

If You Craft It, They Will Come: Growing Adult Program Numbers with Crafts ... and a Few Kids

By Linda Davis

Just two blocks from the town square stands the Bedford Public Library, a beautiful old Carnegie, with crackling faux fires burning in the grates of two gorgeous eight-foot-tall oak fireplaces. Between those fireplaces is the Reference Desk where African violets bloom continuously under the skylight, and sitting behind that desk, often looking up at the skylight or out through the windows to see Old Glory and the Indiana State Flag flying is a lucky librarian. Much of the time that lucky librarian is me.

As a librarian responsible for adult programming, I've booked authors, done all sorts of publicity and preparation. I've helped plan discussions and previews of upcoming television programs and watched and waited as no one walked through the door. I wanted to raise program participation numbers but needed to figure out what makes people attend.

In spring of 2008, I thought it would be fun to have a program where we'd decorate flip-flops. Participants would bring in new flip-flops and the library would supply yarn, fabric, beads, buttons. I called it Flip Flop Fantasy, and 41 people of all ages showed up, flip-flops in hand and ready to decorate. That's a fantastic turnout for a library our size.

Perhaps based on that success, my library director suggested I create weekly adult craft programs throughout the entire year. Instead of running away screaming, as I sometimes wished I had, my first thought was that it sounded like fun, and I dove in wholeheartedly!

The stated goals for the program were to promote recycling while teaching crafting techniques and to provide the opportunity for people to try crafts. It was a busy year, but the results were an increase in attendance, and here's how we did it.

Beginning and Broadcasting

As I began to research crafts, I also planned an intensive advertising campaign. Each week the library's news is sent to the local paper and radio stations and to the Chamber of Commerce for their weekly e-mail broadcast.

We send out a monthly e-mail newsletter and frequently send news to the public radio station in Bloomington. Our craft program became a major focus for our public relations to those outlets, along with others. Our Outreach Services team takes programs to the schools every day, and we promoted the programs to them, too. Advertising in-house

consisted of signs, flyers, and a poster board display in front of the reference desk. We also displayed samples of the crafts which were a real draw. If the craft was good enough, people would show up, but if the craft was cheesy, dopey, or goofy, they didn't. We learned this pretty quickly.

Names that Pop

I called the program Terrific Tuesdays Ten Plus Crafts Program, which referenced the facts that we'd meet every Tuesday and anyone from the age of 10 on up would be welcome. I know 10-year-olds aren't adults, but because anyone aged 10 or younger has to have someone aged 14 or older with them while in the library, we



knew we'd get an older person along with the 10-year-old. This really worked out, too, as the younger ones encouraged adults to come. Once the adults started coming on a regular basis, people began to know each other and enjoy seeing each other. This camaraderie encouraged people to make an effort to show up every week, and by the time Flip Flop Fantasy was reprised in April, our regulars, along with some enthusiastic first timers, added up to 30 participants. We're happy when we get 10 people, so 30 made us practically ecstatic!

As the weeks progressed, it seemed that more people showed up when the craft had a particularly clever or intriguing name. Some of the names I used were Flip Flop Fantasy, Stampalooza, Dollar Days, Miniature Kaleidoscopic Origami, Wycinanki Polish Paper Cutting, Medieval Triptychs, but usually I went with a name that told it like it was such as Duct Tape Roses, Redwork Embroidery. Samples were placed on the reference desk, on the bulletin board at the library entrance when possible, and sometimes even on the checkout desk. When fringed flip flops are on the checkout desk, they get noticed.

Possibilities with Paper

The library would supply glue and glue sticks, scissors, crayons, pencils, markers, paper, and a few rulers; anything else would be up to me. So armed with a knack for crafts and a willingness to try, I began researching paper crafts. A surprising number of crafts that adults were interested in were creating greeting cards.

I scheduled a greeting card workshop every month which made planning a bit easier. One of the most popular paper crafts was Wycinanki (vee-chee-nahn-kee) or Polish Paper Cutting. One of our regular program attendees donated a ream of 11 by 14 vividly colored paper. We cut out our designs in a light or dark color then mounted them on a contrasting color with beautiful results.

It's All in the Planning

Planning, creating, and advertising required a great deal of time. To keep people excited about the program, I circulated schedules that listed two months of upcoming programs.

Even with a monthly greeting card program firmly entrenched in the schedule, that left three more crafts to design and create for each month. This pace is a difficult one to keep up month after month, especially if one has many other job duties to complete each day. It seemed to me, however, that people liked to know what was coming up in weeks ahead, and judging by the number of people who turned up at certain programs, some people may have arranged their own schedule to work around ours.

Freebies and Requested Donations.

We decided to seek donations of fabric, buttons, ribbon, and any craft supplies that anyone might have lying about. Thanks to many of our 27 staff members, we had bags of fabric, a big box of buttons, beads of all shapes and sizes. Our crafting options grew exponentially. I sought help from a local business. Walmart gave us a gift card for \$25 and suggested we might ask for another one every month. Suddenly our year-long educational crafts program had supplies *and* funding! That old saying about it never hurting to ask really proves true sometimes.

Getting Hits and Misses

Although we never had any particular program with zero attendance, some of our programs could certainly be called duds: Learn to Hula was wildly unpopular, and Stampalooza was a stamper-loser. We had a Heroes Workshop a week before Veteran's Day that had too many things to do and pulled in just eight people who did only part of them. We learned from those projects: no dancing, no stamping unless it's for a greeting card (because they are useful), and no overwhelming with too much to do.

