

Director's Message



*David Kahn, Executive Director,
San Diego Historical Society. Photo
by Jack Smith*

It is with enormous pleasure that I recently accepted the invitation of the San Diego Historical Society's Board of Trustees to become the organization's new Executive Director. With its great collections, terrific facilities, and dedicated supporters, the San Diego Historical Society is extremely well positioned to grow in the years ahead and to dramatically expand the scope and quality of the services it provides to the diverse people of San Diego. This is an exciting moment for the San Diego Historical Society. It celebrates its 80th year as guardian of the region's history. So there is no better time than right now for the institution to take stock of its past accomplishments and to lay out a dynamic new strategy for the future.

By almost any measure, our nation's history museums have been undergoing revolutionary changes in recent years--changes that can benefit the San Diego Historical Society and its constituents. Families have begun visiting history museums in increasing numbers while overall audience numbers have soared. Hands-on activities, computer stations, videos, and sound effects have become exhibition staples. Exhibition topics explored in today's history museums are as likely to focus on contemporary issues as they are on events that occurred a century or two ago. Teachers take their students to history museums these days not only to help them learn about the past, but to polish their math and language skills. History museums increasingly serve as venues where people who are different from one another can learn about each other's cultures.

The reinvention of America's history museums is widely considered to have gotten underway a number of years ago when historical organizations began drawing on the latest scholarship from our nation's universities while at the same time replicating exhibition development techniques long, and successfully, employed in our country's leading science and children's museums. History museum curators, exhibition developers, trustees, educators, and administrators have, in short, proven themselves to be quite adept at developing strategies that have transformed their institutions into places where history has become interesting, fun, exciting, and relevant for contemporary audiences of all ages. For example, history museums began telling the stories of everyday people and everyday life rather than concentrating on political and economic history as they had traditionally done. This new focus mirrored academic trends and hit a cord with visitors who are interested in people and stories rather than facts and figures.

Reflecting practice in science and children's museums, historical organizations began conducting audience research to determine precisely which topics visitors are interested in and might really motivate them to visit the museum. This sort of consumer research is similar to that used in the corporate world in the development of new products and services. While the idea of consulting with audiences may sound like a fairly obvious thing for any museum to do, history

museums had not traditionally engaged in the practice—and many still do not do so. Instead, they forge ahead developing exhibitions and other types of programs based on internal perceptions, or misperceptions, as to what audiences might really like to see, and why.

The extensive incorporation of hands-on activities, computers, and media in exhibitions is also something that history museums have borrowed from science and children’s museums—with spectacular results. The San Diego Historical Society’s motto is that the museum is a place where “history comes alive.” Creating interactive exhibitions in the future can help the institution deliver on this promise.

In addition to delivering first-rate, intriguing visitor experiences, organizations such as the San Diego Historical Society have many other obligations. They must provide excellent stewardship of their priceless collections and buildings while promoting scholarship. This is accomplished by accommodating researchers in its substantial research archives and through publications such as *The Journal of San Diego History*.

The San Diego Historical Society has made great headway in many areas in recent years. But there is room for further strengthening of the organization and making sure that it takes its rightful place among the front ranks of our nation’s historical organizations. I personally look forward to working with the San Diego Historical Society’s board, members, staff, and its many supporters in the community to help the institution fully realize its potential in the years to come.

David M. Kahn
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Bob Adelizzi, President, Board of Trustees, SDHS; Mary Lyons, President, University of San Diego; David Kahn, Executive Director, SDHS. Photo by Jack Smith.