenda beginning in February. Here are some things to factor into planning for the big day.

- **Identify an Event Planner.** Who will take the lead on planning the event? Hopefully you tackled this question early on via the **Team Member Roles and Responsibilities**

document and accompanying **worksheet** available on the Maine Memory Resources page. But if that was left undecided or there have been team member changes since then, make sure you discuss who will be actively involved in coordinating the final event.

- **Delegate Other Tasks.** While one person should be in charge, the many tasks are best divided among several individuals. Assign them based on interests and skills. For example, someone with an eye for design could plan the set-up and decor. Give "foodies" the fun task of deciding on what to serve for refreshments. Assign technical aspects (computer station set-up, checking the wireless system, hooking up microphones, bringing extra extension cords, etc.) to the tech coordinator on your team.

- **Set Goals.** MHS intends these kinds of events to have two major goals: 1) celebrating your organization's or community's hard work and partnership with our organization and 2) unveiling your Maine Memory product (digitized items, an online exhibit, or a website) to the general public. But your team may identify additional goals that fall under those overarching themes. Ask yourselves what you want to accomplish at the event and write those goals down.

- **Choose a Convenient Date and Time.** When you hold the event has to do largely with 1) when your group can be there and 2) when you can expect to get a large audience. Is a weekday or weekend day better? Is the evening preferable to the daytime? (Consider that many people work and so generally late afternoon/early evening is preferable.) Will your ideal venue be accessible at that day and time? If not, who will be in charge of locking/un-locking? Have you given yourselves enough time to publicize the event?

- **Choose a Welcoming Venue.** Consider a central and accessible location, one that's easy to find and with ample parking. Make sure you publicize the directions. The venue should be large enough to fit more than 100 people. You may have less than that—but you may have more! You also want to have ample space for any displays or computer stations you might want to set up. Will you need to bring in any tables and chairs or does the venue come with plenty of those? What kind of amplification for speakers will you need? Does the venue have Internet access? Is it wireless? Will you need to bring your own screen and projector (if applicable)? And what about food prep and/or kitchen facilities? These are all things to consider when shopping

around for where to hold your event. Possible options: town halls, library community rooms, school gyms or cafeterias.

- **Create an Agenda.** The best events have structured agendas that stay on track and on time. What components do you want in the agenda? Consider the order of the program, who will speak, how long each person will speak, whether there should be an interactive component of the evening (should the attendees *do* anything at the event?), and who must be thanked. Will you produce actual programs to hand out at the event?

- **Food.** Don't discount the power of food to draw attendees and leave them feeling fulfilled and appreciated. While the refreshments you choose to offer are not nearly as important as the real reason for the celebration, they can enhance the overall festive atmosphere. Consider asking a local restaurant or business to provide restaurants for free or at reduced cost in exchange for ample publicity. If applicable, offer refreshments related to your community or project topic. Make sure you offer the appropriate kinds of food based on the time of day. For instance, providing a full dinner at 7PM probably doesn't make sense, but it would at 6PM. Make sure your publicity is clear about what it is you're offering.

- **Publicity and Invitations.** Think of all the possible ways to get people to the event, and how early you should start publicizing it. Start 4-6 weeks out with invitations, 2-4 weeks out with posters (and smaller-sized flyers), 2-3 weeks out with website/newspaper features (send press releases!), 1-2 weeks out with website/newspaper calendar sections, and days to a week in advance for social networking media. Personally invite VIPs. Remember that word-of-mouth is still one of the best ways to publicize anything.

- **Give-aways.** This is entirely optional, but fun and can help immensely with spreading the word about your project. One Maine Community Heritage Project team produced magnets with their website's URL and a painting of the town done by a team member. They distributed these in large quantity at the culminating celebration—a clever way to keep the website address front and center in everyone's mind.

Phew! Now that that's taken care of, here are some things to think about on the day itself.

- **Arrive early!** Team members involved in any aspect of the event should get to the venue one to two hours before it's scheduled to begin depending on the nature of their task. Unlock doors and put up signs as necessary.

- **Connect and check the equipment well in advance.** As mentioned above, leave this to the single best person for the job—the techie.

- **Set the food out early, but not too early.** Gauge the best times to put out food and drink so that everything looks and tastes fresh for the event's start time.

- **Station one to two team members at the door.** Whether you use an actual registration table or just greet people as they walk in, don't skip this welcoming gesture. If you have a program for the event, hand these out now. (Greeters can also count individuals as they walk in to get an accurate number of attendees.)

- **Start (and end) on time!** This will go a long way toward insuring your event is a success. People appreciate adherence to stated start and end times. Keep each speaking portion to a minimum to maintain a forward momentum. The "MC" should make (and go over) notes in advance and refrain from tangents.

- **Make introductions.** Start by welcoming everyone to the event, explaining the project, acknowledging by name the group members and other participants who did the work, and thanking those who donated/provided services. (It can't hurt to thank those folks at the end as well.)

- **Clean and lock up.** Leave the venue in the same shape—or better—than you found it. If you have to haul out trash, make sure you have bags. Secure the building. Follow up the next day with a call, email, or letter of appreciation to the person in charge of the site (if it was someone other than a team member).

Last, but not least. Was the press there? Find out when the story will appear. Send digital photos to the papers and to MHS. (MCHP teams: Post some on your website!) Write thank-you notes to those who provided services. Deal with any items or equipment that accidentally got left behind.

PUBLICITY AFTER THE PROJECT

Publicity and community outreach should begin the moment your project does—or even before, as soon as you know you're going to be doing it. In addition to the community conversation event, feature articles in the local paper, radio interviews, announcements on websites and social networking sites (Facebook, Twitter, blogs, etc.), letters to interested persons, and the like are all good ways to keep the public informed as you are in the process of *doing* the project.

