
Partnership Power: Essential Museum Strategies for Today's Networked World

Reviewed by Ben Garcia

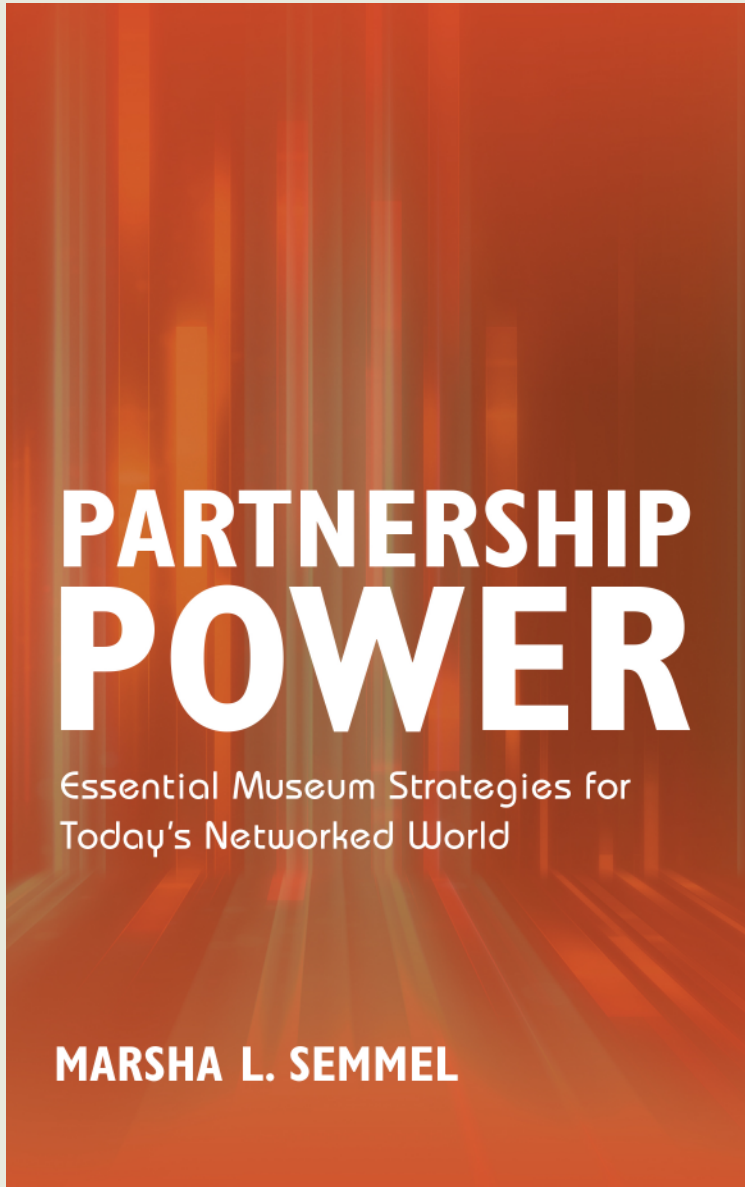
Few of us have the time to read 357 pages on museum partnerships. And my advice after having read *Partnership Power* is: don't. Don't read 357 pages. Read the seven pages that constitute the introduction. Because you will be changed by it. Seriously.

And then jump to the first chapter and read another 12 pages, because it is as powerful a rationale for expanding and centering notions of partnerships in museums as you will ever read. And then, from there, choose your adventure. Think of this book as a breakfast-cereal variety pack. Eat the ones you want right away and leave the Raisin Bran (or Frosted Flakes, depending on your tastes) for another day.

Marsha Semmel, an expert on museum partnerships whose career includes tenures in museums, granting agencies, and museum training organizations, has collected (with great thought and deliberateness) a group of essays from colleagues working in museums, professional service organizations, and other fields that will explode and re-form your understanding of museum partnerships. These essays demonstrate why every museum practitioner needs to better understand concepts like “commons creating” (coined by futurist Bob Johansen, it is the ability to develop shared assets that can benefit other social entities) and “collective impact” (an approach that moves

past individual organizational effectiveness to multi-organization collaboration as a driver of systemic change). The terms may be dry, but the writing is not. The authors push us to take seriously the notion that to survive, our institutions must understand the requirements of a networked age and open themselves to healthy interdependencies.

