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Things That Go Bump in the Night: Museums and Haunted Events

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The days are getting shorter. The nights are getting longer. The wind is blowing leaves from the trees. Museum visitors are asking whether our sites are haunted. For many museums, the annual fall uptick in paranormal interest is an opportunity for increased revenue through specialized events – ghost tours, haunted houses, cemetery walks, etc.

"Social Distancing Trick or Treat!" 1 (Indiana Historical Society)

People are excited to visit museums and other sites in unusual circumstances with opportunities to have different experiences. Often these events take place at dusk, at night, or in the wee hours of the morning. They are held in dim light, occasionally by flashlight only. Sometimes museums bring their most unsettling objects out of storage – the two-headed calf, the wicker coffin, the brains in jars, etc.

In addition to planning for visitor safety such as checking for obstacles, lighting stairs, and providing written and verbal warnings for tripping hazards, it's important to plan for collections stewardship. While many of our objects like to rest in low light, they don't like being bumped into by visitors walking around in the dark.

Things to consider:

- Thoroughly research any objects highlighted at the event. Be sure that the way you use them and the stories you tell are respectful.
- People are excited to be in our spaces. Use the events to engage and intrigue visitors. Think about how you can weave your mission and history through the events as teasers to encourage return visits during regular hours.
- On event registration pages, and at the beginning of the event, tell visitors what to expect as they go through the site as well as any rules they are expected to follow in terms of where they can go and what they can do at the event. Let visitors know whether they can wander through the site unaccompanied by staff or volunteers.
- Some visitors may ask to bring special equipment. They may want to film the experience. Determine what will and won't be allowed. Set clear parameters for what can be recorded and where it could be shown later.
- Place clever signs reminding visitors of any objects that they cannot touch during the event. If visitors are allowed to touch certain objects, clearly set them apart by placing those objects in "Do Touch" zones.
- Think about how you might need to restrict access to exhibits that aren't part of the special events or tours. Place clear signage in front of restricted areas and lock doors. Consider placing staff or volunteers at restricted access points.
- Take extra measures to secure objects. Objects that might otherwise be exhibited in the open may need to be temporarily removed or placed under vitrines. Check that cases are secured with locks. If you have an onsite security system, you may be able to use zoned alarms.

Don't be spooked by offering special themed events. They can be a great way to expose new visitors to our spaces. The skeleton key to success is thinking ahead, making plans, and managing visitor expectations.

Resources

- Is History Haunted? Three museums explain their supernatural programs (American Alliance of Museums)

Further Resources

- Collections Advisors (Indiana Historical Society)
- Timely Tips (Indiana Historical Society)

Collection Trainings

Digitizing Scrapbooks
Sept. 30 (Northeast Document Conservation Center)

Strategies for Born Digital Collections
Oct. 2 (Northeast Document Conservation Center)

Recorded Webinars

- Connecting to Collections Care
- Indiana Historical Society
- Texas Historical Commission

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