

Case Study: Building a Resilient Culture within Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture – Grand Opening to Present Day

CONTEXT

ACTN Strategies fosters organizational resilience for clients by providing a holistic approach to understanding, preparing for, and successfully managing a spectrum of unanticipated disruptions, risks and challenges. Using the holistic approach of integrating People, Process, and Technology, ACTN Strategies offers services designed to mitigate risks to operations and sustain cost efficiency models while promoting a strong brand. These integrated programs increase an organization’s ability to thrive and grow despite unplanned disruptions.

ACTN Strategies’ team of experts deliver strategies designed to address the traditional and social risks many companies face today and, in the future. (See “*Appendix: Contextualizing the Evolving Nature of Risk*” at the end of this study for definitions of traditional and social risks and how they intersect). Our products and services—derived from decades of experience, a proven methodology, rigorous data and technology capabilities that produce actionable solutions—navigate clients through these challenges.

THE NEED: Successful Grand Opening of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History & Culture and Fostering Long-Term Operational Resilience

The Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History & Culture (NMAAHC) faced vast risks in its planning efforts leading up to and during the Grand Opening, which occurred on September 24, 2016 with President Obama leading the dedication ceremony. The NMAAHC leadership team needed a comprehensive crowd management, security, and emergency plan given the historical significance and high visibility of the Museum, unprecedented number of local, national, and international guests, and significant logistical and security protocols required for a presidential appearance. Furthermore, NMAAHC also needed long-term support for managing the historic crowds forecasted to visit the new Smithsonian museum within the next three years.

NMAAHC’s Challenges: NMAAHC’s leadership needed to avoid lasting damage to its reputation caused from an ill-planned and poorly executed opening. To ensure a smooth opening, the Museum had to address security and safety concerns associated with large crowds located in a high-profile public venue as well as the logistical challenges arising from the number of dignitaries and VIPs in attendance, specifically-Presidents Obama, Clinton, George W. Bush, Vice President Biden, Chief Justice Roberts and other distinguished guests like Oprah Winfrey, Robert F. Smith, etc.

In addition to physical security risks, NMAAHC leadership had to overcome the unique social elements surrounding the Grand opening and subsequent daily operations, including the rise of social justice protests and commentary. NMAAHC’s significant stature, mission, and prominent location on the National Mall in Washington, DC created an inherently political environment in which people and organizations of all kinds sought to drive public perception not only about what the building represented but, more importantly, the exhibits therein.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated many social risk factors for NMAAHC; it caused isolation among millions of people, dire health consequences, financial strain on families and businesses, and protests about how governments, businesses, and individuals can best mitigate its spread. As such, NMAAHC leadership needed not only initial support for the opening but over the horizon guidance for creating sustainable operations. For NMAAHC, consulting needs included mitigating lengthy waiting times, managing controlled access to the venue—a new feature of the Smithsonian experiences—and engaging a workforce to keep sight of the collective vision and continued optimal performance in the face of adversity.

THE SMITHSONIAN’S ASK OF ACTN STRATEGIES

The Smithsonian Institution initially came to ACTN Strategies seeking its leadership and counsel to:

- Advise the Smithsonian and NMAAHC leadership on identifying and mitigating the physical and social risks faced during the opening ceremony and ongoing operations
- Perform capacity analysis and logistics planning to accommodate large crowds in a small footprint
- Develop and implement protocols for managing large crowds, both during the opening ceremony and ongoing operations
- Create actionable, adaptable strategies and plans designed to manage unexpected risks and emergencies

Once strategies for mitigating risks to the physical structure were complete, NMAAHC retained ACTN Strategies to lead the change management efforts of transitioning the workforce from an office setting to the Museum Operating environment involving the development of emergency response planning, capacity and crowd management logistics and visitor engagement programs.

To address increases in social risk factors, NMAAHC called upon ACTN Strategies to help Museum leaders design a flexible, distributed (onsite/remote) operating model that allowed for operations to ramp up and down in the wake of the rising COVID-19 numbers, government shutdowns, and widespread social justice protests. Additionally, ACTN Strategies was tasked with implementing required infrastructure and staffing support for ongoing operations of the facility.

The Solution: ACTN Strategies’ Implementation Lifecycle

ACTN Strategies deployed its “Implementation Lifecycle” methodology to develop a bespoke strategy for the Smithsonian and NMAAHC along three pillars: Design, Deploy, and Sustain.