Some popular programs included Felt Tissue Holders (a sewing project that attracted 16 eager sewers, including two teen boys); Woven Heart Valentines (it was that simple paper weaving but people wanted to do it, probably because it was a Valentine); Redwork Embroidery Coaster (27 sewers this time); Tea Bag Folding (35 folders); St. Pat's Pop-up Cards (a very simple cut and paste project that attracted 23 people); and Quilling (two dozen people rolled paper to make quilled cards).

Crafting Like Crazy

A program that I thought was artsy (but was afraid it would seem goofy to others) was Medieval Triptychs. The 24 people who showed up seemed to like the craft just fine. This project was planned in the *what can we make with paper* early days of the program. I asked staff to save the big side panels from large cereal boxes because I wanted lightweight cardboard. I folded the cardboard to make three sections which enabled it to stand on its own and provided, of course, three sections for art. I covered the cardboard with small pieces of white paper. Then I cut out the silhouettes of a dragon and a knight that I had printed on the library's laser printer. I cut the silhouettes each into three parts and glued them onto the cardboard, the knight on one side, the dragon on the other. I also printed other silhouettes in case the participants didn't want to go medieval. A horse silhouette turned out to be really popular. This project, at a cost of zip, was doable for any budget.

We also made T-shirt totes, another no-cost project. I brought in a portable sewing machine; program participants brought in old T-shirts. Turning the shirts wrong side out, I sewed a quick seam across the bottom and demonstrated how to cut out the neck and arms to make a very serviceable tote bag. I showed how my T-shirt tote could carry five two-liter bottles of pop with no problem to 28 attendees.

On a hot day in July, we made homemade ice cream using two zipper-style plastic bags, a small one to put the ice cream ingredients in and a big one to put ice, salt, and the small ingredients bag in. Lots of smiles and laughter were garnered from this one, and it brought in many new faces. This program's supplies (plastic zipper bags in two sizes, milk, sugar, vanilla, ice, and rock salt) seemed a bit pricey at the time, but perhaps I'd been in no-budget mode for so long that spending close to \$25 seemed extravagant.

Duct Tape Roses were popular, too, but also expensive as each roll of tape costs about four dollars. We created the roses on bendable straws and pencils, with pencils being easier to work with. Though the roses look complicated to make, they are actually supremely simple.

The process was shown to me by a teen who, though she had not come to any previous program, had seen the advertisements throughout the library and thought I might like to teach rose making. She then volunteered to attend the program to help instruct. I purchased rolls of duct tape in red (2), green (2), pink (1) and white (1), and I had a roll of regular silver duct tape that I brought from home. We had leftover tape in all colors except pink after 33 people made roses.

We made Tissue Paper Flowers, Marble Magnets, and Suncatchers (with cellophane paper). All were well-attended. For the Marble Magnets, I bought clear, flattened marbles and small round pre-glued magnets (both available at craft stores) and printed tiny pictures on our color laser. The cellophane sheets used for the Suncatchers were pricey, and the cellophane shrinks in the sun. Live and learn, I guess. Next time we'll use colored tissue paper.

One More Time

As the weeks progressed, people began complaining that they hadn't been able to attend certain programs and asked if those programs could be scheduled for a second go-round. So Do-over Days were born. We had two Do-over Days, one in June and another in July. Each Do-over Day offered a choice of two projects. The first Do-over Day (Magnets or Pincushions) had 25 in attendance, but the second (Polish Paper Cutting or Tea Bag Folding, both of which had been huge hits) garnered only six. By this date, my passion for coming up with inexpensive adult craft projects was beginning to ebb. Do-over Days were helpful to fill the schedule and give me a needed break from the pace I had been maintaining.

Ratcheting Up a Notch

When September came, our "bigger" program turned out to be one of our most popular: Tie-dye T-shirts. We had 52 people bring their own shirts to tie and dye. We used rubber bands to tie up the shirts and permanent markers to color on them. We squirted rubbing alcohol onto the shirts to make the ink run, then allowed them to air dry a bit before removing the rubber bands. We did this project in the parking lot because the alcohol used to make the ink run can get overwhelming indoors.

Instructions for this project and most of the other ones are easily found on the Internet. This program netted us some TV exposure as someone from the local television access channel took photos of us having fun.

In December we made felt ornaments: a puffy heart, and a cheerful primitive-style snowman. Samples were put on the entrance bulletin board, on the circulation desk, and in several places on the Adult Services floor, including on the reference desk next to signs and take-home flyers. With 21 attendees, we ended the year with one of our most satisfying programs.

Results and Rewards

The final numbers for our Ten Plus Crafts Program were 40 adult craft programs and a total attendance of 450. Many programs were very popular, and most attendees were adults and teens. These results came with effort, of course, and the challenges of constantly coming up with new ideas *on a shoestring budget* is not easy, but the end results can be well worth the effort. Our crafting programs offered the opportunity to build our program numbers while providing statistics that we could use for future grant requests. The ability to create programs without funding exhibits to potential donors the kind of resourcefulness and drive they appreciate.

You might say that nothing sells so well as a proven track record. Our results from last year garnered us a good-sized grant from a local agency to fund our programs for this year. Now we are able to do programs that require more expensive supplies, such as clay sculpting, painting, and leather crafting.

Our addition of a regularly scheduled adult crafting program to supplement other adult programming raised our program participation numbers, provided statistics used to gain substantial funding for continuing the program, and helped us to expand our friendly relationship with the people of our community. We believe the results were worth the effort.

Author

Linda Davis, a former teacher, is a graduate of Indiana State University.