



What is advocacy?

Some people consider 'advocacy' to be a buzzword, and yet the term is widely used in museums and galleries. For many, the term 'advocacy' creates confusion. What is it? Who should be doing it? What does it involve? This short guide, based on research undertaken with leading museum and advocacy professionals, seeks to answer some of those questions.

What is it?

There is no single definition of advocacy, and very little written about it in the sector. As a result, organisations have interpreted it differently. It's important to reach a shared understanding of advocacy so that museums can achieve greater results from their efforts.

Definition: "Advocacy is the process whereby an organisation seeks to influence others in order to gain support for its mission, interests or course of action. In order to achieve this, networks of support are developed and used to lend credibility, wield influence and offer third-party endorsement."

There are two main ways in which advocacy is considered and undertaken:

- 1) **As a form of political communication** used to influence political decision-making. It might be undertaken in order to influence funding settlements, policy, legislation etc. With the reputation of lobbyists in decline, many believe advocacy has become a 'softer' and more acceptable way to refer to political communications.
- 2) **As a form of stakeholder communications.** Stakeholders are broadly defined as "any group or individual who can affect and is affected by the achievement of the organisation's objectives" (Freeman, 1984). Advocacy, where it is focused towards stakeholders, is an approach that would view political decision-makers as just one of the many groups potentially interested in a museum's mission, interests or course of action.

The stakeholder approach to advocacy takes a broader view, and recognises that many different groups, with differing interests, are involved in making decisions and wielding influence. It also allows museums to undertake advocacy at different levels – from building relationships with a local authority to demonstrating the value of a museum's work to community leaders.

Why do it?

The good news about advocacy is that it's something a lot of museum professionals do without putting that name to it. And yet, does it feel as if the public value of museums is widely appreciated and acknowledged? Probably not. Therefore, there's plenty more to be done to demonstrate why museums matter.

First and foremost, advocacy helps museums and galleries to communicate what they do, why they do it and how it is of value – culturally, socially and economically. It offers a way to impart information and develop other people's understanding. In doing this, it increases the visibility and profile of museums. This 'information sharing' is often the first step in advocacy.

Beyond information sharing, an organisation would look to develop goodwill and support – the kind that can be utilised in support of a cause, issue or cause of action. The development of champions for the museum is a critical step in advocacy. Staff are often seen as having a vested interest in their organisation, so third party champions can bring credibility to advocacy messages.

For advocacy to be truly effective it should be a conversation with others, and not one-directional. As a result it helps museums to build relationships with others. In reaching out and engaging with organisations, people and groups in the outside environment it helps museums to learn more about others - their work and their agendas. As we find ourselves in a period of political and economic uncertainty it reminds us that no museum can afford to be an island. Given that museums are interconnected with so many others, advocacy helps museums to successfully navigate the changing external environment and access new opportunities.

Finally, advocacy helps museums by offering them a voice and wider spheres of influence – they may influence others to support them, but may also influence important decision-making. In short, advocacy helps museums to further their aims and goals.

Who benefits?

- *Museums:*
Through advocacy museums champion themselves and their work. At the same time they are champions for museums as a whole. When done well, advocacy brings reflected glory to the wider sector, raising the profile and reputation of one and all.
- *Stakeholders:*
Partnership-working is just one of the ways in which museums help stakeholders to deliver on *their* goals. Through advocacy, stakeholders are able to recognise areas of mutual interest and mutual benefit, giving them the opportunity to work together in a 'win-win' situation. Many museum stakeholders have an interest in ensuring the long-term success of museums; from the Department for Media, Culture and Sport through to a museum's own friends group.
- *Visitors and the wider public:*
A successful, high profile and well-supported museum is of benefit to those who visit it. Advocacy reminds us that those who make use of the museum's services are the ultimate beneficiaries. Advocacy helps to create the favourable conditions that support museums to succeed and meet their core purpose of enabling people to explore collections for inspiration, learning and enjoyment.

What does it involve?

Advocacy is focused on helping museums make their case, build their arguments and demonstrate their worth to those they seek to influence. The form this takes can vary widely.

Approaches to advocacy can be both general and specific – ranging from making advocacy part of everything an organisation does through to a targeted campaign around a single issue. To quote Alec Coles, former Director of Tyne & Wear Archives & Museums: "advocacy is anything and everything you do that persuades people to support your work. It is about making friends and influencing people and building a groundswell of support."

Advocacy also spans a range of things: from formal to informal, reactive to proactive, general to targeted and light-touch to complex. Advocacy cuts across a range of disciplines: from strategic planning to public relations. It can involve anything from developing an informal relationship over a cup of tea as part of your day job, to planned and targeted lobbying. The tactics chosen for advocacy work will depend on what a museum is hoping to achieve and on what appeals to their chosen target. Advocacy tactics frequently involve gathering data, evaluation, creating a compelling 'narrative' for the organisation and presenting that information through publications and meetings.

So, does advocacy have to be about asking for something? Having an 'ask' is frequently the case: "please represent our museum in your circles" or "maintain our funding". Advocacy likes a dragon to slay because people like to know how they can help and why you've asked for their attention. But it can be worthwhile to let someone know what your museum does without a call to action, because that support can be banked or stockpiled for the future. It's not always possible to predict when a key relationship may become incredibly important. The further a network of support reaches, the more stable a museum will be in the face of unanticipated change.

