



Center for the Future of Museums

Using Scenarios to Plan Your Museum's COVID-19 (Coronavirus) Response

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, futurist training is of critical importance—because foresight is all about creating plans resilient enough to succeed in times of great uncertainty. Everyone is trying to understand what COVID-19 is going to mean for their family, their community, and their organizations. Museum people are no exception. You and your colleagues may be worried and distracted. When contemplating what you might do to respond to the unfolding pandemic, the number of possible actions can seem overwhelming. This document provides some guidance on using scenarios as a tool to map your way forward in coming days and weeks. (Hopefully lowering your personal and institutional anxiety levels at the same time.)

Sample Scenarios: Three Potential Levels of Impact

Scenarios are basically stories: imagined futures based on the intersection of trends and potentially disruptive events. By creating several stories about how things may play out, you can identify how you might adapt to changing circumstances, focus your attention on critical indicators, and identify and minimize the attendant risks. Scenarios provide a way of collapsing potential futures into a manageable number of possibilities and provide a framework for planning how you might respond.

I suggest you start by creating stories around three possible levels of impact your community may experience during this pandemic: low, medium, and high. Each scenario should briefly capture the major elements of this version of the future and provide a few thought-provoking and evocative details. Strive to be plausible, but don't labor over making it entirely "correct"—one major purpose of the stories is to give yourself and your colleagues something to respond to.

To get you started, here are some thoughts on these three potential levels of impact, and a super-short scenario for each that you are welcome to expand and adapt for your own planning. These examples are not meant to be perfect or complete! They are starting points for your own exploration and improvements. For examples of longer, more detailed scenarios (about the world generally, not COVID-19) and suggestions for using scenarios in planning download [TrendsWatch: The Scenario Edition](#).

Low Impact

Every community is at some risk for the spread of COVID-19. However, in some communities this risk may be relatively low due to their circumstances, for example, relative geographic isolation, or absence of major travel hubs. (Other communities may avoid infection through sheer luck.) Even in low impact communities, museums will face challenges associated with the pandemic, including:

- Heightened concern on the part of visitors and staff
- Reductions in international, and domestic tourism
- Economic repercussions of COVID-19 to the museum directly, and to its community at large.

Scenario One: Stay Calm and Carry On

This scenario explores how the (fictional) Buckthorn Art Museum helped the (fictional) township of Buckthorn, Missouri reassure residents and practice social distancing while coping with the economic and psychological fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Read the full scenario [here](#).

Medium Impact

Whether or not they have reported cases of COVID-19 yet, some communities are at elevated risk. They may contain major transportation hubs (airports, train stations), host events that draw travelers (conferences, sporting events, festivals), or be home to military bases, colleges or universities, or businesses that send employees on frequent travel. However, even after cases of COVID-19 have been detected, some communities may curtail its spread via good communications, testing, early diagnosis, and quarantine.

In addition to the stresses listed in the low impact case, above, museums in medium impact communities may have to contend with:

- Recommendations from local authorities to limit public gatherings
- Significant drops in attendance (with corresponding loss of income via admissions, sales, etc.)
- Cancellation of space rentals by clients
- Ripple effects of decisions by a large local organization, (for example, a college or university cancelling classes, asking students not to leave campus, or not to return to campus after break).

Scenario Two: Scaling Back

This scenario explores how the (fictional) Justinia History Museum played a vital role in helping its community respond to the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, while creating strategies to compensate for the damage to its own finances.

Read the full scenario [here](#).

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High Impact

As I write, there have been over 1,700 reported cases of COVID-19 in the US (you can monitor the latest numbers by country and state [here](#).) Based on what is already playing out in affected areas, museums in cities and regions with significant outbreaks of coronavirus may have to contend with:

- Mandatory closing of public facilities
- Mandatory closing of public and private schools
- Bans on gatherings of large numbers of people
- Cancellation of conferences, festivals, and sporting events that drive local tourism
- Reduction in flights into local airports
- Reported incidents of COVID-19 among museum staff, family members of staff, or visitors. (Note that this could happen in any of these scenarios, it is just more likely in a high impact situation.)

Scenario Three: *Lock Down*

This scenario explores how the small (fictional) Seattle Gaming Museum navigated the COVID-19 crisis in the context of the state and city response to the unfolding pandemic. This scenario is a starting point for exploring how a museum might respond to the widespread closure of public facilities and the potential of staff exposure to COVID-19.

