Reaching out to Readers: Launching a Successful Book Club

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Overview
- Planning started in 2007
- First book club books chosen in Spring 2008
- 3 books chosen per year
- Online Communication
  - discussion guides
  - Newsletters
  - guides to further readings
  - polls
- On-site activities as well
Susan Rossen’s idea but it could have come from anywhere. It started similarly to how a group of friends might start a book club. One person has the idea and then recruits other friends (in this case departments) to join based on what they can bring to the table.

Membership leads the initiative because they deal with the project’s timeline in terms of communication. Shop sells the books. Curators have a limited role, but have been helpful in choosing titles.
The Big Launch

- No money? No problem.
- Start simple
- Introductory email
- Leadership from Membership
- Chose two books for a dual exhibition: Homer and Hopper
  - *Country of the Pointed Firs* and *The Big Sleep*

1. Not a lot of money is needed, and we certainly didn’t have much. Books for committee, food?, people volunteer their time and museum volunteers space

2. Didn’t want to build a lot of infrastructure without knowing if it would be successful; Started almost completely online

3. Email sent to all mail lists, including members and non-members; They had option to sign up for the newsletters

Sarah Orne Jewett and Raymond Chandler
Initial response

- Overwhelming: around 700 people signed up immediately for email announcements
- During the Homer and Hopper exhibitions, around 1,200 downloads of the discussion guides
- 10-20 in-person participants for the two free events

1. Now, we have nearly 2,300 participants
2. Indicates “participants” were sharing links with others
Book Club Events

- 3 books chosen per year
- One event per book
  - A mix of traditional discussions and non-traditional events
    - *Caesar and Cleopatra* by George Bernard Shaw - Steppenwolf actors came and did a reading and analysis of the text
    - *My Love Affair with Modern Art* by Katherine Kuh - Museum Ed led a tour through the galleries of paintings she had acquired for the museum
    - Library often hosts discussions, but adds value, e.g. for *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* by Gertrude Stein, we brought out books about artists discussed; other books by Stein, photographs of characters described in book

1. Which is plenty considering there isn’t a FT person dedicated to this project. We’ve tried 2 at one time, and three on their own. Two at one time gives readers options.
What to read?

- Relate it to an exhibition
- Make it tangential
  - e.g. "The Big Sleep" by Raymond Chandler for the Hopper exhibition
- No more than 400 pages
- Well-written
- Accessible but challenging
- Audience participation

1. All but one title has been chosen in relationship to an exhibition; creates a sense of urgency and relevance, plus draws in people to the museum
2. Best to make a tangential choice that evokes the time and place of the exhibition
3. recommended by someone within the committee
4. We had one exception to what we typically do - we let the readers vote. The book they chose, The Lost Painting by Jonathan Harr, was in some ways the least interesting to discuss, but people signed up like crazy.
Tracking the success

- 2,289 participants who have opted in for the newsletter
- Very few people unsubscribe
- Discussion Guides are downloaded frequently - even years after the book was chosen.
- Open rate of emails is extremely successful - 30-45%

1. As mentioned, within first 6 months, around 700 signed up, but after a marketing push through member magazine in 2009 (?), print mailing, and e-blast, another large increase to current numbers.

2. Example: Homer and Hopper guides have been downloaded around 3000 times; during reading cycle, only downloaded around 1,200 times

2. Most marketers think 20% is worth throwing a party for!

3. Some of the most read emails that the museum sends
What’s not working

- Comments/blog style
  - Most are boring (“love the book”)
  - Lots of spam
  - Alternatively, polls are very successful
- Crowds at events
  - Typically 10-20 people come for the events, rarely more.
  - Lots of rsvps, but lots of no-shows too

1. Comments go directly to moderator in Membership who posts a few interesting ones
2. Doesn’t matter if we serve food and wine, charge people, or advertise extensively.
3. Doesn’t mean the events are unsuccessful; they’re just not the heart of the book club.
Benefits for Museum/Library

- Encouraging reading about art
- Shared downloads = museum promotion
- Encourage visits to exhibitions
- Reading lists encourage library use
- Staff morale

1. Every download is encouragement to read about art or think about books in relation to art
2. Downloads are being shared/used in personal book clubs - promotion for museum/library
3. Due to the connection with exhibitions, books encourage readers to visit the museum and look at the art work
   e.g. In discussion guides, we often say “see ‘such and such’ painting for an example of this point”.
4. Additional reading lists encourage reading/library use
What we’ve learned

- Redefine participation
- Despite redefinition, interest and engagement are present
- Serves as a model of how to connect with members

1. Book club “participants” only have time or want to participate at a minimal level. This is not necessarily a bad thing, especially because museum staff can only do the same
2. People are incorporating the offerings into their own life and social groups
3. The Book club is serving as a model “affinity group” that will be used by membership to try and capture more connections with members
Comments about personal satisfaction and joy in being involved with a group like this.