Because of the importance of influencing decision-makers and opinion-formers, advocacy is primarily focused on building long-term relationships. The direction of most advocacy is 'us to them' (e.g. from museum to local councillor), but excellent advocacy also involves 'them to others' (e.g. from local MP to other MPs). It's one thing for a museum to claim its education work is valued, but quite another to have that message come from a local Head Teacher and find its way to the Head of Children's services at the local authority. This third-party endorsement can be crucial in seeking wider support and bringing others on board as advocates for what you do.

Good advocacy is a two-way street, concerned with listening to the agendas of others, not simply communicating the museum's messages. Without listening or adjusting to what is happening in the external environment, museums risk being seen as irrelevant or out of touch. Listening to the agendas of others is not about abandoning core values, or chasing funding, but striking the right balance and finding areas of mutual interest that will help to ensure a museum's future significance and longevity. To this end, advocacy looks to find and exploit common ground and bring together people with diverse interests.

Advocacy can raise a museum's aspirations and ambitions. Everyone has a case to make to someone, and every museum will have its own needs and own challenges. Therefore, for museums to steer their own destiny, they should develop advocacy work for their specific context.

For more information on planning advocacy work take a look at the advocacy flowchart here:

<http://www.museumsassociation.org/love-museums/advocacy-flowchart>

What is it not?

Advocacy is not the same as marketing. While marketing focuses on visitors/audiences/service users, advocacy focuses on stakeholders, of which visitors may only be one group. Which stakeholders matter for advocacy will depend on what is being advocated. It is not the job of advocacy to let people know 'what's on'; and while placing a good news story in the local media can raise a museum's profile this is rarely, if ever, an end goal for advocacy. Advocacy would draw on this awareness and positive reputation to seek a favourable outcome on a wider issue e.g. support for a specific cause or access to a new network of influencers.

Similarly, advocacy should not just be about fundraising. Raising funds can be one of the positive outcomes of advocacy, but it is rarely, and nor should it be, the sole purpose for doing it. While advocacy is focused on raising awareness and building relationships, both key skills needed when fundraising, it has a remit of seeking support that goes beyond the financial.

Advocacy should not only be used to manage a crisis. As relationships take time to build, advocacy should be a long-term commitment and not a knee-jerk response to a crisis. If done well, advocacy should be the very thing to keep a museum from reaching crisis stage. Reactive advocacy work is understandable - the political, economic and social climate can change quickly, forcing the sector to react decisively - but there is real merit in museums investing time in proactive advocacy if they want to further their goals and broaden their supporter-base.

Who does it?

Often the Director or Chief Executive takes the lead on advocacy work – planning it, agreeing key messages and coordinating delivery. There are several explanations for this:

- They define the museum's mission and provide its strategic direction
- They have the broadest view of the organisation
- They are often well-connected and play a figurehead role

Staff with a communications remit are frequently involved, because of their experience in developing messages and disseminating them. For communications staff to play a major role in advocacy they need to have a good understanding of their key stakeholders and be involved in decision-making within the organisation.

The people involved with advocacy will vary from organisation to organisation, but, regardless of who takes the lead, it is crucial to seek the support and commitment of a museum's senior management before embarking on advocacy work.

Advocates can undertake a number of roles; they can:

- Represent: speak for others
- Accompany: speak with others
- Empower: enable others to speak for themselves
- Mediate: facilitate communication between others
- Model: demonstrate the practice to others
- Negotiate: bargain for desired outcomes
- Network: build coalitions and partnerships

Advocacy should be understood and undertaken at all levels of a museum. This view acknowledges that, externally, decisions are taken at a number of levels too. While advocacy planning may be 'owned' by a small group, all museum staff have a role to play in being an advocate and ambassador for the organisation. In the same way that customer service is understood to be a something everyone should be concerned with, advocacy is about representing the organisation in favourable terms to anyone and everyone.

Front-of-house staff can be some of the most important advocates as they're the most visible part of a museum's work. If they convey excitement about the museum, its mission, and their part in achieving that, it can be very powerful. Staff should be empowered to become advocates and should be familiar with the museum's messages. At every level staff are connected into their own networks, and where a good advocacy culture exists, messages will cascade out as intelligence feeds back in. Again, communication should be two-way.

Museums should also consider how they work with groups that are independent but closely allied to them – groups such as friends and volunteers. These powerful 'super-supporters' are often well networked, are knowledgeable about museums and keen to champion the museum's work. The public can also play a role in advocacy, especially where an issue or course of action affects them.

Good advocacy should be embedded in the organisation's strategic plans for the long-term. Quick-fix advocacy doesn't build the bridges museums need for long-term understanding and support. In theory, advocacy can be applied to all museums regardless of size, type or status. Nevertheless advocacy will only work well where there is the commitment to embed it in a museum's ambitions and where it has wider organisational buy-in.

Useful advocacy skills and activities:

- Networking: Gaining access to influential others, and better understanding them, can be vital in achieving advocacy goals.
- Capacity building: It can be worthwhile giving others the skills and knowledge to go forth and advocate for your cause.
- Research: Good advocacy builds on sound research. Advocates should seek to develop their knowledge of stakeholders and trends/issues in the external environment.
- Evaluation and evidence building: Building a case or argument built on solid evidence will substantiate and legitimise your claims.

Further advocacy resources:

- Visit www.museumsassociation.org/love-museums.
- Read the April 2010 issue of Museum Practice, including a Working Knowledge special on advocacy (members and subscribers only): <http://www.museumsassociation.org/museum-practice/advocacy>

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