

“Your Photo Here”

SPARKS! Ignition Grant White Paper August 28, 2012

This paper was prepared for the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) by staff of the Museum of Photographic Arts (MOPA) and Balboa Park Online Collaborative (BPOC). They include: Bill Bostick (BPOC), Maren Dougherty (BPOC), Vivian Kung Haga (BPOC), Joaquin Ortiz (MOPA), and Kristine Page (MOPA).

Resources and contact information for key personnel is available at the end of this report.

I. Administrative Information

Institution: Museum of Photographic Arts
1549 El Prado, San Diego, CA 92101
Project Title: “Your Photo Here” (LG-45-11-0023-11)
Award Amount: \$25,000
Total Project Cost: \$38,576
Grant Period: June 1, 2011 – May 31, 2012
Project Director: Vivian Kung Haga
Formal Project Partner: Balboa Park Online Collaborative (BPOC)

II. Project Summary

The growing online environment presents exciting opportunities for museums to reach people in new and more engaging ways. The Museum of Photographic Arts (MOPA) has learned that its members and visitors want to not only experience the photography of masters, but also share their own creations. This led the museum to begin to experiment with organizing online photo contests open to members of the public. Prior to receiving this Sparks! Ignition grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), MOPA organized several online photo contests with the Balboa Park Online Collaborative (BPOC), including a “Kid’s-Eye View of the Park” contest whereby children could submit their photos of Balboa Park. MOPA staff had also discussed other lens-based contests for which interpretation and online marketing would intersect naturally. Beyond encouraging public creativity and interpretation, the contests would be designed to expand awareness about MOPA’s special exhibitions and collections.

The challenge was that there were no low cost tools for easily managing online contests with public voting. Resolving the problem by patching together various tools – asking people to send photographs to an email address, organizing and posting the photographs to a website, setting up contest voting via SurveyMonkey, etc. – is challenging for smaller institutions because of the staff time involved. Commercial contest solutions are often cost-prohibitive.

For this reason, MOPA proposed the “Your Photo Here” project to build the capacity of museums to engage with audiences online through an advanced, open source online contest solution. The

IMLS funding supported the technical development and testing of a contest module to facilitate multiple kinds of contests with user-generated content such as photographs, video, written narratives, web links, or any combination of the four components. MOPA partnered with BPOC, a technology partnership of more than twenty cultural organizations in San Diego's Balboa Park, to plan the project and oversee the technical development of the contest module.

This project meets a unique need for museums, libraries, and other nonprofit institutions that have attempted to host online contests to engage and educate audiences online. Museums will have an increased capacity to deploy inexpensive social media engagement campaigns to increase visitors (both online and at the museum), integrate visitor voices into exhibitions, and build a more creative, inspiring work environment for staff.

III. Process

The project started in June 2012 with planning meetings comprised of staff from MOPA and BPOC. BPOC managed the development of the contest module for the open source content management system Drupal. BPOC Director of Digital Media Christina DePaolo served as the project manager and BPOC Director of Web Development Bill Bostick served as the technical lead, working closely with MOPA staff to define the functionality needed. While it took us longer to finish the software development than we anticipated, requiring slightly more financial/staffing resources than we had included in our original proposal, no major organizational or policy changes were needed to accomplish the work.

Software Development

Early in the process, the team decided to develop the module for the Drupal CMS because it is used by more than a dozen institutions in Balboa Park and many museums nationwide because of its flexibility and scalability. Drupal is also used for other collaborative museum projects such as ArtBabble (artbabble.org).

For development, Bostick built upon existing Drupal products such as the Voting API module that supports content rating and tabulation. The contest module offers expanded features to enable user submission of photos, videos, narratives, and/or links; ability to add release forms; procedures for approving and publishing content; and voting restrictions that can be modified to either permit or deny multiple votes. Bostick prepared the contest module in January 2012 for MOPA staff testing, then did a series of revisions during January and early February to prepare the module for public testing in mid-February.

Voting Method

BPOC and MOPA staff explored many voting options, such as five-star rating and thumbs up/thumbs down ratings. For the debut of the contest module, the team went with a very simple "Vote for this image" option. The entry with the greatest number of votes wins at the end of the voting period. We hope that our team, or other Drupal developers working with the open-source code, will be able to enhance the module to include other voting methods for more complex contests.