Read the full scenario [here](#).

How can you use these scenarios to help plan your response?

I encourage you to convene a group at your museum to review these sample scenarios. (If your staff are already telecommuting, you could use a platform such as Zoom, Facetime or Google Hangouts to support the discussion online.) Tailor these prototypes to fit your circumstances or use them as a jumping off point to write your own. You may want to:

- Add more details
- Question specific elements of the story that you feel are unlikely, or not applicable to your museum's context
- Introduce elements that address challenges of particular concern to your organization

Share the scenarios you have created with staff tasked with planning your COVID-19 response. As you discuss each scenario encourage participants to:

- Say "If this happened, then we might do that..."
- Ask "what if...?"
- Recognize responses that are common to all scenarios, and therefore are things you can start doing now
- List actions that you should consider, assign staff to evaluate costs and develop implementation plans
- Estimate the financial risk to the museum under each scenario

How will you know which of these scenarios will be closest to true?

Good question, and one you should discuss with your team. I recommend you identify indicators that might tell you when your own circumstances are trending towards scenario 1,2, or 3. For example, you might monitor:

- Reported incidents of COVID-19 in your city or region
- Announcements or declarations by government officials (local, state, or federal)
- Closures or program cancellations by local organizations including other cultural organizations, schools, and houses of worship
- Internal metrics—admissions, sales, program registrations
- Inquiries from concerned visitors
- Self-reporting by staff regarding potential exposure to COVID-19

You may want to create a calendar of key dates and decisions that need to be made, for example:

- Go/no go decisions on events
- Deadlines for cancelling contracts or reservations with the least financial penalty
- Legal obligations for the fulfillment of contracts or grants

Planning for the health and well-being of your staff

COVID-19 will have profound impacts on the museum workforce. People may need to take sick leave for treatment, quarantine, or care of family members. They or their partner may lose work hours and pay. Even those not directly affected by the crisis in terms of exposure or employment may suffer significant psychological stress. To help your organization support the health and well-being of your staff in any of these scenarios, you may want to explore the following issues and collect relevant information:

- How many of your staff receive no paid sick leave (and therefore may be reluctant to stay home if they feel ill?)
- How many of your staff are hourly employees, who would receive no compensation if they are not coming to work?
- How many of your staff self-identify as being at high risk for COVID-19, or are concerned about exposing family members who are at high risk?
- How many of your staff have school-age children, and are or may be coping with school closures?
- How can you support staff in working remotely, and what functions would still require staff on site?

Consider, for each scenario, how you can safeguard the health of your staff and provide the financial and psychological support they need during the coming months.

Financial planning

After the health, well-being and safety of staff and visitors, the biggest concern for many museums is going to be the financial impact of COVID-19 on their organization, both in the immediate future and long-term. To lay the groundwork for exploring the financial impacts of your scenarios, you may want to collect the following information:

- What are your museum's current cash reserves? (Funds you can access quickly to meet financial obligations.)
- What are your average weekly operating costs?
- What is your current mix of revenue (earned, contributed, government, investment)? What are the largest current sources of income?
- Recent trends in your museum's ticket sales, registrations for events, bookings, etc., that may track the emerging impact of COVID-19 on your operations.
- Do you have any large financial obligations looming?
- Does the museum have any [performance obligations](#) attached to contracts or grants? (For example, if you cancel certain events, that may affect sponsorship contracts. Or, you may have grant funding that require deliverables on specific deadlines.)
- Are there contracts or obligations you can cancel or defer with minimal penalty?
- What insurance do you have, and what coverage does it offer for financial losses, including cancellation of events, etc.?

Consider, for each scenario, at what point would you need to begin to take significant measures to cut costs/find new sources of income in order to meet your financial obligations.

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What's Next?

The Alliance is continuing to collect, organize and share the best information we can find on COVID-19 and COVID-19 response. Monitor the AAM website and communications for updates as we add to this growing body of resources. Please contact us at content@aam-us.org if you are interested in writing a piece for the Alliance blogs on what you are doing in your institution, or to suggest resources we might add to our lists.

