Reading 1: Programming and the Social Media Connection

Site: Infopeople Online Learning
Course: TLA50 #6 Engaging Adults
Book: Reading 1: Programming and the Social Media Connection
Printed by: Admin Nancy Nerenberg
Date: Saturday, May 21, 2011, 03:50 PM
Table of Contents

Overview
Topics for Programming
Characteristics of High-quality Programming
Program Examples
The Social Media Connection
Summing Up
Overview

In this final course of the TLA50 Fellowship we turn our attention to attracting, engaging, and involving mid-life adults in activities and conversations initiated by your library. Courses before this one have laid the foundation and erected the framing by providing knowledge of and skills in strategic facilitation, community assessment, partnerships and collaborations, volunteerism, and evaluation. Now it is time to apply what you have learned to the development of engagement opportunities, more specifically to programs, and to the creation of online conversations about these programs and other library efforts.

As a result of this course you will be able to:

- Understand the opportunities for engagement with mid-life adults provided by programming and social media. What are best practices and how do they apply to your library?
- Identify partnerships and collaborations that will enhance programming initiatives in your library.
- Understand how social media can promote, enhance, and expand those initiatives.
- Listen to and learn from individual feedback, program evaluations, online conversations, and other community responses in order to develop or improve programming initiatives.
- Promote library programming through targeted marketing, including word-of-mouth, and encouragement of "viral" social media.

Although programming and social media are emphasized in this course, the primary focus is on engagement. We will look at programs developed at the Multnomah County Library for examples of high-quality efforts targeting mid-life adults. These programming efforts can be enhanced and expanded in the social media sphere where library patrons and staff interact. We will focus on the most commonly-used social networks—Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and blogs—as tools for online conversations about library programs and services. In the Supplementary Material for this week you will find a list of Commoncraft videos that explain the basics of social media.
Topics for Programming

Over the years, programming in public libraries has moved well beyond the standard preschool story times and author lectures. The varied talents of library staff are being put to good use to develop diverse programs that meet the needs and interests of groups such as toddlers, teenagers, and seniors. Adults in mid-life are now receiving attention from public libraries because it is clear that the years from 50 to 65 are being lived in different ways than in the past, by people who are healthier, more physically active, and more involved in their communities.

Programs for these mid-life adults differ in some important ways from conventional library programs for seniors. Programming for seniors has tended to focus on aging itself or assume a physical decline. Topics like Medicare, the physical challenges of aging, World War II era music and culture, and how to use a computer are common, relevant, and popular, but they are not the kinds of subjects that attract the current crop of adults in mid-life, those commonly referred to as "baby boomers."

Planning exciting programming for adults in mid-life requires that we look closely at our community. Remember Cindy Mediavilla's course on Community Assessment? She introduced you to three ways of gathering direct input from your community: key informant interviews, surveys, and focus groups. If you have been able to form an advisory group for your TLA50 initiatives, the group will be able to brainstorm programming ideas. Another way to identify topics for programming is to ask your library colleagues. How many of your colleagues are in their 50s and 60s? Maybe you yourself are in that demographic. What is it that you find interesting or important? Thinking of yourself, your friends and family members, or of specific individuals in this age group may lead to a more clearly-focused array of programs.
Characteristics of High-quality Programming

Besides the topics, there are other aspects of programming that will appeal to mid-life adults. Let's examine some programming recommendations and how they are demonstrated in specific programs developed by Multnomah County Library.

Interests Rather Than Age

Reach the audience through their interests rather than with age stereotyping.

To break down barriers and attract mid-life adults, avoid terms that stereotype your audience by age or era. Terms like "seniors," "boomers," golden or silver anything, "mature," and so on can safely be eliminated. Avoid images and graphics like tie-dye and psychedelic lettering. If these kinds of limiting and stereotyping factors are eliminated in your marketing, it is possible to reach your audience at a deeper level, appealing to them by interest, rather than by superficial characteristics like age or generation.

The point about avoidance of age stereotyping also applies to social media. Although Facebook began as a network for college students, the fastest growing demographic segment using Facebook is women over 55.[1] Baby boomer parents may have just as many uses for social media as their teen and 20-something kids, but their methods of using the tools may be different.

Open and Engaging

Design an open and engaging atmosphere.

One lesson we have learned is that the typical format of "lecture with a ten-minute Q&A at the end" is not what appeals to a lively audience of questioning adults. People seem to want to engage spontaneously with speakers, to debate and question, and to contribute their own experiences. How do you think this recommendation applies to the social media that your library uses to communicate with mid-life adults? Do they want broadcast or conversation?

Capture Their Time and Talent

There are great advantages for the library in providing engaging programming. Adults in mid-life are often freer from time constraints and more willing to get involved than they were when they were younger, raising children, and starting careers. When they see that the library is interested in them and their concerns, they become much more engaged with library programs and events. Their time and talent, and perhaps their votes, can then be captured to provide support and enrichment to the library.
Engagement Through Volunteering

Extend their program engagement through volunteering.