Voting Restrictions

The project team also talked about ways of restricting voting, such as only allowing one vote per IP address. The problem is that the IP address restriction would limit most companies to only one vote

because they route outbound Internet traffic through a firewall or proxy server. We ultimately decided that it would best to limit votes to a specified number of votes per email address, because that would both restrict ballot-stuffing and help museums to build their email mailing lists. While we thought this was the fairest approach, we did receive some complaints from users who were displeased that the contest could be “abused” by people voting repeatedly with multiple email addresses.

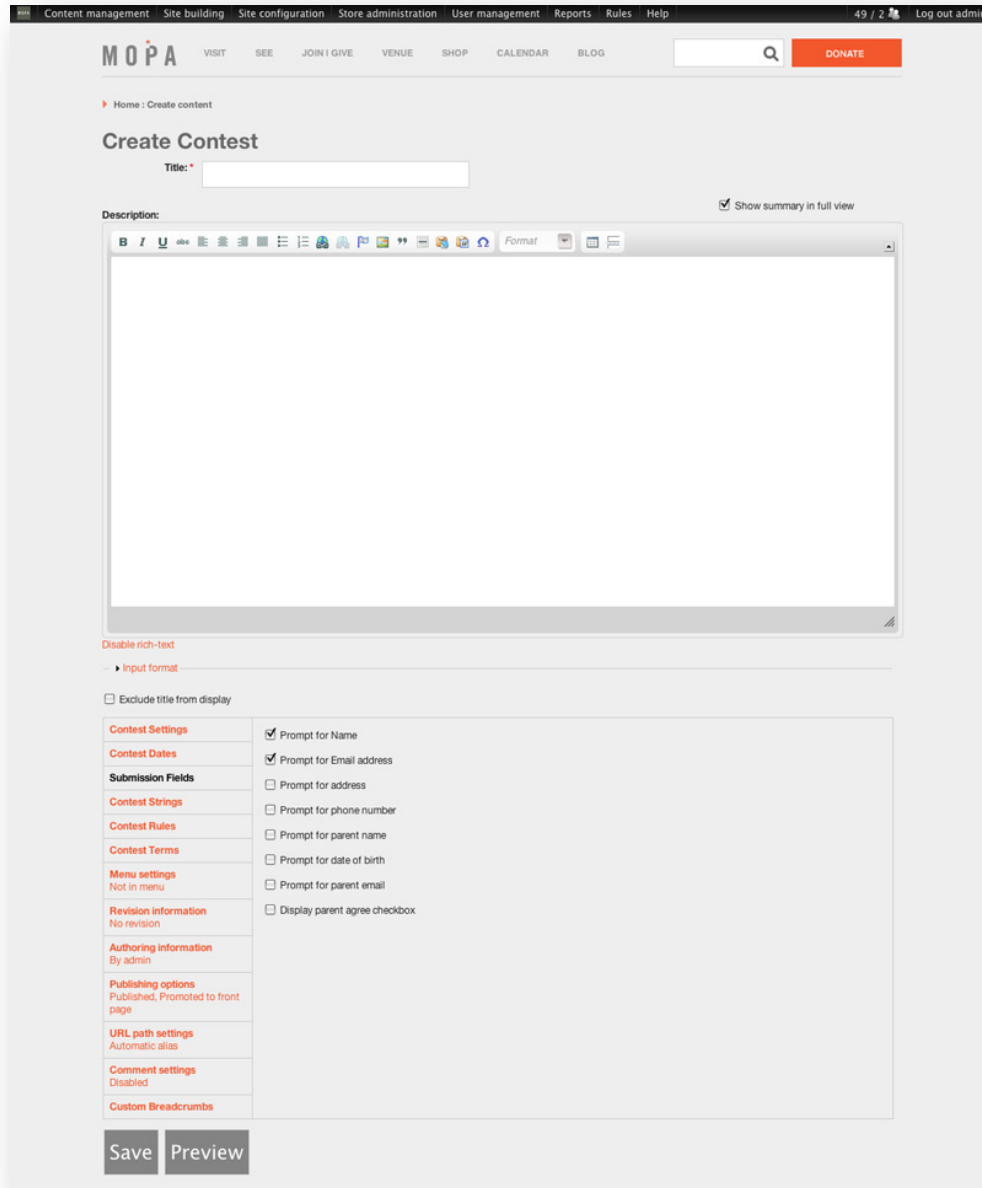


Figure 1: View of the Drupal contest module administrator (staff) interface

Contest Management Overview

- Contest settings: Contest type (photo, video, audio, website); Voting method (popular, panel); Voting frequency (unlimited, hourly, daily, weekly, once only; Checkbox to add sign-up page to voting form.

