CollectiveAccess

Minnesota Alliance of Local History Museums Collaborative Software Project
Collection Management

Museums would not exist without their collections. It is the heart of what we do.

Museums rely on Collection Management Software (CMS) to track the objects in the collection.

- We track the donation history. Where did it come from? Who donated it? When? Is it a gift or a loan?
- We track the condition of the item, note changes over time and any conservation that is done to the item.
- We track its significance. Who made it? Who used it? When? Why? What is its story?
- We track its location within the museum, so we can find it quickly.
- We track its use history. When was it last on exhibit? Has it had too much light exposure? Is it on loan?
The Problem

- Most local history museums in Minnesota use PastPerfect software to manage their collections.
- PastPerfect has issues with its underlying software Visual FoxPro. It is no longer supported by Microsoft. The final version of VFP was released in 2004 and the last update was in 2007.
- While PastPerfect is a good system, and is still functional, it may not work with future versions of Windows. And there will be no security patches going forward.
- PastPerfect released Version 5 in 2010, still using VFP as its underlying software.
- A Statewide Collection Management Software task force assembled in 2014 to find solutions.
Seeking Solutions

- The task force first attempted to work with PastPerfect. Offered to provide customer feedback, work as beta testers, etc. Every time PP was contacted, they said a new system would be available in 3-6 months. It has now been more than 5 years.
- The task force created a survey asking Minnesota History Museums about CMS. What do you use? How do you use it? What are your favorite features? What do you wish you could do?
- We tested many different CMS systems.
Fears

- If PP fails – what do we do?
- While there are many potential CMS systems available, if each organization goes their own way – we loose the opportunity to collaborate.
- If we choose another proprietary system? What happens if that company goes out of business or stops updating?
- Changing systems is hard work. Fields don’t always match and you need to learn a new software. The change needs to be worth the effort.
- We need to develop something NOW.
Opportunities

- We can collaborate!
- We can customize an open-source system that we will always have the ability to update.
- We can make sure that our new systems uses Application Programming Interface (API) that will allow us to share our data if we wish.
- We can share webhosting and development costs.
- We can share training resources if we use the same system.
- We can share our collections with each other and the world.
Solution

- After investigating and working with different CMS systems, CollectiveAccess was selected as the best solution for our needs.
- In 2017 the Minnesota Alliance of Local History Museums (MALHM) applied for and received a Heritage Partnership Grant to customize a Minnesota version of CollectiveAccess and bring on 5 pilot sites.
- Using the NovaScotia and Connecticut systems as guides, and incorporating feedback from Minnesota museums, MALHM’s CA system went live in the spring of 2018.
- We added 2 more organizations in 2019 and have applied for a grant to bring on 10 more this fall.

Each member organization has its own private database to manage their own collection.
Immediate Public Benefits

- Members can select records from their collection to share on the MNCollections.org website. Some members share almost their entire collections, others share none. Each organization is encouraged to use the public system, but has complete control over how much they share.

- Researchers can seek information on collections across the state with one website.

- Visitors to MNCollections.org can leave comments or ask questions and contribute to the body of knowledge.
Challenges

- We need to charge enough to cover the webhosting and support costs.
- We need to develop an application process to make sure that organizations are ready....and a way to help them prepare if they are not ready.
- We need to develop training protocols, both for new organizations, and for existing organizations that have staff turnover.
- We need to develop specific policies on what to do if an organization leaves the system.
- We don’t know yet what our own staffing needs will be.

- Most of these challenges will be addressed through our proposed Heritage Partnership Grant
Benefits

- CollectiveAccess is not only an adequate alternative to PP, but is in many ways superior. (Customization of interfaces, visualization of collection, more robust ways of connecting people and organizations to object records, and more efficient systems for cleaning up data / batch processing.)

- Users meet via Google Hangout to discuss questions, issues or tips & tricks.

- The more members we add, the more we can share the costs of webhosting, backups and training.

- With the system administered by MALHM, there will always be local help for sites that need training, or who fall on hard times.
Links

To try out the Back-end system:
sandbox.malhm.org
user name: test
password: minn

Explore the Public Site:
MNCollections.org
Questions?

- Contact Ann Grandy at malhmcatalog@gmail.com for technical help / training.

- Dustin Heckman at staff@mnhistoryalliance.org for more information on joining the system.