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When we catalogue our collections for internal use, our databases and our staff and volunteers are often trained to use some level of museum "jargon" that the general public might not consider when searching for something in our databases. Take for instance a two-piece women's garment from the 1880s. A museum cataloguer would note this as a "bodice and skirt," but a modern woman who wears clothes might think of it as an "outfit" and the term "bodice" may never enter her mind. If she searched "outfit" in a museum catalogue it will likely not find any results.

Allowing individuals to tag collections in online databases can also help to gather additional information about objects, perhaps most commonly photographs. The museum may have an "unidentified street corner" but the public may know it is the intersection of Vermont Street and 15th Street. Providing a way for the public to engage with the photograph and add this information helps both the museum as well as future members of the public searching for photographs of Vermont Street and/or 15th Street.



[Flanner House Tag Party](#) (Indianapolis Recorder Collection, Indiana Historical Society)

Tagging museum collections does not have to come from outside visitors alone. Having museum staff and volunteers look at the collection in a new light and adding tags that help visitors find items using their own language is also helpful.

Not only does tagging allow visitors to interact with the collection and find what they are looking for, but also allows the museum to learn a bit more about the visitor and how they interact with digital collections. This information can then be used to increase the visitor interactions both online and in person.

Some museums shy away from turning on online database functions like social tagging because they fear that someone will tag something "incorrectly." However, the way our audience experiences an item in the collection is never "incorrect." Even if a social tag is added to an 1860s beetle-wing dress calling out the non-existent "rhinestones" we learn something. One thing we learn is that our audience might want to see this type of item when searching for "rhinestones."



[Shaggy and City Dog License Program.](#) (Indianapolis Recorder Collection, Indiana Historical Society)

If your current database does not allow for social tagging, consider other ways you can gather information from the public regarding your collection. Have a process for adjusting catalogue records to include the information the public shares about collection items online via social media. Consider creating additional categories in your database that reflect the terminology used by your visitors. Even if you still rely on the "jargon" it may help visitors to also include their words. This provides an opportunity for the public to find what they need, but also an opportunity to learn from each other. Who knows, maybe people will no longer talk about an "outfit" but a "bodice and skirt."

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