

Part of creating a successful Museum on Main Street exhibition experience at your venue is providing capable, well-trained docents for your visitors. This document assists you as you recruit docents and helps you conduct a docent training workshop at your site.

What is a Docent?

Docents for Museum on Main Street (MoMS) exhibitions are tour guides who conduct lead observation-based and inquiry-led tours. No formal training or experience is required to become a docent for MoMS exhibitions. Enthusiasm and commitment are the main qualifications needed. Usually, MoMS docents volunteer for the run of the exhibition, but some sites have groups of docents, paid or volunteer, already on staff. However, when the Smithsonian comes to town, you may need to recruit new docents to your existing staff. Many sites have used docent recruitment for MoMS exhibitions to create a docent base that remains an active and valuable asset for the museum.

Recruiting Docents

The first step in recruiting docents is to write a job description for the position. This will help you identify your needs and shape your expectations as well as let prospective docents know what is required of them and how they will be participating. Include in the job description:

Scheduling information: You may only need each docent one day a week for an eight-hour stretch, or you may require each docent to work three days week in four-hour shifts. How you schedule your tours and staff of docents is entirely up to you, but try to anticipate your visitation and base your docent scheduling on that information. Docents will appreciate knowing, from the beginning, how much time they are expected to commit.

Procedures: Make sure to have a procedure in place to provide a substitute if a docent can't make his or her scheduled hours. You may decide to have docents call each other to find a back up (provide a docent contact sheet) or you may prefer to have them call the volunteer coordinator at your site.

Dress code: Decide if you have any special dress requirements for docents. This could be as simple as standard nametags, or you could choose a colorful shirt, vest, or tabard. Some sites have been very creative with docent dress. Docents at one *Key Ingredients* site wore chef's aprons over their street clothes; clothes; docents at a *Between Fences* site wore cowboy hats. Whatever dress requirements you decide upon, make sure the docents know what they are from the outset.

Docent Materials and Training Workshop: Make sure to let prospective docents know that the Museum on Main Street team has created materials to assist them. Each MoMS exhibition has a comprehensive docent guide that provides tour structure and questions appropriate for visitors of all ages. In addition, a training document, "How Do I Become a Great Docent?," is available to local coordinators in the Administration section of the MoMS website: www.museumonmainstreet.org. Please provide a copy of this document to each docent at or before any docent training. It is helpful to provide a docent training

workshop prior to the opening of the exhibition (details below). Attendance at the workshop should be made a requirement.

Skills: The most important part of docent recruitment is selecting individuals with the appropriate skills. Docents need to be pleasant, affable people who are comfortable speaking in public. They need to be flexible and able to roll with the punches because there is no way to anticipate what can happen during a tour. Docents need to “take charge” and guide visitors through the exhibition. They also need to be willing to devote time to learning about the exhibition and to studying the docent guide.

Who to Recruit as Docents

Now that you’re working on a docent job description, start thinking about who to recruit. Teachers make great docents; they are well versed at asking questions and leading discussions. Students at your local high schools, community colleges, colleges or universities may be interested in participating in an internship arrangement or as a student club service project. Civic clubs and service organizations (Women’s Club, Rotary, Kiwanis, Jaycees, etc.) may be interested in similar service projects. Remember that retirees in your community may have more time available to offer to the exhibition. Don’t forget to tap their expertise and experience. Many sites call on their board members to serve as docents, too.

Often the content of the exhibition suggests who to recruit. Approaching special interest groups (community or school) is a great way to recruit volunteers who already have an interest in the exhibition theme. Think about groups like the following:

- For *The Way We Worked*: professional organizations, trade groups, trade guilds or associations
- For *Hometown Teams*: sports teams, coaches, athletic clubs or booster organizations
- For *Water/Ways*: swim teams, water company, groups who work on the water, fishermen

Avoid placing “docent wanted” ads in the newspaper. Make an effort to create relationships with civic organizations, teacher sororities, and special interest groups. These relationships may last long after the exhibition has moved on to its next site. However, don’t feel that you must limit your docent source to one club. Having a complementary mix of docents with varied backgrounds and special skills will only enrich the visitor experience. The most important thing to remember in recruitment is to be creative! You may be surprised at the number of docent resources in your community.

Rewarding Docents

As you’re making plans for your docent program, don’t forget to think about ways to thank and reward your docents. There are a number of ways to reward docents for a job well done,* some ideas are:

- Pins, plaques, or certificates of merit
- Gift shop discounts
- Free one-year museum membership
- Thank-you breakfast, lunch, tea, or dinner
- Recognition in your local newspaper

Although gifts, discounts, and parties are wonderful ways to reward your docents, sometimes the best support is guidance and praise. Make yourself available to answer questions, assuage fears, and provide support. Make an effort to watch your docents in action and praise them. Be specific and personal in your praise. Instead of a pat on the back and *Good job, Ruth*, try *Ruth*,

you handled that group of third graders on Tuesday very well. You really got them thinking about the exhibition. Good work!

(*Remember, April is National Volunteer Recognition Month)

The Next Step

Once you have recruited your exhibition docents, the next step is to schedule a docent training workshop. It is best to hold the workshop once the exhibition is installed in the gallery space, but this is not always possible. If this is the case, distribute the exhibition script (also available to local coordinators on the MoMS website: www.museumonmainstreet.org) and the docent training materials to your docents prior to installation so that they can become familiar with the exhibition content. If you plan your training workshop before the exhibition arrives at your site, be sure to schedule some time for the docents to explore and practice before opening day.

The Docent Training Workshop

Training workshops usually last between two and three hours. This allows plenty of time for reviewing the materials, exploring the exhibition, question-and-answer time, and breaks. Many new docents may be apprehensive about the training, so make sure the workshop is relaxed, casual, and fun. Refreshments always are a nice touch!

All docents should have a copy of "How Do I Become a Great Docent?" and the docent guide for use during the workshop (available on the MoMS website). In fact, let "How Do I Become a Great Docent?" be your outline for the first part of the workshop. Review it with your docents and be sure to keep asking, *Are there any questions?* There will be plenty!