Reading from this book will allow you to add enormous value in your next exhibition development or strategy meeting. I will certainly be assigning parts of the book ahead of future strategic priority meetings at my own institution. For anyone who believes in greater representation and social betterment as outcomes for our work, this is essential reading. It contains the rationale (including research and references) to bring co-workers, trustees, and potential donors along on a pathway toward inherent sustainability. Because the promise of this kind of deep partnering (as a core value and methodology) is nothing less than a promise of sustainability. Semmel, and each of the book's authors, demonstrate this in their collective work.



***Partnership Power: Essential
Museum Strategies for Today's
Networked World***

Marsha L. Semmel

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357 pages

The book is divided into three parts. “Part I: Partnership Perspectives,” addresses the nature of partnerships today (and looking forward), mostly from non-museum perspectives. Foundation heads, leaders from other educational and cultural organizations, and consultants weigh in with fresh ideas and

with important messages “from the outside.” “Part II: Partnership Profiles,” consists of case studies from 12 museums and museum service organizations that model how change can be created from within. In “Part III: Tools, Tips and Resources,” Semmel has curated a selection of available reports and

resources, and divided them into helpful categories (philanthropic, cross-sector, museum, etc.).

The chapters in Part I include paradigm shifters whose messages warrant close attention. Elyse Eidman-Aadahl, Executive Director of the National Writing Project, writes about the need for informal, social, generative spaces within organizations and development processes. She suggests that it is in these spaces that the changes required to address the real needs of a workforce (and by extension the audience) are found. Katherine Prince, Senior Director of Strategic Foresight at KnowledgeWorks, an education policy nonprofit, addresses the needs of a society where smart machines have increasingly taken on functions served by humans. New relationships to rapidly developing technologies, Prince posits, will require different conceptions of core skills and foundational practices for museums. She shares what it means for museums to become “partners in code.” If you like big ideas, linger in Part I.

The case studies in Part II focus on partnerships as building blocks for the kinds of cultural/educational ecosystems and networks that will be required in the future. They come from practitioners who are beginning to push past initial successes and failures to glimpse what sustained engagement can (or could) mean. John Wetenhall, Director of the George Washington University Museum, describes an elegant and replicable strategy for bringing value to a community. Predicated on the notion that empty program space is a mission failure, the museum simply opened

its spaces for free use by a large and diverse group of campus and community partners (rather than keep them dark). The outcomes have been unexpected and welcome.

Organizations the museum imagined as collaborators (and some they did not know to imagine) avail themselves of the spaces and connect with the museum staff and one another. Tammie Kahn, Executive Director of the Children’s Museum of Houston, writes about what they learned about partnering with immigrant and refugee communities in Houston. Today, Spanish, Hindi, Urdu, and English are “institutional languages,” used in interpretation and by staff with visitors, and CMH has found a sustainable model for serving 700,000 people annually at no charge. If you want the nuts and bolts of partnership building (and practical advice), Part II is for you.

Exhibition professionals have learned the value of partnering internally and including wide representation at the exhibition development table. Many of us have had some experience co-developing exhibitions with partners. Exhibitions are addressed in a number of these case studies, but the book pushes us to look at a bigger picture. Do not make the mistake of assuming that this book is just for your colleagues in programs, education, or visitor experience. It is for anyone who cares about equity, social cohesion, and generosity as values in exhibition development.

Partnership Power is an exercise in generosity. Semmel invites us into a community of practice. All the reader need do is open the book and join a group of committed pathbreakers working toward a vision of



shared authority, flattened hierarchies, and strong ecosystems. Semmel is a consummate educator who weaves the threads of myriad ideas and thinkers into an accessible, compelling case for blowing past traditional notions of partnerships to work within a landscape of networked organizations. The collected chapters reinforce and push the central thesis: that current technology, digital networks, and access to data have changed expectations for museums. In order to be of value (and therefore to be sustainable) new models are required to serve constituents that dissolve the borders of our institutions as we understand them. Museums, the collective authors suggest, must be dot connectors, realizing their greatest value by centering themselves in communities connecting people and entities.

Semmel's work since 2002, when she became the first director of strategic partnerships for the Institute of Museum and Library Services, has been characterized by a seemingly inexhaustible curiosity about the future of our field and an ability to consume and synthesize reams of data. She gathers ideas across disciplines and cross-pollinates as she goes. She compares herself to a bumblebee at one point in the book, and the metaphor is apt. The collected essays are a block of honeycomb. This is a book to dip in and out of, and to return to and share.

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