- Contest dates: Submission start/end dates and times; Voting start/end dates and times.
- Contest strings: Vote widget string (i.e., “Vote for this entry”); Vote select string (i.e., “Your vote”); Sign-up string (i.e., “Send me emails about future events and contests”); Submit page title (i.e., “Visitor Photo Submission”).
- Contest rules: Rich text field for contest
- Contest terms: Rich text field for contest terms and conditions.

Through this Drupal module, you can also specify the URL path settings and keep a contest unpublished until the desired publish date.

Testing

The team carried out four contests to test the module. We had hoped that we would be able to test the module with other museums during the grant period but we continued to refine the module throughout the grant period and thought it would be better to wait until more of the issues had been resolved.

First Contest: Cut + Paste (MOPA)

The first contest launched on MOPA’s website was “Cut + Paste,” a collage contest held in conjunction with the exhibition *Unusual Suspects: Paintings and Photographs by Holly Roberts*. Artists of all levels were encouraged to use photographs and other visual media to create a photo collage inspired by the exhibition and submit it via the MOPA website.

This contest attracted 89 entries and 2,252 votes. During the contest period, from February 1, 2012, to March 30, 2012, MOPA’s Facebook following increased by 560 likes, from 5,031 to 5,591. Total visits to MOPA.org increased by 10% percent from 26,833 to 29,748, as compared to the same period last year. During this time, the “Cut + Paste” contest page was the second most popular page of the website (after the homepage) with 4,647 views, or about 5% of the site’s pageviews.

Second Contest: Park Shorts (BPOC, in collaboration with park institutions)

For the second contest, BPOC launched a contest called “Park Shorts” on Balboapark.org geared toward youth ages 13-17. Youth were encouraged to produce one-minute videos highlighting their favorite places in Balboa Park or the San Diego Zoo. Our discussions with educators were quite optimistic about this contest, but we learned that video contests do not attract nearly as many participants as photo contests. Despite promoting it widely via social networking sites, museum and media partners, and outreach to local schools and arts groups, the contest struggled to attract submissions. Only three people submitted videos, and as a result, the team debated whether or not to publicize public voting. The team decided to keep the submission available for voting on Balboapark.org but we did not promote voting through social media. For this reason, the contest did not have a significant impact on our social media follower growth nor our website traffic. Park Shorts received 170 votes.

We learned from this contest that video production still presents a greater challenge than photography. Before launching another video contest, we would develop stronger partnerships with classroom teachers or other groups to ensure a larger rate of participation.

Third Contest: Foodie Photo Contest (MOPA)

In May 2012, MOPA launched a “Foodie” photo contest for people to submit photos of cooking or consuming food. This contest attracted 66 entries and 741 votes. During the contest, from May 1,

2012 to June 15, 2012, MOPA’s Facebook following increased by 340 likes from 5,927 to 6,267. Total visits to the MOPA website increased by 28% percent from 19,290 visits to 24,681 visits, as compared to the same period in 2011. During this time, the “Foodie” landing page was the sixth most popular page on MOPA.org with 1,656 views.

Fourth Contest: Balboa Park Top Dog (BPOC, in collaboration with park institutions)

In July, BPOC launched the third annual “Balboa Park Top Dog” contest with Balboa Park Central and other Park organizations. The contest is designed to showcase different buildings and gardens in the Park where people go with their dogs. The contest attracted 99 entries and 2,374 votes.

During the contest period, from July 1 to August 23, 2012, Balboa Park’s Facebook following increased by 2,388 likes from 47,431 to 49,819, and its Twitter following increased by 184 followers from 9,950 to 10,134. While there are many other factors that impact social media use and growth, it was clear that the contest attracted a substantial online activity, with 10,416 views of the “Top Dog” page during the contest period. Total visits to BalboaPark.org increased by 15% percent from 283,126 visits to 324,786 visits during the contest (as compared to the same period in 2011).

