
The Programming Process: A Primer

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Imagine yourself, an adult programming director, standing between your program speaker and a bowl of punch. Now add some horror with this thought: nobody showed up for your program. It is the supremely embarrassing moment. Something has gone wrong. You have failed.

There may be as many reasons to avoid programming as there are libraries. Policy is sometimes cited as the reason, a debate which is taken up elsewhere in this issue. But the library with no policy objection to programming would seem to have no impediment other than fear of failure.

But, fear of failure is the last reason to avoid programming. Such a fear is understandable when one considers the practical obstacles to having a successful program. Every librarian has heard them — lack of in-house space, money, ideas, and staff.

These obstacles, while formidable, are not prohibitive. They are management problems to be solved in much the same way as the problem of how to stay open on Sundays. A reasonable amount of thought, planning and coordinating can overcome most obstacles so that any library can give its patrons something that books, magazines and microfilm cannot—a living collection. That is programming at its best.

There is no guarantee that your speaker will not feel like the Maytag repairman. The use of a systematic approach to programming will help you to spot weaknesses and correct them with each successive program. What follows is a discussion of the basic steps in the programming process. While written for the potential programmer with little or no experience and no idea of where to start, it also has applications for the more experienced person. Library programming is certainly an area where ideas and techniques are freely shared.

There are some preliminary steps that need to be taken before you can introduce that classical guitarist to your eager audience. A good way to begin is with an understanding of what it is you are trying to do, and why. For instance a definition of public library programming is one place to get started. After a good amount of reading and no little amount of thought I suggest the following:

Programming is the selection, planning and presentation of library sponsored activities such as workshops, lectures, performances, film showings, and discussion groups for the purpose of increasing awareness of particular subject areas of the collection, providing information in alternative formats, facilitating community access to cultural events or providing a neutral forum for discussion.

Getting Started

No matter how long you have worked with your library system, no matter how well you think you know your community, some research is essential to your success with programming. Just as an advertising agency wouldn't begin to market a new product until it studies the size and behavior of the potential buyer group, you should not begin any program planning without knowing all you can about the people who will attend. A good place to start is with the latest census information. Study the statistics on your county and city, as well as the areas surrounding you. Try to put together an accurate picture of your community by studying figures on age and race breakdown, educational level, income level, household size, etc. Knowing that your community has a large percentage of retired people or single-parent households, for example, can give you an idea of some potential audiences for your programs.

Other useful sources of statistical information are the publications of the Office of State Budget and Management in Raleigh, and the *Survey of Buying Power Data Service*, published by *Sales and Marketing Management* magazine. The latter will even provide you with information on the volume of sales by category of purchase for each county as well as similar

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in-depth marketing information. Also, check with your county manager's office for studies that may have been done specifically for your county.

Your local newspaper can give you all kinds of clues to the needs of your community, and, also, an insight into the "hot" issues of your area. It's a good idea to review a year of local headlines, especially if you are new on the job. Reviewing headlines, you might discover that neighborhood crime or rape is of primary concern. You might learn that voters are frustrated about the quality of local education or that there is a great need for exposure to the arts in rural areas of the county. The programmer who is sensitive to what is important to the people "out there" will be meeting the greatest needs of the community.

The sensitive programmer can keep informed about the needs of the community by making the library an active member of strategic local organizations. Your county might have an inter-agency council or community council, comprising city and county agencies, volunteer groups, and in some instances, representatives of local government and the media. These groups usually meet monthly, allowing time for reports on member activities and, often, a short program presented by a member agency. By representing the library, a programmer can offer to locate needed information for another agency, keep abreast of community activities and needs, publicize a program or service, and generate positive public relations for the library. Active membership in such a group can often be your most valuable source of ideas for programs and a far-reaching publicity tool. If time permits, it is a good idea to represent the library to other organizations such as the local arts council and other cultural groups as well as educational groups and community "hotlines." Activities with these groups can help you to break down your audience into distinct categories when that is helpful to your program selection and publicity. Best of all, ideas for potentially successful programs flow naturally as a result of your involvement.

Community Resources

Once you have studied your community makeup and its needs or concerns, you can begin to look at its resources—its possible sources of program ideas, speakers and performers. You can do this by making a survey of

organized community groups, such as civic clubs, merchants associations, etc. Look for chamber of commerce directories, club directories, community college faculty listings, listings of professional groups, and membership lists of other organizations. By building up a collection of specialized lists, you develop a reference source of speakers and other talent. One day you might like to coordinate this list as a talent bank and make it available to other groups for use in their program planning.

Staff Resources

You are surrounded by a goldmine of talent—your staff. If you start asking you will probably find closet artists or discussion leaders, calligraphers or public speakers, genealogists or mandolin players. Not only will you have help with your poster design, but the staff may be your biggest source of program ideas. Adding the cumulation of their contact hours with the public to yours, you have comprehensive information on what patrons are reading, what they are asking for in the way of reference questions and what services they would like the library to provide.