(see Figure 1 for more specific elements of these pillars)

1. **Design:** ACTN Strategies helped NMAAHC define its stakeholders and created customized approaches to their operations.
2. **Deploy:** ACTN Strategies developed and implemented plans for NMAAHC’s capacity and crowd management plans as well as Emergency Awareness training and holistic enterprise communications plan for museum staff.
3. **Sustain:** ACTN Strategies provided techniques, models, tools and staffing support for ongoing operations, employee engagement and customized strategies for identifying, assessing, and mitigation risks

ACTN Strategies' Implementation Lifecycle



Figure 1- ACTN Strategies' Implementation Lifecycle

The Outcome: A Successful Opening Ceremony and Long-Term Readiness and Operational Resilience

As a result of its partnership with ACTN Strategies, NMAAHC is a resilient organization able to withstand disruptions such as long-term closures, uncertainty of a global pandemic and its resulting economic collapse, not mention the reality that NMAAHC is located on the National Mall in Washington, DC – an area that often is “Ground Zero” for protests and public demonstrations.

The opening of the NMAAHC was the culmination of days of celebrations and heralded as a “mini inauguration.” ACTN Strategies’ counsel, planning, and preparation proved invaluable for the success of the opening festivities and continues to present day. ACTN Strategies built a framework by which NMAAHC could identify risk and provided requisite training and operational processes to integrate all facets of the NMAAHC organizational structure and mitigate future risks.

NMAAHC Leadership’s Feedback on ACTN Strategies Support of Grand Opening Day

NMAAHC Deputy Director

“Awesome is an over-used word but it is appropriate when referring to ACTN Strategies. Your diligence and attention to detail are exactly what we need. - Many thanks.”

Smithsonian Director Office of Protection Services

“My heartfelt thanks ACTN Strategies for your leadership on behalf of the museum and willingness to problem solve and collaborate throughout the day. We could not have done it without you.”

Roughly two million people visit NMAAHC each year, and thanks in large part to support from ACTN Strategies, can do so in a safe and secure environment. These visitors represent the entire spectrum of political and cultural views, meaning that traditional and social risks like physical security, the health and safety of visitors, data security, and public discourse over exhibits in the museum are a constant reality that NMAAHC always faces.

Ultimately, the value of ACTN Strategies’ counsel went far beyond the Grand Opening preparations in 2015 and 2016. ACTN Strategies offered a sustainable roadmap for success that included guidance for understanding, planning, and mitigating all risks, traditional and social. As a result, ACTN Strategies’ leadership helped NMAAHC develop a resilient culture prepared to withstand foreseeable and unanticipated disruptions.

APPENDIX: Contextualizing the Evolving Nature of Risk

Risk is unavoidable. Rather than wishing it to be different, organizations must proactively mitigate and, if necessary, address risk. Businesses that can take bold, methodical approaches to handling risk have an opportunity to emerge stronger and better able to withstand future events.

Defining Risk for Organizations.

Kith and ENODO global—a crisis management and reputation management firm and a risk advisory firm, respectively—conducted research that identified two types of risk facing every organization: Traditional Risk and Social Risk.

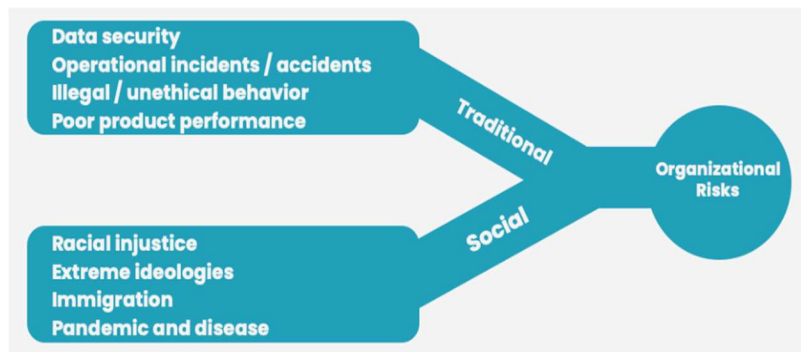


Image Credit: “Social Risk Webinar,” Kith, November 19, 2020

The Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated many of these risk factors; it has caused isolation caused among millions of people, dire health consequences, financial strain on families and businesses, and protests how governments, businesses, and individuals can best mitigate its spread.