On March 17 we will release *TrendsWatch: The Future of Financial Sustainability*. This edition of CFM's forecasting report is particularly timely, given the financial stress that the pandemic will impose on many museums. It is our hope that the commentary, analysis, and examples in this year's edition will help museums improve their long-term bottom lines.

However, unfolding events require museums to create short-term strategies to shore up their finances as well. In coming weeks, I will work with colleagues to pull together resources and examples of how museums might respond to their immediate financial needs—please let me know if you have advice to share with our field. You can reach me at emeritt@aam-us.org.

Yours from the (hopefully healthy and virus-free) future,

Elizabeth

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COVID-19 Scenario One: Stay Calm and Carry On

This scenario explores how the (fictional) Buckthorn Art Museum helps the (fictional) township of Buckthorn, Missouri, reassure residents and practice social distancing while coping with the economic and psychological fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Buckthorn Township, Missouri, was very fortunate during the coronavirus outbreak of 2020, experiencing no confirmed cases of COVID-19. In later years the Mayor liked to joke that this was the upside of having the local train station, shopping mall, and local big box store all close in the previous five years. Good fortune or no, local businesses, including restaurants, cinemas, and retail stores experienced a 15 percent decline in income in the first half of 2020, as local residents voluntarily practiced social distancing as recommended by the CDC.

At the Buckthorn Art Museum, attendance averaged 80 percent of normal January through June 2020. The museum also experienced a 20 percent decline in private contributions, as donors redirected some of their giving to COVID-19 relief organizations, and to crowdfunding campaigns by friends and relatives needing financial help to cover their own health care costs. The museum's operating costs rose by 5 percent for supplies and labor as they instituted additional vigilance in cleaning and disinfecting exhibits, especially in the children's art activity area. The museum was able to cover the resulting deficit by tapping its financial reserves.

The museum credits its COVID-19 communication campaign for limiting the damage to attendance and events. Through notices on its website and in the local paper, emails to members and past visitors and program participants, and notices posted throughout the community, the museum reassured the public they were open, vigilant, and practicing good sanitation. Staff took creative measures to maintain service in the face of community concerns. They offered to send staff to local schools to give classroom programs in place of field trips. Citing research that shows that lowering stress boosts the immune system, staff created a "morning meditation hour" during which visitors were encouraged to check out a (sanitized) chair and scatter themselves throughout the galleries for some quiet contemplation time. The museum amended its personnel policies to empower staff to contribute sick leave to a pool available to any employee (including part-time staff who normally did not have access to sick leave). The museum suspended all work-related travel, and staff who had attended out-of-state conferences in February and March self-quarantined.



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Scenario Two: Scaling Back

This scenario explores how the (fictional) Justinia History Museum played a vital role in helping the (fictional) city of Justinia respond to the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, while creating financial strategies to compensate for the damage to their own finances.

The Justinia City Council is widely credited with having limited the local impact of the 2020 COVID-19 Pandemic. In March, as the number of reported cases in the US began to soar, the Councilors convened school principals, business leaders, church officials, directors of social service and cultural nonprofits as well as the heads of the city health, transportation, and safety departments to plan a coordinated response. The resulting city-wide effort included launching a public health information campaign, migrating K-12 classes to online platforms, establishing two drive-thru COVID-19 testing stations, and cancelling all recreational sporting events. Cultural nonprofits voluntarily cancelled many public events, including performances and programs. In turn, the city established a relief fund to help alleviate some of the financial damage to local businesses and nonprofits.

The Justinia History Museum played an essential role in the city's COVID-19 response. Partnering with the local nonprofit science center, they hosted a community coronavirus forum, sharing information, answering questions, and briefing the public on the response plan. Curators quickly pulled together an exhibit telling stories of how Justinia had responded to the 1918 influenza pandemic (during which one third of the county's population came down with the flu). The exhibit was designed for digital exploration online as well as being installed in the museum's grand hall, which had itself been converted to a hospital ward in 1918. Museum educators worked with the public school system to integrate the museum's on-line learning platform into the distance education plan for students, and shared the curricula and resources the museum had developed for home-schoolers.

The director brought together staff from all areas of operation to create policies and procedures designed to maximize the health and safety of visitors and staff. Rigorous cleaning and sanitation of the public and office areas was implemented. An outreach officer from the local health department led an all-staff training session on COVID-19 precautions. Staff were encouraged to telework when possible, providing laptops and other equipment as needed, and all work-related travel was suspended.