In recent years Multnomah County Library (MCL) has made a conscious effort to recruit highly-skilled volunteers. We started by recruiting retired teachers, attorneys, and social workers to teach citizenship classes. As a result, the library now has a group of experienced volunteers who have been teaching classes in a well-established program.

Programs directed at mid-life adults have also benefitted from the skills of volunteers. MCL uses volunteers as speakers and as program facilitators. Some programs, such as Books to Action, inspire audiences to volunteer through the program itself (more about this later). Taking engagement beyond discussion and into the field is part of what makes these programs sustainable. The energy builds and expands into other library programs, such as Talk Time sessions facilitated by volunteers. (Talk Time is an opportunity for English language learners to practice speaking in a relaxed, non-threatening environment.) The library's outreach services also use the talents of mid-life adults. Visiting Voices is a service that sends volunteers into Alzheimer's and dementia care facilities to read aloud to residents. Using their dramatic skills, these readers are able to draw responses from people with whom it may be otherwise difficult to communicate. There are many other examples, but the common thread is finding and using the talents of mid-life adults who are ready to get involved in new ways in their communities.

Endnotes
Program Examples

To develop programming that appeals to mid-life adults, MCL has taken these characteristics seriously, experimented with a variety of approaches, and pursued creative partnerships. The library has benefited from a half-time position funded by a grant from Life by Design NW (www.lifebydesignnw.org) and the Atlantic Philanthropies. Here are some notable programs targeted to adults ages 50+. Even if your library does not have a programmer position, these types of programs can be developed on some scale, in any community, through local partnerships and collaborations.

Books-to-Action

Books-to-Action offers an interesting twist on the usual library book group. Working with Hands On Greater Portland (www.handsonportland.org), the library chose books with social issues at the heart—starting with Bowling Alone, by Robert Putnam—and conducted a book discussion group. Hands on Greater Portland then organized a related one-time volunteer project for book group participants to work on. MCL has used books that are concerned with homelessness, the environment, the loss of community, and literacy.

This has been a very popular program; it provides an engaged and active way to participate in a book group and to put ideals and concerns to work. Books-to-Action needs more direction and coordination than some library programs, and it requires a community partner. However, if your library has some substantial projects to be done by volunteers within the library, this could be adapted to support the library itself.

Coffee and Conversation

Just what they sound like, Coffee and Conversation groups are informal but focused through expert volunteer facilitation and a pertinent theme. Coffee is provided, and people are encouraged to talk about issues that concern them, with the guidance of a trained facilitator. Topics like creativity, work, and care-giving are explored; in fact, a special group for caregivers has been created to address the isolating experience that caring for an aging or sick family member or friend can be.

What's It All About, Alfie?
When we started to plan this series, we felt tentative and unsure, until, that is, someone broke into a chorus of *What's It All About, Alfie?* From then on, we were focused! Inspired by the programs on aging and spirituality developed by Richard Bray at Alameda County Library, we decided to tackle a three-part series of talks and discussions on spirituality. The subject in general is one of great interest to many adults in mid-life, whether or not they are conventionally religious.

Working with a small group of local people, including a Franciscan nun and two spiritual directors, we put together a program that tries to sketch out a very broad view of spirituality. We have included discussions of community, religion vs. spirituality, contemplation, and compassion, as common ground for all religious perspectives and for those with no religion. The discussions have been lively, respectful, and really interesting. An eclectic booklist and small journals for note-taking were provided to all participants, to encourage the introspection that spirituality of any kind demands.

The evaluations have been excellent, thus far, with only one or two raised eyebrows. We were anticipating controversy, which has not really materialized.

**Perspectives on Positive Aging**

An occasional series of talks and discussions on a wide variety of topics, the Perspectives on Positive Aging series is a flexible container for different kinds of programs. We have broken our own rule here by using the word "aging" in the title, but we felt that we didn't want to fall too far into denial. Mid-life does have issues of aging that can be dealt with in a positive way.

We have invited pro bono speakers with a range of experience to give us their perspectives on aging, retirement, joy, money, wisdom, and concerns that are of interest not just to adults in mid-life but to many others as well. This has been very well-received. Planning and executing this series has mainly been a matter of networking, that is, talking to friends, colleagues, and luminaries in our community and finding out who is able and willing to bring their wisdom and experience to the table.
The Social Media Connection

As you are developing programming to appeal to mid-life adults, consider what they may do before, during, and after the program occurs. Think about what they do to:

- Learn about the program
- Decide to attend and save the date
- Share the information with their friends
- Attend and participate
- Discuss or offer feedback about the event

In all of these steps there are opportunities for engagement through social media.

