

## CASE STUDIES

In a case study of the Kansas City Museum, David Ucko draws on his experience transforming an older, eclectic museum into a science center, focusing on the need for a well-crafted mission statement. Cynthia Yao

- describes how people and resources coalesced around the notion of
- establishing the Ann Arbor Hands-On Museum, chronicling strategic steps
- in the institution's growth.

# MISSION NOT IMPOSSIBLE **David A. Ucko**

Creating a mission statement appears to be a simple task. After all, don't all science centers have the same mission? Although science center missions may share similarities, your mission should be based on the unique strengths of your science center and the needs of the community you serve.

The purpose of most nonprofit organizations is to change people's lives. Your mission statement indicates what change you desire in your audience, and therefore what public service your science center provides. Thus the mission statement summarizes your basic purpose, your reason for existence. Commitment to this mission reflects opportunities or needs within your community, which must be matched by the capability of your institution to address them. The mission statement identifies your niche, and serves as a guide for your staff, volunteers, and board. It provides the long-range goals toward which day-to-day actions must be directed. The mission helps science center management target the use of limited resources of people and dollars.

The mission statement also lets those outside the organization, such as donors and potential supporters, know what your institution is striving to accomplish. Your success, and consequently, your ability to raise funds, will be measured by

- how effectively you carry out this mission. For example, the
- General Operating Support grant program of the Institute of
- Museum Services (IMS) uses this criterion as the basis of the
- review process to decide which institutions are funded.

- It is easy to create a very broad, inclusive mission statement.
- However, such a statement can get you into trouble when
- political or financial interests push the institution in particular
- directions. Individuals or corporations may propose projects
- to the science center and even provide the funds with which
- to carry them out. Their ideas may be sound, but they must fit
- within your mission. Without a clear focus, it is too easy to
- become distracted and siphon away valuable internal re-
- sources from key programs. Sometimes, it is possible to
- redirect such projects in ways that directly support the
- mission. A well-defined mission acts as a valuable filter when
- you consider what exhibits and programs to offer.

- During difficult economic times, science centers may need to
- cut back the programs they deliver, and may be forced to
- reduce the staff as well. A clear, agreed-upon mission state-
- ment becomes a tool that helps management make tough
- decisions about which services are most important to the
- organization and therefore must be maintained, while others



are reduced or eliminated. It helps deal with science center programs that have become ends in themselves, rather than the means for achieving long-range institutional goals.

Finally, a mission statement is not a document developed as an assignment and then filed away to be forgotten. It must act as an ongoing guide for both short-term operations and long-term planning. When it no longer serves that function, it should be rewritten to make it serve that need.

**CASE STUDY: KANSAS CITY MUSEUM**

Prior to 1990, when I arrived at the Kansas City Museum, the institution viewed itself as a traditional museum. As stated in the fundraising case statement: "The first function of any museum is to collect, and it is the predominant reason for our existence." Since its incorporation in 1939, the museum had collected 250,000 objects in diverse areas, creating outstanding collections of costumes, native American artifacts, carriages, natural history specimens, and many other categories. Unfortunately, the museum lacked a clear focus. Our institution encompassed nearly everything but fine arts, which were the province of an older local museum.

.....  
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.....

We decided to re-examine the mission to clarify the museum's direction and to respond to changing community needs. When the museum was incorporated, the original emphasis stressed "history, natural science and industrial science." In fact, the museum hosted the region's first science fair in 1952, and became a member of ASTC in the late 1970s. During the recent past, however, regional history had been the museum's primary focus.

Although other local institutions collected and exhibited regional history, the Kansas City metropolitan area had no science museum. In light of this and the ever-increasing impact on the lives of Kansas Citians by science and technology, the board determined that the museum place increased emphasis on these areas. We wrote a revised mission statement to embody that thrust, creating a primary focus on science and a secondary focus on regional history. Still an important part of the museum, history now became a tool for understanding the past and present as a means of preparing for a future based on science and technology.

The museum's mission statement now reads:

The Kansas City Museum promotes informal learning about science, technology, and history through participatory exhibits and programs that are both educational and entertaining. The primary audiences served by the Kansas City Museum are families and school groups from the region, as well as tourists.

The following is an elaboration of that mission statement:

The Museum's primary *educational* mission is to stimulate public interest in science and technology, and to increase awareness of the influence that science and technology have on people's lives, and on the history of our region and its future. The goal of this effort is to enhance scientific literacy, and to encourage the pursuit of careers in science and technology.

The Museum's *historical* mission is to preserve the region's heritage by collecting significant artifacts, specimens, and documents. These collections shall be used to support a secondary educational mission of placing the lives of today's Kansas Citians in historical perspective.

The Museum’s *social* mission is two-fold: to reach children—with the intent to spark an interest in science at an early age, and to reach adults—especially those not predisposed toward science. Special target groups are women and minorities, groups that have been traditionally underrepresented in the science and engineering work force.

The Museum carries out its mission by offering experiences that are educational, entertaining, and actively involve its audiences. These experiences include exhibits and programs based on science and technology and the history and future of the Kansas City region. The Museum seeks to collaborate on its programs with other organizations whose goals support those of the Kansas City Museum.

• To better carry out this mission, we now are in the process of  
• creating “Science City,” a separate new facility for the Kansas  
• City Museum that will serve as an innovative stand-alone  
• science center for the community. At the same time, we will  
• renovate our existing facility, Corinthian Hall, as a stately home  
• and history museum.

• In summary, your mission is the basis for everything else that  
• your science center does and will do. If you wish to create a  
• firm foundation for your institution, prepare your mission  
• statement thoughtfully, and then review it regularly. Although  
• it is a difficult task, it’s certainly not Mission Impossible!

• .....  
• *Before becoming president of the Kansas City Museum in 1990, David Ucko*  
• *was deputy director of the California Museum of Science and Industry in Los*  
• *Angeles, and vice president for programs at Chicago’s Museum of Science*  
• *and Industry. Dr. Ucko was a chemistry professor before entering the*  
• *museum field in 1979, and holds a Ph.D. in chemistry from M.I.T.*