

Along with the need for museums to upgrade and update displays, and to develop improved access to collections, the question of how to provide interactive and engaging activities is of critical importance.

Digital technologies have thrown both solutions and extra challenges into the mix. For the not-so-technical and for those on tight budgets making things interactive is easier than it seems.

We've put together a list of ideas to help:

Before and after photos

Search your collection for photographs of your historic house or garden or an important site in your locality which has changed drastically.

Copy and enlarge these to A4 size, or larger if the quality is good. This enables people to easily see the detail in the photograph. Visit the location to take a modern photo from a similar vantage point – the more accurately you can do this the more successful the interactive will be. Take the photo with you on location so you can refer to it.

Print the modern photograph on a transparent overlay at the same size as the facsimile and fix it along one edge over the original to give a 'before and after' view. It's probably worthwhile to secure the photograph to a cardboard backing or something to give it stability as people will want to open and close it multiple times.

Both the facsimile and the overlay are easy to replace if and when they become worn.

Dolls houses

If your museum occupies a historic site or is a building of significance, think about making a miniature version of the property. A local woodworker or kindly grandpa might be able to build a model of the museum.

Think about painting it or wallpapering the exterior using scrapbooking papers. Decorate its interior with replicas of the furniture and décor of a

particular era relevant to your property. Refer to collection information and photographs about how the property looked, or to well-documented similar properties.

Use your imagination: crochet a doily as a rug, photocopy miniature paintings to decorate walls, find vintage fabrics and glue to simply shaped furniture cut from blocks of wood.

Reference material can be printed for visitors to leaf through while children are playing with the doll's house museum. It's a great way to keep children occupied if there are fragile items on display. Place it on the floor in an area of the museum easily supervised.

Dress up box

If you have clothing in your collection that denotes particular fashion trends or an important event such as a ball or wedding, why not provide a dress-up box containing similar items.

Some of these can be sourced from second hand stores and cut down to size. Get the talented seamstresses on board with this project. Stores like Spotlight and Lincraft sell a range of furry, fluffy and lacy fabrics which can be sewn into simple versions of the costumes on display.

Don't forget the accessories – hats, gloves, hair clips and belts can make a costume come alive. And remember to cater for the boys, who love to dress up as much as girls and rarely get opportunities outside donning Batman's over-underpants or superhero gear. A shortened walking cane, a folded handkerchief, a medal pinned to a lapel, all adds authenticity to the dress up box.

Place the dress-up box near the displayed costumes or photographs of the people wearing the costume, along with background information and instruction on getting dressed.

Dress up boxes can also be themed. Think about the interpretation in the museum and choose a theme to highlight. 'On the farm', 'During the war' or 'Memories of childhood' are good examples. This way a range of costumes can be provided and you can supplement the box with objects that can be safely handled such as simple tools.

Keep a close eye on the cleanliness of various items and regularly launder them. Parents will love you for this. Think about lice in hats. Microwave them or put them in a plastic bag and deep freeze for 24 hours to kill any pests.

Encourage people to take photos wearing the costumes and get them to post to their Facebook page or share them on your own.

Collection objects for handling

One of the easiest ways of providing interactive experiences for visitors is to let them touch things.

Think about the objects in your collection that are fairly impervious to change. Things made of metal or wood, or those with their own protection such as a framed photograph fit into this category. Objects which performed a function are always of interest; butter pats and butter churns, typewriters and old hand irons are good examples, and can be used to start a conversation about how the object was used. Memorabilia is also popular.

Be mindful of things that open and close; they can trap or pinch children's fingers and the hinging mechanism might suffer from sustained use. Also be aware of objects that are liable to damage if dropped. Reduce this risk by providing a padded table or a rubber mat below the examination area.

Change the objects regularly along with the information.

You might also like...

If your museum offers an outreach program whether it be to the local preschool or to a nursing home, these interactives can be easily modified to take with you on a visit.

Here are some examples:

Museum in a Box

Australian Museum

<https://australian.museum/learn/teachers/museum-box/>

Art in a Suitcase

Bathurst Regional Art Gallery

<https://bathurstart.com.au/education/education-programs/>