The cooperation of staff members is very important to the overall success of your efforts. If you involve them in the selection and planning they will help you in the production. Involving the staff ensures that accurate information about a program will be given to an inquiring patron. This word-of-mouth publicity is invaluable. Working with the ideas and talents of the staff will make your programs even richer. Get the staff behind you and your whole job will be a lot easier.

Physical Facilities

Some libraries are lucky enough to have their own auditoriums or meeting rooms. While a convenient space makes programming much easier, lack of it should not prevent you from producing quality, well-attended programs. You just have to be a little more imaginative.

You would be surprised to see what a little muscle and some bending of the rules can do to turn your main reading area into an intimate, comfortable spot for a Friday night performance of a local string quartet. Move some magazine racks, borrow some chairs from a funeral home and let everyone know that there may be a little extra "commotion" on what is normally a slow night.

Small groups can meet by putting a few tables together and pulling up some chairs. It may not be ideal, but it works. Other patrons are generally very understanding, too. Library programs can leave the library, too, with good results. Just make sure that all of your publicity, including program hand-outs, makes it very clear that the event is library-sponsored or co-sponsored. Survey your community to find out if there is a county or city auditorium. Ask churches if they allow other groups to use meeting rooms, chairs, pianos, stages, or other equipment. Through the Community Schools Act, certain county schools may be used free of charge, including janitorial services. If you need an auditorium or expanded classroom with convenient parking, call the Board of Education. Find out if your county park or fairgrounds is available for large programs but remember to keep in mind an alternative in case of bad weather.

As you make your surveys of community characteristics and needs, resources, staff resources and available physical facilities, try to put all of the information you gather into a simple, usable format. Since much of the information may change or need to be added to, a 3X5 card file or Rolodex file will work well. In no time you will have assembled a file of useful figures, names, addresses and telephone numbers, making program planning a pleasure.

Getting Creative Program Ideas

Chances are you have been storing up ideas for library programs for a long time. That is usually what leads people to try programming in the first place. If this is the case, be sure to start a file of these ideas along with notes about possible speakers or performers. However, for those times when you just aren't inspired, there are some simple things you can do to develop ideas.

Since no programming idea is sacred, by all means "borrow" other libraries' ideas. In addition to standard publications like *Library Journal*, non-traditional publications like *Unabashed Librarian*, *Library PR News* and *Down East* are good sources of program ideas.¹ You can duplicate the entire program or you can use your creativity and build on someone else's idea.

Watch television and read the newspaper with an eye towards getting program ideas. The network morning shows and evening news

broadcasts often run series which can be adapted to suit your needs. Local newspapers sometimes run a feature story on someone with an interesting talent or hobby or someone who has done something of interest. Why not get right on the telephone and book yourself a crowd pleaser? Think of all the free advance publicity.

Similarly, radio or television feature stories on annexation or local elections could lead to a debate program. If you see a story on a citizens' crime prevention group, why not offer to work with them or co-sponsor a program on crime?

As mentioned earlier, your involvement with an inter-agency council will supply you with many ideas. At the meetings you will have an opportunity to meet representatives of city, county, state and federal agencies who are often happy to present programs on issues related to their agency's jurisdiction. One possible program would be "Starting Your Own Business," with help from the Small Business Administration, the SCORE volunteer organization and the local Bar Association. Inter-agency council meeting time can be put to effective use by making arrangements for this kind of program in person.

Sometimes, ideas evolve out of a display in the library that attracts a lot of attention. For example, a popular exhibit of Ukrainian Easter eggs can turn into a workshop on egg decorating presented by the person who volunteered to set up the exhibit.

Area clubs and associations such as craft guilds or sports organizations are usually eager to provide workshops or demonstrations on their specialty area. You may already have a directory of clubs in your area. If you do not, think about starting one as the result of your survey of community resources. Remember to consider ethnic, historical, craft, benevolent and professional groups. By inviting club involvement with the library, you can provide easy to arrange genealogy workshops, programs on buying a home or making a will, as well as demonstrations of Italian cooking.

Community colleges, as well as clubs are a rich source of talent. Watch the listings for continuing education course offerings and try to get an instructor to give a preview lecture or workshop on, say, speedwriting, well in advance of registration. Also, community colleges sometimes will pick up the cost of speakers' honorarium and transportation, if you co-sponsor a major program. Community colleges also coordinate the artist-in-residence

program in your area. Take advantage of an artist's residence throughout the school year for varied programs.

