

Changing our Course without Losing our Audiences.

Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum, USA
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The CBMM is a mid-sized (30 full-time staff) regional museum, founded in the mid-1960's to preserve the Bay's vanishing maritime traditions – especially boatbuilding and fishing. It is an outdoor history museum, built-up very much in the model of Mystic Seaport, with a working boatyard, collections of traditional watercraft and historic buildings gathered from around the Eastern Shore of the Bay. We now occupy an 18-acre waterfront site. We are 100% self-funded, with an annual budget of approximately \$3 million.

For over 40 years, the Museum has done a very good job of collecting and preserving maritime artifacts, and of developing exhibits and programs that tell the stories of the area's maritime past. We have become a highly respected museum, a valued and trusted keeper of the past—its memories, stories, and artifacts.

CBMM is and always has been a museum about place—the Chesapeake Bay—a place where human history and natural history have always been tightly intertwined. Yet in recent years, as this magnificent place and its people face dramatic changes to their culture and way of life, the museum continued to view the Bay through the rear-view mirror of history. This is, after all, what American history museums do...

With rare exceptions, America's history museums (including maritime) have shared a decline in attendance that goes all the way back to 1976. Meanwhile, science and children's museums have flourished, and aquaria have enjoyed an tsunami of expansion. There are many possible explanations for our decline...

- a shift in the nation's focus to science and technology, and corresponding shift in academic priorities from grade school to grad school.
- A growing demand for more engaging family (read CHILDREN) activities and active learning– i.e. hands-on experiences.
- An increase in competition for decreasing hours of "free time"
- A change in America's demographic profile – white Americans of western European origin will soon be a minority in many states
- The coast to coast decline in the quantity and visibility of American maritime enterprise – for most Americans now the sea is only a place for recreation.
- And then there is the economy...

Whatever the reasons, our museums have clearly been challenged, raising more questions than answers. Here is my take on this situation:

The unspoken but perhaps undeniable fact is that the “value” of most of our maritime museums is declining – we are becoming less and less relevant to our 21st-century audiences. It is no longer a matter of improving our marketing. Like the situation that the US auto manufacturers have found themselves in, we need to develop new products to meet what new customers actually want and need.

If we intend to remain valuable and relevant to today’s audiences, (and tomorrow’s) then we had better find a way to connect what we do and what we care about with the issues most important to them. For each of our institutions, the solutions will be different.

At the CBMM, we believe that the key issue for those who work, play and live along the Chesapeake Bay is the accelerating pace of change in this place. Population growth and development seem unstoppable, and the results have been steady environmental degradation of the Bay’s waters and the subsequent loss of traditional working maritime cultures and communities that have defined the region for centuries.

Chesapeake residents and visitors worry that the Bay is dying and the region is losing its character, flavor and identity. They are becoming less and less concerned about history, and more and more worried about their Bay and its future.

So, CBMM has accepted the reality that doing nothing will lead to our being even more marginalized. We are beginning to admit that we must adjust our focus, and our mission. I would say “*change* our focus and mission” but I know *change* is an especially frightening word to those of us who have dedicated most of our lives to preservation – to keeping things just the way they are.

CBMM is now in the process of refining our mission goals and the ways we achieve them. Specifically, we are trying to find ways to bring the lessons of the past to bear on the very real challenges of the present. We are beginning to draw bolder connections between cultural history and natural history, between the past we know and the future we do not.

This is in effect a re-branding process for CBMM, and we are worried about unforeseen consequences. We are worried that if we are not careful, we will de-value the Museum in the process. In our jargon, we don’t want to “throw the baby out with the bathwater.” So, before we get too far ahead of our audiences, we are trying to find answers to some very important questions:

- How do we sustain the interest of our current audiences and funders who have been connected to the museum because of their love of our traditional presentations of the past? Will we risk losing them as we take our traditional stories up to date?

- The environmental and political challenges facing the Chesapeake region are serious and often discouraging. What kinds of programs can we offer that will engage our publics without just depressing them and turning them off?
- More and more newcomers (“come-heres”) are arriving on the Eastern Shore every day and they do not know or understand the region’s history. The past here isn’t part of their lives. How can the museum connect to all these new people without turning our back on the “from-heres” whose stories we are telling?
- As we redefine the Museum, who will be our new stakeholders? Which new partners should we be reaching out to?

We have found that there is a lot we do not know about our current and future audiences, and so we are working to find some answers before we get too far out ahead of them.

We are meeting with experts – museum colleagues who out ahead of us in these matters of change, and have some experience to share. We are talking with new partners – leaders in the field of environmental science, natural history and public policy – who we will need as we move ahead. Thankfully, they are eager to have us join them.

We are meeting with important stakeholders – current partners, supporters (including trustees), special friends (including our important core of dedicated volunteers), educators, and of course our own staff.

We are paying special attention to our members – 6000 families who form our largest support base - contributing over \$1 million per year, and forming the largest group of participants in our programs.

And of course we are talking with our visitors. What do they think about us as we are today? Are we meeting their expectations? Would they be interested in following the new courses we are plotting?

To evaluate our current visitor experience, and to compare how we perform against other historical museums around the US, we are participating in a survey program designed by the American Association for State and Local History. By combining a series of fixed questions that will benchmark us in our current activities with a group of CBMM-specific questions that will help us identify our current visitors’ interests and concerns, this instrument should provide critical guidance for us.

The questions that grow out of this study will then be used to guide discussions with non-visitors. Why don’t they visit now? If we offer changes exhibits and programs, is it any more likely that they might visit?

In the end, we know we need to change, and we know that change always brings risk. But our goal is to expand our audiences and base of support, not see them shrink.