

Project Title: The Barter Economy: A New Museum Membership

1. Administrative Information

Institution: Sandy Spring Museum

Project Name: The Barter Economy: A New Museum Membership

Amount Awarded: \$21,900

Total Project Cost: \$29,302

Project Dates: 8/01/2015 – 7/31/2017

Project Director: Allison Weiss, Executive Director

2. Project Summary

In 2015 Sandy Spring Museum (SSM) proposed piloting a one-year project entitled **The Barter Economy: A New Museum Membership** based on the idea that there are professional services that can be bartered for in exchange for museum resources. The purpose of this project was to test a new model for membership, to build deeper relationships between the museum and its constituents, and to create win-win situations where the museum benefits from professional services or goods and the barterers get something that is of value to them but of no direct cost to the museum.

The anticipated outcomes for the project were (1) to pilot a new system of membership; (2) to foster a greater sense of community participation in the museum and recreate the sense of purpose and ownership of the original volunteer-founders of the museum; (3) to contribute to the financial stability of the museum by bartering for much-needed professional services and possibly turning the barterers into donors.

The Philosophy behind this project

The impetus for this project was the recognition that the traditional membership model is suitable for some of the people associated with Sandy Spring Museum but not with all. In 2013 Sandy Spring Museum's operations shifted away from the traditional history museum model, and changed its focus from preservation to participation. Our new model of operations is "community-driven," that is, much of our programming is created by community members. This ranges from a community-curated exhibit to a live concert hosted by a partner organization. Because these individuals and groups seldom become dues-paying members of the museum, we wondered whether there was a way we could develop a new kind of membership tailored to these relationships.

We conceived of this SPARKS project in order to address the fact that we work with many individuals and groups at a level deeper than "member." Rather than members or visitors, they

are participants and partners. We wanted to explore an additional model of membership that would better suit our new model of operations.

3. Process

After hiring a part-time Bartering Facilitator, we contracted Insight Evaluation Services (IES) to conduct a front-end evaluation to gather feedback for what the *Barter Membership Program* might look like, as well as how SSM could reach out to other participants. We were already informally bartering with a number of individuals and businesses so wanted to hear their ideas about how a formal barter program could benefit them.

Those interviewed felt that their relationship with the museum was productive and that they were “building community” by partnering with the museum. This idea was stressed more frequently than that they were obtaining something of value in return for their services.

When asked who else would be interested in bartering, the focus group participants thought that nearly anyone would have a skill to barter but they stressed that the bartering needs to be for obtaining professional services. In other words, if the museum needs painting, they should barter with a professional painting company and not with a volunteer who owns a paint brush.

One individual raised the issue that bartered services could be taxed by the IRS and that this needed to be explained to the barterers.

Generally participants felt that the museum could barter visibility and space: marketing through the museum’s website and e-newsletters, and offering free or reduced costs for renting the facility. Although we had anticipated bartering professional services, like instructing a business on archiving their records, no one in the focus group thought this would be worth bartering for.

The focus groups were also asked about what other expanded offerings might be of interest. For example, would barterers be interested in being part of a coupon book (a book filled with coupons promoting the services offered by barter program participants). Would barterers be interested in bartering with one another? While both of these ideas were popular, it was eventually determined that they were out of the scope of the current project. Business-to-business bartering models already exist (<http://www.u-exchange.com/businessbarter>) as do individual-to-individual bartering programs (<https://timebanks.org>).

The next stage of the project involved clearly defining what the barter membership is. While the museum has been bartering with individuals and companies for several years, the goal was that this project would enable us to standardize these ad hoc arrangements.

We developed a chart of all of the “products and services” that could be bartered by the museum and their value (included in the appendices), which included rooms for rent, audio-visual equipment, tickets to museum programs, and various marketing opportunities (in seasonal program guides, on the website, and so on). Our greatest assets were space and the ability to market the businesses that barter with us. Our greatest needs were for lawn mowing, painting, cleaning services, and other maintenance tasks.

We began working on individual arrangements with existing and new bartering partners. We identified twelve individuals and businesses with whom we worked in some capacity. This included the museum’s internet technology contractor, the local newspaper, several photographers, a graphic designer, and so on. Several of these people participated in the focus groups so were already aware of the project. These individuals and businesses were asked to join the Barter Membership Program as charter members. We also promoted the Barter Exchange on our website, through the Chamber of Commerce, in a local news story, and by reaching out directly to businesses whose services we wanted.