But what about when the project is complete? Your work is not quite done! At that point, the publicity machine should *really* kick into place. Your digitization project, online exhibit, or community website will only have an audience if you tell people about it, and continue to do so even after your organization or team has finished all its work.

Here are a number of hints and tips for publicizing your project throughout the community and, if applicable, within the school system.

COMMUNITY/GENERAL

- Make sure town officials know about the project and see if they will put a link to your digitized items, exhibit, or website from the town's home page. Don't forget to tell your Chamber of Commerce, and ask them to help publicize the project. It is, after all, promoting your community!

- Do you have tourists passing through? Make the project's URL available – on brochures, magnets, or other trinkets – at hotels and bed & breakfasts. If you have public access information stations in town (including at the Chamber), make sure information is placed or posted there, too.

- Ask your public library to put an icon on their computers that goes directly to your items, exhibit, or website on Maine Memory so patrons will readily see them/it.

- Consider promoting your work with flyers at town celebrations, festivals/fairs, on town meeting day/voting day, at school and library board meetings, at historical society meetings, and any other gatherings you can think of. Have a small flyer or other item with URL information on it to give out. If applicable, ask students who participated to do the promotion for you. (Adults love to hear kids talking about their projects!)

- Don't forget social networking: Facebook, Twitter, blogs, etc. These venues are great for marketing. Get creative… You could pick a selected topic from your site and tweet one digitized item a day.

- Create an, or offer to participate in an existing, lecture series at the library and/or historical society. Focus on one aspect of your digitized collection, exhibit topic, or aspect of your historical narrative per month. Spend 20-30 minutes talking about the topic and showing images. Then invite discussion.

- [For MCHP]: In the fall and beyond, poll the community about what they think about the website. Ask for help on what they think is missing, what they'd like to see, etc. By creating an *online* poll linked to the site, you are likely to draw a bit of a different crowd than at your original community conversation. Get a student or students to set up the poll/survey and advertise it as created by students.

- Host a call-for-items day where you invite people to bring old photos and other historic town ephemera to a central location for scanning and cataloging—just as a service to individuals, or as a way of having them contribute their historic materials through your account on MMN. (Note: There are special stipulations to adding items from individuals through your contributor's account on Maine Memory, so contact the Community Partnership Coordinator first before undertaking this kind of event.)

SCHOOL/TEACHER LED PUBLICITY (IF A SCHOOL WAS INVOLVED IN YOUR PROJECT)

Not only will this school-initiated publicity help parents and community members know about the project from the students' point of view, but it will inform other teachers and administrators of the project and its associated curriculum for use in future years.

- Schools should **link to the list of digitized items, the exhibit, or the website from the school website** and have students/teachers bookmark the URL – at all levels.

- Have **students compose an email** or memo to send to teachers and parents and provide the URL of your project's product, or write/design a card that can go home in report cards or other missives to parents. And/or have them hop on Maine Memory and send an "e-card" to parents and/or friends using one of the group's newly-uploaded images.

- Send a group of kids to the office to **chat with the principal** about the project, what they've learned, and how much they enjoyed their experience...how often do principals get to hear the good stuff?

- Make sure that the **teachers in the school/district who didn't participate** are aware of your work as a resource and also of how they, too, could incorporate such a project into their teaching.

- One of the best ways to get the items and research you've put on Maine Memory into teachers' hands is to have the current group members—and/or students if at all possible—**address colleagues at a faculty meeting** (at the closing of school and/or in the opening workshop days in the fall) with a show-and-tell routine and explanation of the educational framework that now exists for new teachers to plug into.

- Teachers and/or students could create a short **scavenger hunt activity** that could be doled out to other teachers. Incorporate basic, but ever-popular, features like the zoom tool. While those type of activities are great for the last weeks of school, they can also be helpful in the opening days in the fall, too.

- **Administrators—**building level, superintendent and curriculum coordinator types—need to be aware of the work, have the opportunities pointed out to them and be provided with the contact information of the appropriate people from the organization(s) who participated.

- Address the **school board** in some form or fashion. Involve students if at all possible.

- **Open Houses** in the fall are a great time and place to spread the word. So are school assemblies, anytime.

- Invite **guest speakers** into the school on a regular basis to speak on topics related to your digitized items, exhibit, or website.

- Along the lines of a Community Read, teachers might create a fun and educational **Community Analysis activity** where all students are provided with the same primary source(s) and are taught how to evaluate, analyze and draw conclusions. It would be a neat way for all students to have a similar experience and help beef up historical literacy skills at the same time – a school-wide moment to focus on local history.

- **Post interesting images** around the school to get kids' attention before you begin a unit on one of the topics covered in the project. Have students identify/write captions for each of the images as they begin to study the topic. Or direct them to your groups' items on Maine Memory directly to find the images for themselves and write caption based on information in the cataloging records, in the exhibit, or on the website. The mystery will likely intrigue many students.

- Another quick and easy image-based activity is a **caption contest**. Using some of the more unusual images from the project, ask students to create a comical caption for the image. Only accept entries that also provide the "real story" based on research the student had to conduct on his/her own. This is a quick way to get kids exposed to the project and MMN in general.

- Because older people tend to enjoy looking at MMN, yet may be intimidated by the technology, run a community service activity where **students visit nursing homes** or host an event at school where they guide adults through the items, exhibit, or website. Or, in a pared down version, students with web access could be given the assignment of sharing the project with an older adult and recording their feedback.

- For those that are really ambitious, a **Local History Quiz Bowl** could work really well, where students and/or community members are asked questions based on the content of the project.

MORE INFORMATION

Visit the Share YOUR Local History section of the Maine Memory Network website, www.MaineMemory.net.