

**BEING small IS NOT  
A PROBLEM AT ALL**

# BABY, WE'LL ROLL WITH IT

## Resilience in the Small Museum

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Museums, galleries, and archives are good at rolling with the punches. Things can change at a moment's notice – a key volunteer moves to be closer to her new grandbaby; a longtime funder changes their philanthropic focus; the hoped-for donation of a local item doesn't materialize but a massive and unexpected donation of other items does. We make plans to develop new exhibits, deepen community engagement, strengthen existing and develop new relationships with underserved groups. And then something happens and we have to rethink, revise, and/or restart.

For those of us who function with few staff and who heavily rely on volunteers, these hiccups can be overwhelming – especially when they come in rapid succession. After a nightmarish summer in 2009 when nothing went according to plan, in response to the BC Arts Council's application question about our most notable recent successes, I actually wrote, "We survived the summer of Plan Bs."

I've learned a few things over the years about dealing with the uncertainty that plagues our sector without going stark raving mad:

**RULE #1:****Reel from the hit, then move on**

It's perfectly acceptable – even imperative – to feel the frustration and work through it in whatever way you can. But once you've had your good cry or gone for a punishing workout or talked it out with the neighbourhood chickadees (my personal favourite), you need to look for the opportunity. I am a firm believer in the silver-lining philosophy. Yep, that tree landing on one of our buildings this past March would have put an abrupt end to our exhibit development partnership with the local high school if COVID-19 hadn't hit the same day. Moving everything out to make way for repairs gave us the perfect opportunity to collaborate with the Yaqan Nukiy and Ktunaxa communities on a new exhibit highlighting their cultural resilience in a changing world.

The phrase “resilience in a changing world” really sums up our situation. The world is going to change, so we might as well adapt. This is the incentive we need to stop doing things the way we've always done them. Volunteer grandmother

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moving away forces us to embrace new volunteer recruitment strategies. Massive donations of items opens up new exhibit opportunities. COVID-19 might mean we can't connect with audiences in person, but now we're finally wrapping our heads around technology.

You might say this is a reactive strategy. Part of me agrees. But in small organizations, we don't always have the resources to predict what *might* happen; we're too busy grappling with what *is* happening. Being able to react positively and strategically in an unexpected situation is a good thing.

COVID-19 and a tree hit us at the same time on March 14, 2020, forcing a complete redirect of all our spring and summer plans.  
Photo credit:  
Creston Museum.

Trail Museum & Archives Donor Wall. A clear testament to the social capital the museum has earned in the community, 2020.

Photo credit:  
Sarah Benson-Lord.



**RULE #2:**

**When your world goes sideways, tell people**

As my friend and colleague Sarah Benson-Lord of the Trail Museum & Archives says, “Being small, we know everyone and everyone knows us. Sometimes our own social collateral can lead to success (e.g., fundraising, calling in favours, local grant opportunities, etc.). Sometimes the formalities of advocacy can be eased by a friendly conversation in the grocery store or sitting down for a coffee. It helps that we can bump into each other frequently and take the ‘procedure’ out of things. It also means we can talk to each other on a slightly different level about our own realities (good and bad).”

Talking about the challenges we face is not only a good, healthy way of dealing with frustration and uncertainty, it can also lead to solutions. Maybe you end up talking to someone who has the knowledge or skills to solve the problem. Maybe they have the same problem and you can collaborate on the solution. Maybe it’s someone who completely sympathizes and is about to become your new key volunteer. Regardless of the outcome, you’re building bridges and connections, and that is only going to boost your resilience.

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**Lesson learned: Our problems are the community's problems; the community's problems are our problems. Together, we can solve them.**

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**RULE #3:**

**No one does it alone**

To bounce back from adversity, we need the help and support of our community. To achieve that, we have to be there for our community when they need us.

I had a severe crisis of confidence this past summer when I realized that almost all of our community engagement strategies had been undone by COVID-19: 22 years of hard work to make this a true community museum and it was all going down the drain. It was a tough moment. But then I got a flurry of emails from teachers desperate for help in developing outdoor learning opportunities for their students in this strange new world.

We've been extremely busy, creating new content, developing new programs, and connecting with new schools, teachers, and curricula. We've more than doubled our typical annual school participation, all of which has been delivered in a safe, physically-distanced format.

Lesson learned: Our problems are the community's problems; the community's problems are our problems. Together, we can solve them.

That's resilience.



A collection of old flags and a historic map of Canada formed the foundation of an on-demand school program on Confederation, 2020.

*Photo credit: Creston Museum.*