We created a system for tracking what was being bartered and the associated value of the service. Here’s an example of the bartering in action:

Kathy Lynn photographed several events at the museum. She valued these services at about \$700, or equal in value to renting space at the museum. In exchange we facilitated a flower arranging class held at the museum by Ms. Lynn. The museum did not charge her for the use of the space or for marketing assistance and managing class registration.

4. Project Results

In addition to bartering with businesses we already knew, we recruited new individuals who were interested in being part of this program, including a writer who produced marketing content in exchange for space, and an artist who produced a logo for a special event in exchange for a free booth at the event. Although we tried to be creative in terms of what the museum could offer in exchange, all Barter Members wanted marketing and free use of the facility in exchange for services.

In twelve months we bartered for twelve different services for an estimated value of \$12,625. (This list is itemized in the appendices.) While that may sound successful, there were other negative results that made the barter membership program not worth continuing.

- 1) We were unable to barter for the services that were most desirable to the museum. Businesses were not willing to barter for services that they normally charge for, i.e. our landscaping company was not interested in bartering for services because this is how they make money.
- 2) Because the bartering that we were able to facilitate did not involve the businesses that we had paid contracts with (cleaning services, landscaping), we did not receive the financial benefits that we hoped would result. While we were happy to benefit businesses, the goal was to have a win-win arrangement.
- 3) Sometimes we bartered for services that we otherwise would not have used or paid for. For example, photographer Amanda Claire valued her services of photographing several museum events at \$2500. In practice, the museum has never hired professional photographers to photograph special events so the barter did not offset actual budgeted expenses.
- 4) Most barterers wanted free use of the facility. We had to think carefully about whether this was a wise exchange because just like with our landscaping contractor who did not want to barter with us, the museum stands to lose income if we give away services that we normally charge for. It would be counter-productive to offer services that would result in a loss of income for the museum unless we could justify offsetting the costs with something intangible. The same issue resulted from providing free ads or listing on the museum's website. Marketing someone's business with a free ad in a program could also result in a loss of income because we normally sell ad space.
- 5) There are tax implications to bartering that we were unaware of when we first proposed this project. Since we are a nonprofit, we don't generally think about taxes but bartering for services is taxable income for the business or individual receiving the services. Formalizing this process with businesses who were already donating some portion of their services to the museum would make bartering less advantageous.
- 6) There was no one-size-fits-all barter arrangement. Every exchange was on a case-by-case basis with unique details and agreements. While we expected this to be an iterative process, the intended outcome for this project was a way to standardize bartering. By the end of the project, we did not feel any closer to developing a standardized way to barter.

What we did not anticipate was that the individuals who were most interested in bartering were artists. Because these self-employed individuals were not bound by the rules of a for-profit business, they were less likely to have fixed costs, and the services they provided (for example, photographing an event) did not involve paying a staff person. In other words, an independent artist had leeway to make whatever arrangements s/he thought were in her best interest, unlike a business owner who has fixed costs.

HOW WE SHIFTED DIRECTIONS

Due to a delay in getting the project started because of staff turnover, we were granted a one-year extension for this grant. In Year II we focused on our relationships with artists and arts and education-focused organizations. Instead of classifying mutually beneficial exchanges as *bartering*, we changed the terminology to *partnering*. These individuals and groups wanted to **co-create** something with the museum (a work of art, a performance, a public presentation, an activity, etc.) that could potentially benefit the entire community and ultimately help partners expand their outreach. So instead of services like painting and lawn mowing, we provided free or deeply discounted space and marketing assistance with individuals and organizations who wanted to host programs at the museum that would benefit the community (as opposed to hosting a private event at the museum that benefits a limited audience).

In Year II we worked with thirteen different groups who hosted projects/programs at the museum. At the end of the year we selected six of these partners to participate in a formative evaluation with Insight Evaluation Services. (Included in the appendices). On the surface, working with partners to host programs may sound like nothing more than traditional educational programming at a museum. But in fact it was something different. These were projects, performances, exhibits, and workshops that were designed by the partnering organization, not the museum. The partners were given space, artistic freedom, infrastructure support (marketing assistance, a means to register participants, a professional sound system, etc) in exchange for making their program (exhibit, performance, etc) open to the public and jointly marketed under the museum's name.