Another usually cooperative group is area merchants, especially those new in town. They are often happy to put on demonstrations such as microwave cooking, cake decorating, summer canning, or flower arranging. Be sure to discuss in advance the details such as who supplies the materials and supplies. The idea of free advertising is usually attractive to merchants, but be sure to make it clear that your program is not an endorsement of one particular merchant or brand. The use of phrases such as "... instruction and materials courtesy of ..." helps to prevent any misunderstanding.

The program ideas mentioned so far have been basically free or low-cost productions. If you have a more professional, major program in mind, consider applying for a grant. Although there is increasing competition for funds, money is available for programs on topics which suit the foundation's requirements. Foundations, corporations, and state and federal government provide money, and sometimes even staff, to assist in planning the program. With a reasonable budget you can afford to attract well-known speakers or performers and provide for professional publicity and attractive facilities. Usually, you must show that the program will in some way benefit the community as well as meet the population, subject matter, and format requirements of the funding body. Helpful sources of information on available grants are *The Foundation Directory*, foundation annual reports, and publications of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

One final word on program ideas. Duplication of effort is not only a waste of time and money, it can possibly alienate a civic group or community agency that is already doing what you are about to do. It is always best to be aware of what organizations such as county/city parks and recreation are doing in the way of programming before you get too far in your planning. You might consider co-sponsoring a program. You can pool your efforts and resources, and often, double your audience. Your involvement with an inter-agency council will make it easy for you to be aware of what everyone else is doing.

Turning Ideas Into Programs

Now, you are ready. It is time for the detail work that produces results you can be proud of. The first question to consider is the format your program should take. Often used formats are lecture, demonstration, lecture/demonstration, workshop, film showing, film showing/discussion, panel discussion, discussion group with leader, performance and special theme festival (i.e., library sponsored Medieval Festival). Plant care programs are ideally suited to demonstrations, while a program on coastal area development might be enhanced by a panel discussion presenting opposing views. There are pros and cons to each format. It is best to decide based on subject matter and available facilities.

Once you have decided on the best format, you will then want to think about scheduling. Is your program meant to be a single event, or would it be better as a series allowing for a variety of speakers to address different aspects of a topic? Scheduling of your programs should be done carefully, based also on a thorough knowledge of the habits and activities of your community. Find out about regularly held large meetings such as mid week religious services. Also, be on the watch for major activities such as plays or banquets which might interfere with your program or cause you to forfeit a substantial part of your audience. A community calendar is especially helpful for this kind of scheduling. Also, try to obtain school calendars and other community schedules.

If you are planning a multi-part series to be held in the evenings, remember not to let the series extend to much more than four parts. Programs held on the same day or evening for consecutive weeks work best. The consistency makes it easier to remember the time and day. It is possible to hold a two-part program within one week, but you risk losing part of your audience that just can't commit two days or evenings out of the same week. Often experience has shown that evening programs starting before 7:30 p.m. will guarantee stragglers. Programs that start by 7:30 p.m. can generally be gracefully ended by 9:00 p.m.

The location for your program is largely dictated by the availability of facilities, the nature of the program, size of the audience expected and the time schedule. If you do not have a library location, use your survey information to determine the best accommodations. Some excellent programs travel, either because

there is no library facility available or because the aim of the program is to reach people who cannot or will not come to the library because of lack of transportation, confinement to an institution, or because libraries, much as they try to overcome it, are sometimes intimidating institutions. If you decide to take your program out into the community, be innovative. Try to present it where people gather—shopping malls, apartment buildings, community recreation centers, festivals, etc.

If the program is held outside the library be sure to inform the appropriate authorities of your plans, schedules, in writing. Ask about available A-V equipment and outlets, available kitchen facilities and the usage policy, and bathroom facilities. Also, ask about the smoking policy and make sure that your clean-up responsibilities are well-defined. Most organizations will ask you to sign a form holding you or the library responsible for the use of the facility. Also, some groups may require a small fee, about \$10.00, to cover the utility expense.

Since one of the best reasons for providing programs is the opportunity to draw attention to the library's collection, always try to set up some sort of display of books on topics related to the program. Be as simple or elaborate as you like, but make it clear that the display books can be checked out. If you are at an outside location, you might want to work out a way to check out books at that location. This is a good time to display other library publications such as bookmarks, schedules and programs for upcoming events. Also, a sign-up book placed on the table or passed around will create a useful mailing list for future programs.

You will always want to schedule your programs well in advance, allowing plenty of time for arrangements to be made with the speaker or performer as well as for adequate publicity and location, refreshment, and transportation details to be worked out.

Your first encounter with the program speaker or performer may be in person. It can occur at an arts and crafts fair where you have gotten involved in a discussion with an artist, and before you know it, you have convinced that person to put on a two-part workshop on portrait painting. No matter how conclusive your discussion may have been, always follow up immediately with written correspondence stipulating the date, time, place, directions and other agreements such as who provides the

materials. It may also be helpful to provide a room layout if there is to be a performance.