Even as they helped lead COVID-19 response internally and in the community, museum staff struggled with the pandemic's impact on their own operations. Attendance dropped by sixty percent—in part because their core visitors were older, and inherently at higher risk for COVID-19. The popular morning family hours for parents with pre-school age children had to be cancelled because many participants were concerned about indirectly increasing the risk to elderly relatives. The museum had developed a robust income stream from space rentals, but by June almost a quarter of these events had been cancelled by clients, and an additional ten percent postponed until the fall. The city's (voluntary) ban on gatherings of over 500 people led the museum to cancel their annual fundraiser. Another major financial blow was a 14 percent decline in the value of the museum's investments, due to the combined impacts of COVID-19 and Saudi oil policies on the market.

In response, the museum launched a campaign asking donors to step up their support to help JHM weather the storm. Highlighting their work in helping the city respond to COVID-19, they made a case for the museum as an essential public resource that was needed by the public now more than ever. With the support of the City Council, the director also negotiated with lenders to defer payments on their current bond debt. The museum cancelled three rented touring exhibits scheduled for 2020, replacing them with exhibits drawn from the museum's collections (including the well-received exhibit on the 1918 flu). Even so, the museum was forced to cut the hours of some part time employees, implement a hiring freeze, and suspend cost of living increases.



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COVID-19 Scenario Three: Lock Down

This scenario explores how the (fictional) Seattle Gaming Museum navigated the COVID-19 crisis in the context of the state and city response to the unfolding pandemic. This scenario is a starting point for exploring how a museum might deal with the widespread closure of public facilities and staff exposure to COVID-19.

Seattle experienced one of the earliest COVID-19 outbreaks of 2020. Their first case was confirmed on January 21, the first two deaths occurred on February 26, and by March 10 the official case count in King County stood at 120, with 22 deaths. On March 3, Seattle Mayor Jenny Durkan declared a state of civil emergency and one week later the state of Washington instituted a ban on “social, spiritual, and recreational gatherings” of 250 people or more in three counties encompassing the Seattle area for at least the month of March. On March 12, Gov. Jay Inslee on Thursday ordered all public and private K-12 schools in King, Pierce, and Snohomish counties to close for six weeks.

By late March, the director and board of the Seattle Gaming Museum (SGM) knew they had a crisis on their hands. Their primary visitors were students from the nearby University of Washington and two local high schools, together with the tenants of an adjacent coworking space. The museum had developed a quirky business model around those audiences. Visitors were invited to pay a voluntary admission fee to the galleries, which profiled a stunning collection of both tabletop and digital games with an emphasis on strategy and role-playing, and charged a small fee to join any of several games being held at the museum at any given time. (The museum’s monthly all-access gaming pass was extremely popular.) Twenty percent of revenue came from the museum store, which sold a wide selection of gaming supplies and associated fiction. The museum also provided space for over two dozen local gaming clubs, and many of the club members became members and donors.

As COVID-19 closures and response rolled out, the university and the local schools closed and most of the clubs told the museum they would suspend their game nights indefinitely. Attendance and shop sales fell by 80 percent. Then, on March 20, a tenant of the neighboring coworking space was diagnosed with COVID-19. As this person and their coworkers were frequent visitors to SGM, museum staff realized they had been exposed to the coronavirus, and went into voluntary quarantine. The board of directors closed the museum galleries indefinitely and engaged a commercial firm to do a deep clean of the building.

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As is true of many nonprofits, SGM had very little in the way of financial reserves. The board treasurer reported the museum had enough cash on hand to meet payroll, rent, and other financial obligations for about two weeks, absent new income. The director (a retiree from a local tech company) offered to forgo his salary for the duration of the crisis, diverting those funds to support the museum's one full-time and two half-time staff for as long as possible while they were in quarantine.

Staff, in turn, worked from home to launch an online crowdfunding campaign, tied to an online game created in collaboration with two games designers on the museum's board. "Conquer COVID" challenged players around the world to respond to COVID-19 in productive ways and alleviated the stress of social isolation caused by widespread quarantine. In April, the museum received a grant from the Neighborhood Small Relief Fund, which was established by Amazon to provide cash grants to small Seattle businesses in need during the novel coronavirus outbreak. This enabled the museum to maintain rent payments and salaries until they reopened.