The screenshot shows the Balboa Park website header with navigation links like 'Hot Deals', 'Inside The Park', and 'PARK PASS'. Below the header, the page title is 'Balboa Park Top Dog Photo Contest'. On the left, there is a booking section for hotels and attractions. The main content area displays a table of contest submissions.

Select...	Name	Post date	Published	Votes
<input type="checkbox"/>	Veronica Remsbottom Email: [REDACTED] Phone: [REDACTED]	08/13/2012 - 11:35pm	No	0
<input type="checkbox"/>	Farah Balaghi Email: [REDACTED].com Phone: [REDACTED]	08/13/2012 - 11:09pm	No	0
<input type="checkbox"/>	Chris Tomac Email: [REDACTED] Phone: [REDACTED]	08/13/2012 - 9:46pm	Yes	50
<input type="checkbox"/>	Janelle Humphrey Email: [REDACTED] Phone: [REDACTED]	08/13/2012 - 8:59pm	No	0

Figure 2: Staff view of contest submissions. From this menu, staff can decide which images should be published for public voting.

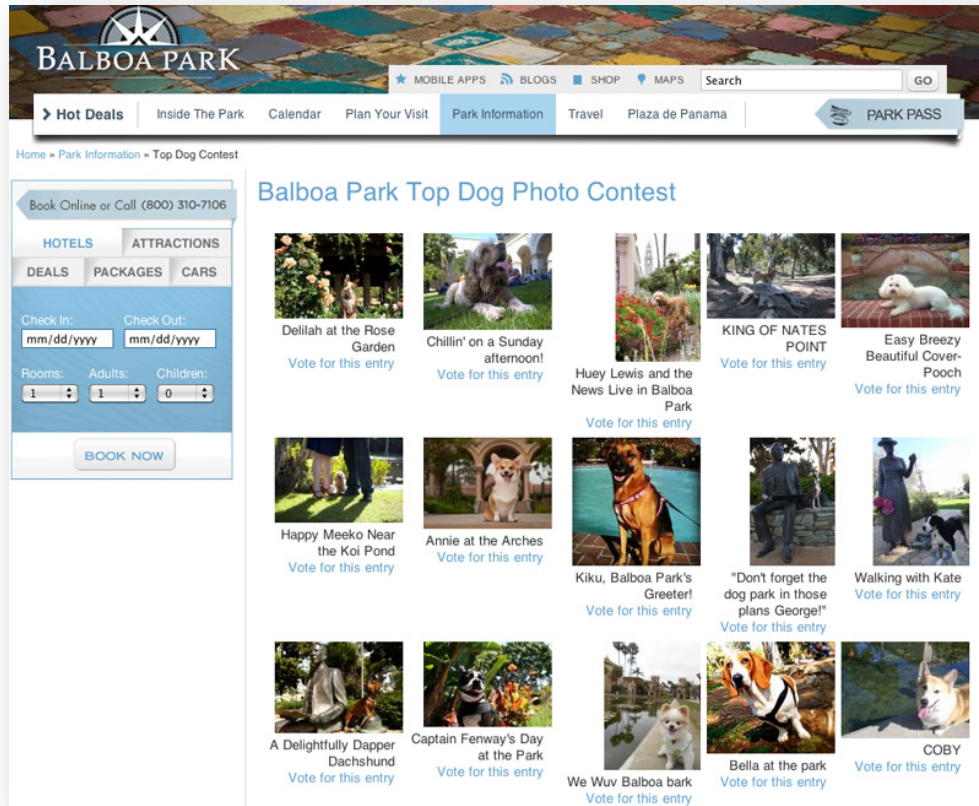


Figure 3: Public view of Top Dog contest voting

Summary of Activity

Contest	Contest Type	Entries	Votes
Cut + Paste	Collage	89	2252
Park Shorts	Video	66	741
Foodie	Photo	3	170
Top Dog	Photo	99	2374

State of the Module

The module is working but its features are quite basic. To allow for more robust use, we hope to make the following additions and changes to the module, or work with others in the Drupal community to modify the code:

- Permit different voting options, such as 5-star ratings.
- Add ability to control how submissions are displayed on pages. Currently, an expert-level Drupal developer is needed to change these views. It would be helpful to have a "leaderboard" view so that users can see the latest results.
- Provide a clear response when users submit images instead of a general Drupal confirmation.