Learn about the Program

Rather than visiting the library website or a branch library regularly, some people may prefer to have messages about new programs delivered to them via RSS feed or Facebook posts and events. Would a Facebook event, blog post, or Twitter message be effective for your community of users? Many libraries—such as Orange County Library System, Houston Public Library, and Phoenix Public Library—are using Twitter to promote programs and events. (Blogger Lindy Brown compiles a frequently-updated list of Libraries on Twitter.)

Decide to Attend and Save the Date

By RSVPing to an event on Facebook, library patrons can remind themselves of a date and time as well as invite their friends. If you are promoting a recurring program, you might want to offer testimonials and reviews from past events that will convince newcomers to attend. The Denver Public Library uses Library Love Stories to get testimonials from happy patrons. All you need is a video recording device at an event and you can quickly get live reviews up on YouTube and your website. The power of "customer reviews" on sites like Yelp can be harnessed by libraries, as well. For an example, see the user reviews of Santa Monica Public Library on Yelp.

Share the Information with Their Friends

Having a calendar or a specific page on your library's website for events allows users to share a single link with friends. Many people would prefer to attend an event with a group rather than alone. Adding "social share" buttons to the site allows users—with a single click—to publish your event or program to the social site of their choosing. Facebook has especially well-designed "Share" features call "Social Plugins" (this may involve the help of a webmaster).
Attend and Participate

Are there aspects of the program that would be enhanced and expanded through social networks? Could you use social media to share information about the speaker? Recommend pre-event reading? What about getting your patrons to promote your programs for you? Those attending the program can use smart phones to disseminate their reactions to library programs and events via Twitter or Facebook.

Discuss or Offer Feedback about the Event

If programs are announced on your library's blog or Facebook Page, users can add comments, ask questions, and get additional information about the program. The essence of social media like Facebook and Twitter is conversation rather than broadcast. By using these social media your library can encourage interaction rather than simply make an announcement. Don't be afraid to ask for feedback after the program. If you are afraid of negative feedback, think about this: participants will be talking about their experience at the library whether you encourage it or not. Take advantage of this opportunity to be part of these conversations. If you add your appreciation for the feedback—whether positive or negative—it will be just as visible as the original comment, and it will show that you are making a genuine effort to engage your audience.

Social networks offer channels of communication with your library that websites do not. Social networks also give users the opportunity to share information with their friends. Look at how businesses use Facebook and Twitter to encourage interaction with their brand and to share product information. Many libraries are using social media sites such as Facebook to answer questions, promote their programs, interact with their fans, and serve their communities in new ways. Later in the course you will have an opportunity to explore how libraries are using social media, to do a "scavenger hunt" of library Facebook Pages, and to listen in on various libraries' conversations with users.
Endnotes

Summing Up

Developed over a span of two years, the programming efforts at MCL represent a slowly-building success. The audiences are engaged and alert to the nuances of these topics, and they keep track of the library's offerings so that they can return for more. Although MCL rarely uses words or symbols that explicitly call them out, attendees are mainly mid-life adults. Younger or older attendees enrich the mix—we welcome them, too! We have enticed them all by offering substantive programs that confront the big questions we come to in the middle of life. Who shall I be? What is next? What can I give back?

We have also learned that engagement and participation are essential and that if we offer those elements, we can capture the imagination and the energy of the adults in mid-life who attend our programs. When we do that, then we are the richer, with involved audiences and dedicated volunteers.

As you think about engaging mid-life adults, consider how the traditional strategies for programming can be enhanced and expanded through the use of social media that is relevant and valuable to your community.

Think about how to market your programs effectively and with the broadest possible reach. Printing flyers, updating a website, and sending out monthly newsletters are all ways to advertise your programs, but they only reach a certain segment of patrons. Some people prefer to learn about programming via those channels, so they are important to maintain. However, many other library users (and non-users) get their information in different ways, and these potential participants might not be as accessible via traditional marketing methods. Social networks may be the best ways to reach these new and not-so-new users.

In your responses to the social media survey that Analisa posted to the Ning at the beginning of the TLA50 Fellowship, we found many that indicated your receptivity to engaging mid-life adults through social networks. Here's what you said in response to the question about how your library is or could be benefiting from the use of social media:

- Just being present and available through social media says that we want to participate in the conversation.
- Social media has increased participation in our programs.
- (Social media) creates a sense that the library is a living, breathing thing to those who are not regular users.
- It's just another doorway for people to find us...and they do!
- We need to use all means to let folks know what's up with us...and, of course, to hear back!
- I believe we should expand our computer classes to include Facebook, blogging, and
more.

- Social media is where our patrons are.

This week you have three assignment options for sharing your experiences and ideas. Choose one or more to tell us about what your library is currently doing to engage mid-life adults, what ideas you have, and what proactive things you can do to overcome obstacles and build staff support and buy-in for your efforts.

**What to Do Next:** Go do one or more of the [Week 1 Assignment Options](http://elearn.infopeople.org/mod/book/print.php?id=3400).