This procedure applies to agreements made over the telephone or in other ways. Put as much as you can in writing and ask for a written confirmation in return. Also, request biographical information, and, if possible, a black and white glossy photograph for advance publicity. If you plan to hand out a program you might want to include some of this same information. A polite telephone call one or two days in advance will set your mind at ease. Most speakers appreciate this gesture since they probably have busy, intricate schedules. Also, the opportunity to make any last minute changes or requests is usually welcomed by both parties.

If you are fortunate enough to have a budget that allows you to pay an honorarium and/or travel expenses, include that information in your conversations and correspondence. Ask if he or she would prefer payment in advance of the program. Most people understand that libraries do not have huge budgets, but the honorarium or travel advance, however small, helps to ease the financial burden, especially for an out of town guest.

You will need to consider whether or not to provide dinner or some sort of refreshment, especially if the program speaker comes from a distance. By all means, arrange for some sort of beverage and a private place to freshen up or change. After the program you will want to remain to assist with the clean-up as well as to be sure that your guest departs safely. Of course, a prompt thank-you note, with newspaper clippings if there has been coverage, should follow.

Publicity

All stages of your program planning are important, but the most critical is publicity. Without a strong publicity campaign, all of your efforts at program selection and planning could be wasted. The number of approaches to take to publicity is limitless since each program may lend itself to some unique approaches. For example, for a program on nutrition on a budget, flyers that look like coupons could be stuffed into grocery bags by store employees. This article does not attempt to cover every aspect of program publicity. Instead, you should refer to some of the items listed in the bibliography for more detailed information.

Here are some major considerations to keep in mind. First, think about the audience you want to reach. A pre-election candidates' night would be of interest to the entire voting age population in your area, while a panel discussion on Medicare benefits would probably attract a much more narrow audience. Once you have defined your target audience, referring to your survey information, think about the organizations that can give you access to your audience. For example, you might want to talk to the League of Women Voters or senior citizen clubs. Disseminate your publicity through these groups. This specific approach as well as the more general approach through the media will help you to be highly effective.

With your target audience firmly in mind you can decide on the format and design of your publicity. These are some formats generally used by libraries:

- posters
- flyers
- TV/newspaper/radio feature
- short radio/TV spot
- notice in church bulletin
- library radio program
- bookmarks
- listing in community calendar
- word of mouth

Newspapers, radio and television stations prefer to use official press releases. The information should be brief but comprehensive and should be written on letterhead. Remember to include important dates and times at the very beginning of the release since the end of the release may be cut short because of space considerations. Always list your name, title and telephone number.

It is a good idea to visit the offices of the media in your local area to develop a working rapport. Ask about policies, deadlines and styles. When you have a program that you think would be of interest to the media you can prepare a fact sheet, including the black and white glossy photograph. This information will be helpful to a reporter or city editor in deciding if there should be an interview, advance photograph and actual coverage of the event.

Naturally, your publicity activities should be well-timed. Once the program is final, inform your staff and use the very effective word of mouth form of publicity with patrons. With all the details taken care of at least one month in advance, you can begin to publicize with

posters, flyers, interviews. Remember to schedule continuous publicity to run during the entire course of a series. The media generally prefer two weeks' notice of an event, but be sure to check the day before the article is to appear in print or on the air. Many a press release has been lost. The keys to good publicity are timeliness and comprehensive coverage. Get the word out early and schedule publicity activities with a gradual build up of intensity the week of the program.

Evaluation

The evaluation, the last stage in the programming process, is an investment in the future. A written evaluation of each program will not only provide you with an idea of what went well and what did not, it can also, by virtue of the form used, become a unique reference tool. The form you use should provide you with an organized body of information on the program, from names and addresses of speakers, size of audience, staff time, to cost and audience reaction. You will probably find yourself referring to these forms over and over for various reasons. A useful sample evaluation form is contained in *Library Programs: How to Select, Plan and Produce Them*.² Of course, you will want to adapt the form to suit your needs.

The evaluation of the program can be as general as your observations on audience reaction, speaker performance, general organization. Periodically, a more specific, more revealing evaluation can be done by placing short, easy to complete forms in audience seats. It helps to provide small pencils. People prefer to check items off, but always leave room for comments. It is interesting to test your publicity effectiveness by including a question on how the audience member has heard about the program.

This is intended to be a practical guide to library programming. It is not ivory tower stuff. Any library person who undertakes programming eventually establishes his own pattern of operation efficiently and effectively, but only after the inevitable trial and error of new undertakings. There are other articles on the literature to help, as well.³ This writer hopes that this article will encourage new and expanded library programming by showing that the proposed programming process can make the difficult a little easier.

References
Continued, p. 94.