

Outreach Program Attendance Reflection

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Abstract

This paper is a reflection of the “Do You: Financial Health and Wellness” program offered through Anythink Library’s York Street branch. In this essay I will cover the scope of the program, a brief background of the library and its mission and values, my thoughts on the success of the program and possible ways to improve, and finally, how aspects from this outreach program could be used in future program planning.

Outreach Program Attendance Reflection

I attended the “Do You: Financial Health and Wellness” event offered through Anythink Library’s York Street location in Thornton, Colorado. This was an adult program targeting those interested in learning how to save money, pay down debt, and keep an organized budget. The description provided on the event’s page mentions that the focus will be on learning helpful advice on how to stick to financial goals set in 2020. The program was informal, and conversations around financial planning were drawn from what we said we were interested in learning at the beginning of the session. Inquiries included creating a budget, low-risk investing opportunities, and paying down high-interest rate debt fast.

Anythink serves Adams County residents with seven public library locations and one bookmobile. The mission statement for Anythink Library is: “We Open Doors for Curious Minds”. Curiosity was indeed what led me to participate in this event, and for that they accomplished their mission. There are also five shared values of Anythink branches, and the one that best fits with the purpose of this program is their value in an eagerness to learn and offering opportunities to do so.

I arrived early to the meeting space and overheard one of Anythink’s librarians explain to another participant that the reason behind offering this program (among others in a “Do You” series of programming events) was to provide services relevant to common New Year’s goals. Though participation for this particular event was low, she mentioned that this subject had been requested by many library patrons. With time to observe my setting, I jotted down descriptions of the meeting space itself. (Notably, I left my winter coat on because the temperature of the room was uncomfortably cold. The meeting space did however provide free hot beverages, which improved the situation some.) I noticed how close together the four

tables were to each other in this rather small meeting space, creating a cramped environment for the three of us in attendance. The meeting room door was left open throughout the program, and noise from the library broke up the speaker's presentation at times.

As previously stated, there was a small turnout for this event, which was composed of myself and two other young adult female participants. An Anythink librarian was also present at the back of the room for the entirety of the program, but she did not take part in the session, and did not make herself known to the group. I identified her as a staff member from a lanyard hanging around her neck. I speculate that she was there to oversee the program but not directly participate in the activity itself. One of the two other participants appeared to be engaged in the program, posing lots of questions throughout the two-hour session.

The program was not a success in my eyes. The event's speaker – Shawn Kelley – was a Ramsey Solutions Master Financial Coach, which I believe should have been mentioned in the event description. Instead of focusing on financial health and wellness as a whole, the meeting took a biased approach toward finances based on the teachings of Dave Ramsey (an American radio show host, author, and successful businessman). I felt that I was being pitched an opportunity to work with a financial coach, rather than being educated on topics related to financial health. If I wanted to know more, I would need to hire him. Furthermore, he ended the program by advising us to buy the two books he promoted throughout the event – which I thought odd both because we were supposed to be learning about budgeting our money, and because this event took place in a public library. (After a quick trip to Anythink's online public access catalog, I discovered that both books were available in the library's system.)

I think this program would have been more successful had it been transparent about the service it was providing in its event description. Had it specifically stated that this was focused on Dave Ramsey's tips to pay down debt and get rich, perhaps a different type of crowd would have turned up. I would have also switched this to a one-on-one type of session, since the host asked personal questions from each of us throughout the event – many of which were finance related and I felt uncomfortable answering in a public setting. Along the same lines, I would have closed the door to the meeting space to keep a more private setting to discuss personal financial affairs. Lastly, a two-hour event should have an intermission. Although it appeared that the host was running the show, because there was a librarian present in the space, I felt she could have read the room and proposed a short break on behalf of the patrons.

I appreciated that there was a larger theme that this program fell into. Knowing that there was an entire series of "Do You" events scheduled for this year that centered around resolutions, I was curious to know more. I am inspired by this idea of an ongoing thematic series and will take this into consideration during future program planning.

Conclusion

This experience was a positive one in that I have a better understanding of what *not* to do to create a successful outreach program. I know now that event descriptions should be transparent and give a scope of the session that is being offered. This also makes it important for me as the program planner to understand who I am inviting to speak, what they will offer my participants, and how this ties in with the mission and values of the institution I aim to represent. I did not realize that environment also plays a vital role in the success of a program, and will take this into account when designing program spaces for future outreach projects.