

ARCS 2015 Conference Session Review

Avoiding a Crash on the Indie Track

Presenters:

Ted Greenberg, Museum Consultant
Brent Powell, Museum Collection Care / Crozier Fine Arts
Suzanne Quigley, Art & Artifact Services

Review Submitted by:

Batja Bell, Independent Registrar

Geri Thomas noted in Friday's session on Career Stages and Professional Development that the museum world mirrors trends in the general economy. Suzanne Quigley continued that theme in Saturday's session with a statistic from the Freelancers Union: 43% of the US workforce is currently self-employed.

Museums, like other businesses in the last decade, have restructured, cutting staff positions. Opportunities for employment and mobility are limited in many regions. Thankfully, contract registrars have always been with us to cover vacancies and special projects. But increasingly, museums rely on them to support skeletal staffs for their more routine and labor-intensive, but necessary, activities. Experienced free-lancers are a good deal for this kind of work: they're highly productive, motivated, and require minimal training and supervision.

Some specialized contractors may choreograph entire museum projects and exhibitions - managing multi-tiered and multi-disciplinary teams from start to finish. In many cases, independents provide expertise not available in the museum's own staff. Other free-lance collections professionals have expanded their skill sets beyond museums to include curation, private art advisory, appraisals, and exhibition design as well.

Most of us working as independents didn't begin our careers that broadly. Nor were we groomed in museum studies programs to become our own managers. Whether or not independent practice was a deliberate choice, or a survival technique, we've had to figure it out on our own, using a combination of experience, wit, collegial support, research, and trial-and-error.

So it was exciting to have a session at ARCS in which colleagues could share their journeys along this career track. Moderated by Suzanne Quigley, it featured two other speakers: Ted Greenberg (who, like Suzanne, now works independently for both private clients and institutions after positions at major museums); Brent Powell, with many years on museum staffs and at art services companies, now also operates as an independent consultant.

Ted and Suzanne described the range of skills needed to offer services to both private and institutional clients as full-service collections professional. Keeping enough work coming in to provide a livelihood requires diversification:

- Breadth of experience garnered from years of work, for varied organizations, in as many aspects of collections care and coordination as possible
- ‘The chops’ (to borrow a good New Orleans jazzman’s term!) – stamina, skills, tenacity and resourcefulness -- to improvise within new and unexpected situations. Versatility is key, as one must learn new systems and protocols on the fly, and work within different collecting environments and standards (museums, private collectors, corporate collections, educational institutions).
- Ability to understand, develop, write and review contracts, policies and forms, and have facility with a variety of databases and other tools.
- A ‘track record’ with, and network of, national and international related service providers: shippers, preparators, agents, lawyers, and other registrars. (Colleagues serve as resources and also provide referrals to other clients).
- Ability to educate and communicate with others who may not have the same vocabulary or framework – cross-cultural as well as cross-professional communication skills.
- Wisdom to know where and how compromises can be made while maintaining standards and minimizing risk (and, dare I add, without also risking client relationships).

However, sustaining an independent career also requires basic business practices and decisions that are not specific to the registrar/collections specialist field:

- Whether (or not) to incorporate
- Whether (or not) to create a formal business plan
- Managing your finances: business bank account, credit card, tracking expenses
- Protecting your business: Liability insurance and strategies to its cover cost, legal assistance
- Protecting yourself: health coverage, retirement planning
- Bookkeeping and business records
- Taxes (filing quarterly/annually/single or married)
- Managing your business profile, including:
 - Maintaining your resume and references
 - Developing your own contracts and other forms
 - How you market yourself: web presence, social media, networking
 - Establishing rates and billing systems

Brent’s presentation described the management of large-scale collections projects. A senior consultant may be responsible not only for the overall planning, budgeting and timetable, but for determining staffing needs and hiring subcontractors for the client organization. To do this requires a broad understanding of the entire project, its technical requirements, and all budgetary considerations. This manager must also have ‘people skills’, the ability to schedule, lead, delegate, equip and train personnel; and to set fair and appropriate rates of pay.

Brent outlined his methodology; this is a major topic itself, and it’s equally applicable to managers, whether they are in-house museum staff or outside consultants. Vetting, booking, and oversight of subcontractors are jobs registrars handle on smaller-scale projects as well, and it is important to understand how diverse teams of personnel are

successfully coordinated and managed. This certainly could be expanded into its own session for a future ARCS conference, with case studies illustrating projects of all sizes.

The session ended with Suzanne announcing the arrival of OnContract to the ARCS fold. OnContract membership is an additional \$20 per year to ARCS members who offer services on a free-lance basis. It allows them to list specialties and, once up-and-running, will make resumes available and searchable to potential clients via the ARCS website. This is similar to directories of conservators available on the AIC site or appraisers on the ASA. As there currently is no 'accreditation' system for free-lancers listed with ARCS, clients will be encouraged to contact and vet the individuals themselves.

For our colleagues on the museum staff side, this panel served as reminder of all that seasoned independents can bring to the table. And it provided talking points that could to help them justify the hire of experienced contractors for their projects.

To me, as a contract registrar, the session was a useful reminder of what's still on my 'business to-do' list, and what I could be doing better. But it is also reassuring to know that there is no single business model, and that others' practices weren't built in a day.

Suzanne concluded by stating that independents don't inhabit a "dog-eat-dog world". We thrive through collaboration, not competition. My best gigs have come as the result of referrals by other registrars who know my work, and I happily pass along opportunities to trusted colleagues. I hope that OnContract not only will help support our network and expand our opportunities as independents, but will also allow our community to remain in touch between ARCS biennials.

Many thanks to Suzanne, Ted, and Brent for your efforts and insightful presentations!