

Archives Open House **Do-it-Yourself (DiY) Guidelines**

An open house for your community can show off your archival collection and introduce people to your preservation and access work. Holding an open house is not complicated. Success depends on good communications to the community and some simple preparations.

There are just a few guidelines to follow to make the experiences a pleasure for you and for your visitors. Here are some tips to help make your event a success.

Whom to invite

Open houses offer everyone in your community a chance to see your collections and learn about your work, but you can specifically invite groups you would like to bring into your institution for the event.

- **Local public officials:** mayor, town board, county supervisors, school principals, school board members, city council members, state legislators.
- **History-related groups:** genealogy clubs, historic preservation groups, civil war re-enactors, public and private school history teachers, officers and members of other local historical societies.
- **Communicators:** newspaper editors and columnists, public librarians, TV and radio program hosts, visitors bureau staff, community foundation directors and staff.
- **Officers and members of your own institution:** president, secretary, treasurer, board members, officers and members of your friends group, colleagues and staff.

Your decisions on whom to invite will influence most of the other preparations for your open house.

When to hold the event

- **Select a date and time** that gives your community and your invited guests the best chance to attend and that as much as possible avoids conflicts with other popular events.
- **Choose a date during a related statewide event.** The month of October is ideal in many ways, since it's Wisconsin Archives Month as well as Family History Month.
- **Limit the hours** of your open house (2-3 hours is usually adequate) to make the event manageable.
- **Make, print and mail invitation:** Create an invitation to your event that can be mailed; use a photograph of something from your collection to add interest to the invitation. Use our template which allows you to add your own specific event details and print.

[Click here to open the invitation template \(PDF, 122KB\)](#)

What to show during an open house

- **The most interesting items in your collection:** Select the most interesting items from your collections for an exhibit. Identify each item with a brief descriptive label. Set up the exhibit where the largest number of visitors can view it at once (templates of sample labels are included – modify to fit your needs).
- **A tour of your facility and grounds:** If you have enough staff or volunteers, offer a staff-guided or self-guided walking tour of your public and non-public areas: exhibit spaces, reading rooms, work areas, collection storage areas, grounds. Provide handouts of written information on all these areas for a self-guided tour.
- **Demonstrations:** If you have enough staff or volunteers, hold demonstrations of the most interesting aspects of your work: conservation procedures, collections digitization, historical photos identification, research procedures. Any demonstration should employ an interesting collection that you can show off and describe.
- **Show how your institution serves the community:** Exhibits, tours and demonstrations should show how your institution serves the community and its members by preserving and providing access to historical records.
 - **Materials to exhibit/include** in tours or demonstrations:
 - Publications: show or describe publications written using your collections.
 - Collection indexes: show or describe collection indexes created by your staff or local genealogy groups to make the collections more accessible.
 - Students' projects: exhibit students' projects that developed from visits to your institution, use of your collections, or advice from your staff.
- **Information Sheet:** Give each visitor a one-sheet informational handout about your collection and institution. On this sheet, describe your historical records (highlight several of the most interesting collections), describe your work with them, and explain how your collections, services and programs benefit the community.

Preparing your collection and facility

- Clean, box and shelve all collections except those needed for tours or demonstrations, remove all obstructions from the tour routes.
- Make signs for self-guided tours that identify routes to take.
- Provide plenty of free parking, use signs to mark the entrances to parking areas and to show the way from parking areas to the entrance to your building – also signs from parking area to archives are important (cheap, durable outdoor signs can be found at your

local Menards or Home Depot; a template is also included for your modification and use).

[Click here for the signs template \(PDF, 260KB\)](#)

- Make bathrooms as accessible as possible
- Identify staffing needs for the open house – assign tasks or stations to employees and / or volunteers.
- If you are holding this open house single-handedly, it is best to have just one area that your visitors will come to, with exhibits prepared in advance that do not require your supervision or require minimal supervision. When guests arrive, welcome them with a brief overview of the exhibit, pointing out interesting things in your collection that they shouldn't miss, then let them wander through at their own pace.

How to publicize your open house

- Newspapers: write and send out a press release to the City Desk or City Editor of your local newspapers (a sample press release is included).
- Radio and TV: contact the program directors at your local radio and television stations to see if they might include details about your open house on their community calendar or public service announcements; send them a press release as well.
- Community organization newsletters: use your press release to write up more complete notices of your open house, and send copies for inclusion in the newsletters of your community organizations.
- Invitation: create an invitation to your event that can be mailed. Use a photograph of something from your collection to add interest to the invitation.

[Click here for the press release template \(PDF, 28KB\)](#)

If you provide refreshments for your open house

- Providing refreshments is up to you...some people do and others don't; there is no rule of thumb regarding what is appropriate, just use your instincts – you know your community best.
- Any food/drink with a “low mess factor” is desirable for your open house. An assortment of cookies and simple refreshments is sufficient. Individually packaged candy is also a good treat, especially around Halloween when these can be purchased in bulk.
- Provide large garbage containers in the food area.
- Ensure the safety of your collections by requesting that guests do not take food/drink into any areas where collections are laid out to. If you have a volunteer, ask one to remind guests of this guideline and monitor food and drink.

A suggested timeline to use for preparations

- **8 weeks before:** clear open house with supervisor; if necessary, establish budget by contacting caterers, printers; draft guest list.
- **6 weeks before:** create/mail invitations; contact/send press releases to local newspaper, radio and TV
- **5 weeks before:** choose collections to showcase; write-up information about collection; create a flyer to distribute
- **4 weeks before:** create guides and exhibit tags; call for volunteers and/or student workers to help staff the open house; finalize arrangements for refreshments
- **3 weeks before:** distribute flyers in person to local merchants
- **1 week before:** begin clearing up space where exhibit will be held; create layout of how you want exhibit tables to be set up
- **2 days before:** begin to set up tables; set out items for display from your collection; place descriptive labels near each item
- **1 day before:** finalize set up for display tables; set up refreshment tables in a second area (if available); set out disposable products (cups, napkins, paper plates) and platters/plates for arranging food
- **1 hour before:** set out food and drinks for arriving guests

- **Zero Hour: Smile, have a great time showing off these special items from your collection, and thank you for all the hard work that has gone into making this collection accessible!**