- Increase social integration, such as the option to easily share favorite images via Facebook and Twitter.
- Add ways for basic users to export all data related to entries and votes so that the contact information for participants can be easily added to existing databases. Currently, an expert-level Drupal developer is needed for this task.
- Increase reliability of start and end date settings. We experienced problems with this so we did it manually, but it did work some of the time. More testing is needed.

Dissemination Efforts

The project team is committed to sharing information about the contest to the national museum community through online updates and representation at national conferences. We have also started talking to other museum professionals in Balboa Park about integrating the contest module into their websites.

Demonstrations to Date

- In February 2012, MOPA’s Interim Director of Education Joaquin Ortiz participated in demonstration sessions during the IMLS WebWise conference in Baltimore. He showed participants the visitor interface for the Cut + Paste contest and the Drupal back-end.
- In April 2012, Ortiz, BPOC Director Vivian Kung Haga, BPOC Director of Web Development Bill Bostick, and BPOC Director of External Affairs Maren Dougherty demonstrated the contest module at the Museums and the Web conference in San Diego.
- In April 2012, Kung Haga participated in a panel discussion at the American Association of Museums Annual Meeting. She joined other Sparks! grantees to speak about the contest module.

Distribution of Code

The project team will distribute the code and documentation developed for the project under the terms of the GNU General Public License (GPL). The contest module and its documentation will be available through a link from BPOC.org. Bostick is also working on creating an Amazon web image of the final product that will empower less-technical museum professionals to create contests quickly without any assistance from web/IT staff.

IV. Project Results

Significance of the project to MOPA

The “Your Photo Here” project aligned perfectly with MOPA’s broader efforts to leverage interactive technologies to advance visual literacy initiatives. The module allowed MOPA to interact with the public in a meaningful way, demonstrating that the organization values the contributions of its visitors. The module is now being viewed as a way to involve specific audiences and shape initiatives to reach them. For instance, MOPA plans to use the module as part of a membership campaign to inspire current members and encourage new ones.

In addition to launching this series of contests based on user-generated content, MOPA launched a crowdsourced exhibition project in 2012 titled *Soapbox! The Audience Speaks*. Through an in-gallery touchable and MOPA.org, visitors view and rate works from the permanent collection, with results to be shown in an upcoming exhibition. The works received more than 100,000 votes – far exceeding staff expectations, indicating that there is an interest among visitors to move from a passive observer role to that of a citizen curator.

Significance of the project to the broader cultural heritage community

Given initial success with the contests, we hope that other museums and libraries across the country will take advantage of the free, open-source contest module, and that others in the community will build upon the code to make it more reliable and add greater functionality. Test contests confirmed our expectations that the contests would grow quickly through social media: participants take pride in their entries and naturally share contest links with friends and families via social networks.

Overall Learnings/Recommendations From Three Contest Managers

- *Be thoughtful regarding the rules of the contest.* As reported by Ortiz, “A lot of the visitor frustration we dealt with was addressed by changing the participants’ expectations through what was communicated through the rules of the contest. Use language from other online contests to create a set of rules that work well for the specific contest.”
- *Don’t expect video contests to attract the same level of participation as photo contests.* As reported by Dougherty, “While we haven’t done an extensive analysis of the reasons for the low number of video contest entries, we recognize that video is still much more time-intensive than photography and requires a greater skill set. We would be interested to know if any other museums have attempted video contests and, if so, what their results have been.”
- *Overall, the contests did what we wanted them to do: provide a fun, engaging experience for visitors.* As reported by Page, “I did receive positive feedback from participants, all of whom loved participating in the contest and were excited to share their images.”

Looking Ahead

MOPA and BPOC both plan to continue to host online photo contests using the contest module, probably two or three per year. BPOC will explore opportunities to integrate the module into other museums in Balboa Park. If your library or museum uses the module, we would appreciate hearing about your experiences so we can continue to aggregate and share information about the module to the broader cultural heritage community.

Resources

A link to the code will be available on the BPOC website, www.bpoc.org. The project team is available to answer questions from museum staff planning to use the contest module.

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