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# INDIANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY COLLECTIONS ADVISOR

A RESOURCE FROM IHS LOCAL HISTORY SERVICES

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## SOCIAL TAGGING AND MUSEUM COLLECTIONS

By Karen DePauw, manager, IHS Local History Services

As we have been functioning in a world where our primary way of communicating with our audiences is online, take some time to evaluate what you have learned about your audience. How are they connecting with posts on social media? How are they interacting with your collection? Are there ways you can adjust what you "normally" do in order to make sure that you are thinking as much about how they want to access your collection as you are about how you need to access it internally?

One great way to involve the community in your collection is through social tagging and the proper use of categories in cataloguing. Both of these can help people locate certain types of things in your collection. They also increase the accessibility of your collection by increasing the way in which people can find what they are looking for at any given time.



[Paul Harris Labels](#). (Indiana Historical Society)

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### ONLINE RESOURCES

[The Use of Social Tagging to Support the Cataloguing of Learning Objects](#)  
(2014 IEEE Frontiers In Education Conference)

[Collecting Cultural Colloquialisms: The Art of Social Tagging](#)  
(Museum Hack)

[Can Social Tagging Deepen the Museum Experience?](#)  
(Hyperallergic)

[Steve museum: An Ongoing Experiment in Social Tagging, Folksonomy, and Museums](#)  
(Museums and the Web)

### UPCOMING TRAINING AND PROGRAMS

[Coping with Pests and Mold](#)  
June 2 -  
Northeast Document Conservation Center webinar.

[Girl, Wash Your Data: Developing a Collections Data Management Project](#)  
June 4 -  
Lyrasis webinar.

[Advocating for Collections During Challenging Times](#)  
June 10 -  
Connecting to Collections Care

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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