

VOLUNTEER DOCENTS VS. PAID INTERPRETERS: WHICH IS RIGHT FOR YOUR MUSEUM?

By Tara Young, Independent Museum Education Consultant

Interpreters are on the front lines at nearly every museum, delivering programs, giving tours, answering questions, and playing a major role in the visitor's experience. The staffing structure of your interpreters may not have changed for some time, but it could now be at a turning point due to economic and demographic shifts. Because of budget cutbacks, your museum may be eliminating staff and replacing them with volunteers. Or difficulties with recruitment may require you to think about restructuring your program to meet the needs of new generations of volunteers. You may even have put your docent program on hiatus as you determine the best way to move it forward. These predicaments are facing many of us in the field, and they present an opportunity to step back and to consider whether volunteer or paid interpreters—or a combination—are best for our institutions.

Volunteer interpreters, which I'll call docents for simplicity's sake, are at the heart of many museums. If you work with docents, you probably enjoy it, as they have numerous positive attributes. Docents come to a museum because of a strong personal commitment to its mission. They are often highly qualified, dedicated, knowledgeable, and enthusiastic. They may have advanced degrees, be prominent community members, and may support your institution financially. Docents can be powerful advocates for your museum. And of course, they work without pay, saving substantial amounts of money in salary, taxes, and possibly benefits.

The positives of docents are many, but museums need to consider their costs as well. Volunteers may not get paid, but they are certainly not free. Hard costs include training materials and guest speakers, recognition gifts, supplies, and refreshments. Soft costs include docent benefits like free memberships, parking vouchers, or program discounts. Staff time is the most substantial cost that museums invest in docents. Factor in the salary and benefits of the person or people who recruit, hire, train, oversee, schedule, and evaluate the docent corps.

Docents may have some shortcomings that are less pronounced than paid inter-

preters. Since docents seek personal enrichment rather than compensation, they may resist requirements—such as dress code, annual evaluations, or minimum hours—that make their service feel too much like a job. They may not be versatile, preferring to tour specific age groups, for example, or not wanting to participate in off-site programs. No matter how dedicated your docents, paid employment, travel, or family responsibilities probably—and understandably—take precedence over their volunteer work. Beware that you may encounter last-minute cancellations or have problems scheduling docents around the holidays.

The pros and cons of paid interpreters are essentially the opposite of those discussed above. (This discussion assumes that paid interpreters are part-time, hourly staff, though some museums have full-time interpreters.) On the plus side, paid staff are usually reliable, barring illness or an emergency. They will schedule their vacation or personal leave in advance and per your museum's policies for allotting time off. Depending on their job descriptions, you can easily cross-train paid staff and assign them where they are needed, without having to take narrow preferences into consideration. When recruiting staff, you can require specific credentials; with volunteers, you may need to cast your net wider to reach your recruitment targets. Paid staff are typically given a higher level of responsibility, such as security clearance and budget oversight, that can allow them to assume a greater role in program management.

The drawbacks of paid staff relate largely to the costs involved. On one hand, their wages are a significant—and perhaps unaffordable—line item. You may find yourself making do with fewer staff than is ideal because of budget constraints, leading to a compromised visitor experience (say, larger tour groups or unstaffed galleries). Even so, hourly wages for interpreters are usually very low and lack benefits; they may work multiple jobs to make ends meet. High turnover is a problem; be prepared for regular vacancies. Given the low wages, paid interpreters may have less experience than docents, who are often retired from successful careers. Paid staff also require a

significant amount of oversight, for which education managers may not be trained. If you are new to employee management, enlist the help of your museum's human resources specialist as you navigate everything from interviewing to termination.

Hybrid models that use some volunteer docents and some paid interpreters can save money and allow you to capitalize on the "pros" of each group while avoiding some of the "cons." For example, paid educators (perhaps with teaching certificates or other relevant credentials) could lead school tours while docents lead public tours. This can allow for more consistency in program delivery and can ensure closer adherence to standards. Another option would be to use docents for in-house tours but to use paid educators for external programs, such as outreaches, that require travel and transport of materials.

With a hybrid model, the functions of the paid staff and the volunteer docents must be distinct. It is unethical, and may even violate employment laws, to pay some people but not others for doing the same task. Make sure to consult your human resources department, and perhaps an attorney, as you define roles. A clear distinction is also crucial to building an effective team and to avoiding resentment and turf wars. Whether your interpreters are paid or not, they should all be treated as professionals and should be given the tools they need to succeed: clear job descriptions with duties and expectations outlined, regular opportunities for feedback and evaluation, and professional development that encourages them to continually hone their skills. Whichever model you use, remember to show your appreciation for a job well done. Good interpreters, paid or not, make our collections come to life. They are creative and flexible, they are welcoming and empowering to visitors, and they are at the very heart of what we, as 21st-century community-minded museums, want to be.

Tara Young is an independent museum education consultant based in Worcester, MA. She thanks her colleagues Jennifer DePrizio, Dawn Low, and Maria Mingalone, who presented with her on this topic at the NEMA conference in Nashua last November.