



Center for the Future of Museums

COVID-19 Scenario One: Stay Calm and Carry On

This scenario explores how the (fictional) Buckthorn Art Museum helps the (fictional) township of Buckthorn, Missouri, reassure residents and practice social distancing while coping with the economic and psychological fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Buckthorn Township, Missouri, was very fortunate during the coronavirus outbreak of 2020, experiencing no confirmed cases of COVID-19. In later years the Mayor liked to joke that this was the upside of having the local train station, shopping mall, and local big box store all close in the previous five years. Good fortune or no, local businesses, including restaurants, cinemas, and retail stores experienced a 15 percent decline in income in the first half of 2020, as local residents voluntarily practiced social distancing as recommended by the CDC.

At the Buckthorn Art Museum, attendance averaged 80 percent of normal January through June 2020. The museum also experienced a 20 percent decline in private contributions, as donors redirected some of their giving to COVID-19 relief organizations, and to crowdfunding campaigns by friends and relatives needing financial help to cover their own health care costs. The museum's operating costs rose by 5 percent for supplies and labor as they instituted additional vigilance in cleaning and disinfecting exhibits, especially in the children's art activity area. The museum was able to cover the resulting deficit by tapping its financial reserves.

The museum credits its COVID-19 communication campaign for limiting the damage to attendance and events. Through notices on its website and in the local paper, emails to members and past visitors and program participants, and notices posted throughout the community, the museum reassured the public they were open, vigilant, and practicing good sanitation. Staff took creative measures to maintain service in the face of community concerns. They offered to send staff to local schools to give classroom programs in place of field trips. Citing research that shows that lowering stress boosts the immune system, staff created a "morning meditation hour" during which visitors were encouraged to check out a (sanitized) chair and scatter themselves throughout the galleries for some quiet contemplation time. The museum amended its personnel policies to empower staff to contribute sick leave to a pool available to any employee (including part-time staff who normally did not have access to sick leave). The museum suspended all work-related travel, and staff who had attended out-of-state conferences in February and March self-quarantined.