To illustrate how this arrangement is different from traditional museum programming, I quote JoungSook Park, the artistic director of the Peace Mission Korean Dance Group, when asked why she partners with the museum:

"Truthfully I don't have time to work with the museum. We are invited to perform everywhere – the Kennedy Center, the Smithsonian. We have too many commitments. And your space is too small! But I partner with you because other organizations have an agenda. They tell us what to do. When I came here, you asked me what I wanted to do. I feel free as an artist here." (Personal conversation, October 24, 2017)

This comment, made during the formative evaluation, also illustrates how our partnerships differ from traditional programming:

Allison wanted all the women of our mosque to come up with something. It was very open and we could decide, but we were not sure what to do. And we joked that we are

not used to that, to making those kinds of decisions. Events at (our organization) are all very similar; we know how to set those up and how they will be organized. So to have someone to say “It’s up to you to do what you like and what you want to do,” we had to think: What do we really like and how do we want to do that? What does the community want to see of (our) women? What do they want to know about us? It was a good learning experience for us....Also Phillip (museum staff) at the museum needs credit. Everyone who speaks at our mosque, speaks at a head table. But Phillip suggested that speakers sit among the audience to make it more friendly—that was very revolutionary for us. Small things like that can change the whole event. (Sarah Malik)

Did the project succeed?

The project did not succeed as it was originally conceived. There is an inherent challenge in bartering. If you are a bread baker looking to barter for meat but the butcher does not want your bread, no barter takes place. This is referred to as a “lack of double coincidences.” (*Barter Exchange: Meaning and Problems of Barter Exchange*, by J. Singh) A double coincident is when you want to exchange exactly what I want to receive and vice versa. Currency evolved because double coincidences are so rare.

We quickly discovered that what we had to offer had limited appeal to the businesses with the services that we coveted. For a short time, we considered developing a different model – one in which businesses could bank services that could be exchanged with a third business - but realized that the management of such a time bank would be beyond our capacity. A museum could potentially be part of a time bank but not be the organization that manages it.

However we believe that the partnership model that evolved is extremely valuable to us and replicable by others. Based on this experience, we will continue to fine-tune our partnership concept. To address the feedback from the evaluation, we will be creating a Memorandum of Understanding for every partner with whom we work. We will also seek to provide more free use of space to partners and increase marketing support for their projects.

Things to consider when contemplating starting a Barter Membership:

- Offer to exchange something that you want to promote.
 - For example Sandy Spring Museum’s grounds are underutilized. Offering them for barter or for use by a partner not only provides something of value to but showcases the grounds to others.
 - The museum’s classroom is underutilized. Providing partners free use of the classroom allows us to offer more programs to the public at no cost to the museum.

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 - The museum’s classroom is underutilized. Providing partners free use of the classroom allows us to offer more programs to the public at no cost to the museum.

- Keep the exchanges informal.
 - The museum's I.T. services are given to the museum at a significant discount. The provider does not receive any financial benefit from his donation (professional services are not tax deductible) but if he received a free facility rental from the museum, he would need to report this on his taxes. Therefore having an informal exchange (e.g. listing his company's name on as a charter member of the Barter Exchange, rather than give him a free room rental) is more beneficial to him than receiving something with a specific value.
- There may be benefits but not necessarily financial ones.
 - People interested in bartering were not those who think of exchanges in a purely transactional way. They were more interested in building community, supporting the museum, and having their name associated with something positive. They were individuals who felt kinship to the museum's mission. In the words of Tom Corbitt of Capital City Cherokee Community, one of our partners, his organization and the museum share "cultural synergy."
 - One must consider whether building a sense of belonging to the museum community is worth the time and expense involved in managing these arrangements. Whether "building community" is achieved can only be determined by looking at the results of the project over several years, not just one year.
- Expect the unexpected.
 - The barter exchange offered us an opportunity for getting the word out that we were looking to work with the community in untraditional ways. As noted, the unexpected outcome of this project was that instead of getting someone to paint the museum in exchange for a room rental, we ended up having the community create programming at the museum. This unintended consequence has shaped the future of Sandy Spring Museum.

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