

Programming cultural events in a network of libraries

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Abstract:

Lyon Public Library has long been committed into cultural action, as a strategic policy is to advocate access to knowledge in an inclusive way.

The project of the library is to put forward not just actions but “events” on various topics, that are structure access to knowledge for the citizens, federate internally the librarians around strong projects, and strengthen our identity in the city and our professional role as a cultural stakeholder.

The event is based on a general concept, and then derived for 3 to 4 months into a large exhibition and a program of cultural actions – from 60 to 120 actions - taking places on the whole red of equipment, addressing different publics, with digital publications and education, with an overall more visible communication action plan.

The role of library is reinforced by numerous partnerships with cultural institutions, universities, civil societies organizations, editors and private companies that enable us to go deeper into strong issues, collaborate in new ways especially the digital hot topics and put up together new cultural actions and study days.

Keywords: cultural action, events, cultural stakeholder

1. Lyon public library cultural policy

Lyon Public Library has long been committed into cultural action. The strategic policy to advocate access to knowledge in an inclusive way led to all 9 departments of the central branch, the Part-Dieu Library, all 14 local branches and the mobile library service implied in cultural events or activities in various ways: public talks, exhibitions, meetings, workshops....

More than 120 agents are concerned - about a quarter of our total staff - participating in various stages of organizing and promoting the cultural activities

The same teams are in charge of their collections and of their cultural activities, as cultural policy is designed as an extension of collection policy.

The concept is to have the same expertise or closeness to the public when editing cultural actions in order to promote collections and highlight different topics.

The publicity of this activity is edited in a bi-monthly magazine *Topo* that gathers all activities in an agenda, and puts forward recent contents from one of our databases: Ask a librarian web service, news, health literacy. On a yearly basis over 2600 activities are set, from children's stories reading and to major exhibition over 600m2.

A program of heritage mediation meeting allows from 60 to 90 small groups to get hand-on experience of original documents of all sorts, and has a special edition *The discovery hour*.

Outreach is ensured through a program managed by the municipality in which the library, alongside every cultural service (museums, performing art schools, opera and theaters) has contractual commitment to deliver in special areas and for special audiences.

As a result of this policy, our public library is acknowledged to be a major cultural stakeholder with a very large offer, a wide variety of topics and a good coverage of the city's 9 districts.

The public reception is good, with more than 75 000 patrons a year exhibitions excepted, about 1000 patrons for heritage mediation and from 10 000 to 60 000 visitors for the central library exhibitions.

Media coverage is good and frequent, in local medias. The municipality acknowledges this policy and supports constructions of new libraries with dedicated spaces to cultural actions, varying from auditorium to exhibition halls.

Every coin has two sides, so how is this organisation challenging?

First of all, one can be stricken by the diversity of actions and topics. Of course the universality of a metropolitan library collection implies a diversity of cultural actions, but the absence of focus, of clear priority can lead to a difficulty of understanding the library strategy. The context of communication deluge deepens this difficulty, as any cultural stakeholder needs to be visible and readable in a competitive way.

For cultural partners, educational institutions or professionals, the lack of partnerships or explicit priorities result in inter-personal level relation. Except some projects led by the director himself, working with the library means liaising with some librarians without any guarantee of continuity in case of departure for example.

Financial resources allocation is based on renewal so that every team manages its topics or its public with confidence, but on the other hand, at no time exceptional projects can benefit from extraordinary support. The necessity of actions in close proximity with the public in local branches faces demands of high quality standards, which are time and budget consuming. Scarcity of financial resources leads to setting global priorities for the whole library.

2. Implementing cultural events

In 2012 a strategic plan for the library set by a new director, Gilles Eboli, strengthens cultural actions by allocating more funds and more staff, and clearly sets it as a priority, and not the icing on a cake. Equal to collections or library branches management, cultural action is thought to enhance the capacity of the library to give access to knowledge by carrying out events.

Events are meant, beyond the usual expectation of “public splash”, to gather the library teams and have them working together beyond the usual exhibition teams. The basis is large exhibition in the central library, which concept leads to a program of cultural actions designed around its central topic. Librarians from departments and local branches cooperate on a topic beside the usual cooperation on collections and issues related to public welcome

The program is made of public talks or conferences, but also other exhibitions, workshops, and shows. All branches are expected to imply themselves, according to their staff, technical capacity and public.

The ambition is, on the basis of an exhibition that explores and deploys a concept, to have an impact due the number of and diversity of actions – from 60 to 110 - allowing the library to raise partnerships and sponsorship, and reaching a large geographical coverage in the city.

So far, three events have been launched. In 2013, the issue of *Recreation, art and culture new generation* was to address the capacity of the library to talk about contemporary art for children, and to reflect how art today was engaging youth in several ways. A working team of about 20 librarians led by the youth department manager designed an exhibition over 500m², 110 cultural actions and over 100 exhibition visits. Over 40 partners helped to design the event, supporting the exhibition or some cultural actions, very often both. For the first time in the library the exhibition was massively audiovisual and numerical, with tablets, software and interactive screens. The event was a success both for the public and the professionals, with two study days organized in link with national stake holders – national library youth department, national network of youth editors. Sponsorship rose with mainly support in equipment of free collaboration. Vast financial resources were invested as a will to support not only the event but the importance of youth and young adults in the library.

The second event *A fabric of innovation* dealt with the roots of industrial innovations in the Rhône-Alpes region. Sprung from the regional and local funds department, the concept was to prove how important industrial innovation was in the regional identity, and how innovations from distinct fields, which led to clusters and government supports today to chemical, transport, health, textile and image, crossed over for over 200 years. The exhibition was the largest ever made in the library, with over 600m², and it had an original start for a library : it was mainly based on objects rather than the library documents, further more objects borrowed to over 100 partners – museums, firms, associations. All public talks did not find their public but overall it was a big success, with a public interested in industrial issues that was for some new patrons for the library. The collaborative aspect was once again a major success, allowing the library to work with large institutions and researchers.

The third event is ongoing; it is focused on the welcoming of IFLA's congress delegates with an exhibition *Treasures!* Showing the 90 most precious documents from the library's various collections, and a cultural program *It will be possible... in the library* addressing the congress theme.

The program was designed as an opportunity for the teams to develop the link between patrons, libraries and societies with projects allowing patrons to express their views on the future of libraries and about the library services in various ways: schedules issues, services, games...

3. Challenges ahead

Strong issues were addressed in ambitious exhibitions visited by more than 40 000 persons, but internal reports proved that organising both a large exhibition and a cultural program is so demanding in human and financial resources that there is a necessity to balance events and the local level of cultural actions, so that the effort is sustainable on the long run.

With an overall more visible communication action plan, the library is still not expected by medias to be a major stake holder in art issues or scientific issues, and the coverage of the events is not really different from the previous coverage of the former exhibitions the library usually carried on for years.

Even if the publication of original contents on both digital databases and print supports is satisfactory, the educational role of the library is still challenged. Mediation is made by librarians not trained in this role and with no background on arts history or science history.

Overall, events changed the way the cultural actions were done with much more collaboration both internal and external, and allowed to reach new levels in partnerships and sponsorships.

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