



This column explores innovative informal education projects being undertaken within our local museum community. As active spaces for dialogue, connection and critical thinking, it seeks to highlight programming that makes our institutions more inclusive and that encourage more meaningful engagement with our visitors.

SPOTLIGHT ON MUSEUM ED

DARK

Evening Programming For Adults

Sarah Carlson

Although one major role of organizations with mandates of informal education, like museums, galleries, science centres and aquariums, is to support hands-on informal education, we are often seen solely as kid-friendly educational establishments that are great spots to spend a rainy day. This provides our organizations with the opportunity to counter that perception and offer bring in a new audience by hosting entertaining adult-only programs. These events invite those 19 and older to spend time exploring our sites and discover that we are a great place for a date night or an evening out with friends. Organizations throughout the

Lower Mainland are coming up with creative ways to introduce programming targeted at the adult crowd, where visitors are invited to learn and interact with other like-minded individuals in a casual, relaxed environment.

Both the Vancouver Aquarium and Science World host regular evening events for adults where they open their doors after hours and have programming where visitors get exclusive access to all the site has to offer, including interactive talks with guest speakers, hands-on activities, while enjoying food and drinks. The Vancouver Art Gallery has a Young Associates (YA) program, which brings together a dynamic group of young professionals for events like Rendezvous on the Rooftop, where the YA are invited to come have a cocktail and an exclusive behind the scenes tour of the current exhibit, or FUSE, where the gallery comes alive with innovative and experimental art, music and performances. The Royal BC Museum also offers a wide variety of themed programming just for adults, including Museum Happy Hour, Night at the Museum and Night Shift, which gives visitors the opportunity to enjoy an evening of presentations, live music and exciting interaction with museum and community experts.

A visitor is transfixed by jellyfish during a night at the aquarium (Stock photo)



Visitors are transported back in time aboard Tram Car 1220 as a costumed storyteller from *Forbidden Vancouver* regales them with scandalous stories from prohibition in B.C. Photo credit: *Steveston Interurban Tram*

While many institutions can draw upon a large staff team and make use of resources with their marketing, catering and programming departments, it is often challenging for smaller organizations to host events on a larger scale. One example of evening programming which has been very successful is *Cosmic Nights* at the H.R. MacMillan Space Centre. Aimed at entertaining and informing grown-ups about the wonders of the universe, the evening

includes a custom planetarium show, music, drinks, science demonstrations and a guest lecturer. Each program is unique and highlights a hot topic in astronomy and space exploration and invites visitors to be part of the conversation – from a debate about Venus or Mars would be more suitable to send humans or whether life can exist on the icy planets in our solar system and beyond – that keeps visitors coming back for more!!

Two visitors enjoy some snacks and conversation during Cosmic Nights at the H.R. MacMillan Space Centre. Photo credit: Lindsay Elliot

Here are a few tips for organizations interested in offering evening programming for adults from Michael Unger, Program Coordinator at the H.R. MacMillan Space Centre.

- **Know Your Audience.** Be as specific as you can when developing your programming plan. Ensure you identify who your primary audience will be and understand their needs. For many adults, it is a desire to learn in a casual setting where there is also the opportunity to socialize, meet other like-minded people and have something to eat or drink.
- **Define Success.** Programs take time to grow and build a following. In addition to knowing your audience, it is important to define how you will measure the success of new initiatives. Consider your organization's capacity and set realistic benchmarks for your site, whether that means hosting one new program, selling a set number of tickets per event, or increasing the number of repeat visitors that attend your events.
- **Identify Barriers.** Determine what obstacles you (as well as your potential visitors) face and work to make your programs more accessible. Some institutional barriers could include cost, staffing, or liability surrounding obtaining a liquor license for your site.
- **Know Your Limits.** Factor in the size of your site and your staff team when planning your programs. Consider the format of your programs and assess their sustainability (ie. program structures that can be used with new content each time).



To build capacity, think about the ways in which you can draw upon resources within your own organization, as well as form partnerships with other local businesses and organizations.

- **Gather Feedback.** Make sure to evaluate each program and use that data to implement changes. Gather feedback from participants through informal conversations during the event and formal evaluations distributed after the event, then debrief with staff to discuss what worked well, as well as what could be improved upon.



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