
Programming: The Correct Choice

Ricki V. Brown

To program or not to program is a choice many librarians are now confronting. The question is much larger than it would at first appear. If libraries examine their basic goals they will discover that programming is pertinent to all areas of library service: Information, Education, Recreation, and Cultural Enrichment. Programming is an integral part of public library service. Librarians who assume that potential patrons are well versed in seeking their informational needs at the library through the traditional reference question format are likely to be leaving a large portion of the community unserved. Information programming is an aggressive tool which can help public librarians reach some of the non-users of traditional library services.

Programs are an extension of the materials on the shelves. Lectures, films and demonstrations are methods of actively presenting the resources of the collection. History, art, economics, and crafts gain added dimensions through oral presentations and visual demonstrations. Adults learn in different ways, so activities of this nature may be more meaningful to some individuals than the written word.

We are in the business of information and ideas—whether they come in printed form (books and magazines) or audio (records, cassettes, musical programs) or visual (films, exhibits, etc.) or human (personal contact, rapping programs)...¹

Programming can publicize and enhance resources the library already has, and it can be an informational, recreational or educational resource unto itself which goes beyond materials the library has to provide learning experiences that cannot be provided by materials alone. Programming can also be a way of creating new or improved materials for the library to offer its community. Active programming has to incorporate some degree of community involvement. As the library staff

learns more about programming resources in the community and as the library becomes known as a place that provides a range of activities, patrons with informational needs that touch on these activities will begin turning to the library for help. Patron requests will include "I heard about the program the library had on social security. Could I have the name of the person who did the program? I'd like to have him do a program for my club"; or "Your lecture on Michelangelo expressed new interpretations of his works. Could I get the name of the speaker to follow up on some of his ideas." The requests will expand into suggestions such as this one. "The library does so much and knows so much about what goes on in the community. Wouldn't you be the perfect people to coordinate a calendar of events for the community?," and so on. Many libraries like to think of themselves as the community information center. Programming can help them do that, by encouraging them to start speaker's bureaus, local talent banks, calendars of events, or any number of alternative reference sources. These are very often people sources that are not nearly so easy as our traditional references sources to acquire, catalog and provide access to, but their value certainly makes it worth the effort.

The decentralization of many library systems through branch facilities allows libraries flexibility in programming events that few institutions can match. It could be argued that programming for a library is even more important the smaller the community the library serves. Less cosmopolitan areas do not have the multiplicity of activities available in larger communities, and the library is sometimes the principal available cultural resource in the community. In such circumstances, the library would have a responsibility for coordinating activities to enhance the quality of life and perhaps lay the groundwork for establishing other cultural outlets.²

Adult programming can also serve as a major public relations avenue. Programs lure people into the library. Programs become a tool

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in re-educating the public as to the role of the library. Often, people think of the public library as a place for children or simply an annex to the schools. Other segments of the population view the library as a place to obtain the best sellers or other popular reading materials. Yet other citizens consider the library too forbidding to utilize it at all. Programs provide an opportunity for the library to present a positive image. While in the library, program attendees may discover some of the range of services libraries have to offer. Those with preconceived and outdated notions of the library and its services may find their impressions changed. As one public relations expert said

Well-conceived special events offer excellent opportunities to encourage members of the community at large, or special segments of it, to visit the library, see for themselves what kind of place it is, and relinquish some of their prejudices and misconceptions.³

Library programming combined with a strong public relations program creates another advantage. The library's name will be seen and heard in many different parts of the media. Library fun runs will be found on the evening sports newscast; breadbaking classes in the home living sections; book talks in the Sunday literary section; and financial planning seminars in the business news. Programming provides the opportunity for the library to advertise itself. Non-users will recognize the library as an active, productive institution. During times of cutbacks in government spending, the library will have a base for support. It will have demonstrated to government leaders that the library plays an important role in community life, because they will have heard about it through the media, whether they ever actually visit the library or not.

Critics of library programming often contend that libraries have limited resources that should not be squandered on activities at best peripheral to real library service. However, programming is more often a low cost option for providing something of quality to a community that may not be able to afford in-depth materials on a subject, but can fairly quickly, easily and cheaply set up a local expert to come share with others his knowledge of the subject. Staff time is usually the largest expense involved in programming, and while it is not cheap, it is flexible and stretchable in ways that materials budgets are not.

During periods of declining financial resources, programming is one of those services that may be continued with minimal cost,

except for staff time. The more proficient the staff becomes at doing programming, the less time that is involved. As the library's reputation for quality programming spreads, speakers, craftsmen, and artists may volunteer their services to the library. This is a sign that the library's programming services are successful.

A positive response to programming is the correct choice for public librarians today. Programming is a method of providing information. Programming is an excellent public relations tool. Programming is an integral part of library service. Programming is the cohesive element which binds library resources and staff to the public it serves.

References

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