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Java City: Developing a Successful Cultural Center

Jack Montgomery

Defining Space

Western Kentucky University Library had a large two-level, but largely unused lobby that had once been the library's entrance but had been closed as a new entrance was created. By 2002, it sat empty and all but devoid of human traffic just outside our Reference area. Also, in 2002, Reference statistics were down, as was Circulation and library usage in general. Dean Binder believed that with the renovation and development of this former lobby, the library would realize an increase in campus visibility and library usage would increase.

Dr. Binder partnered with the campus food service provider to establish a café with comfortable and attractive seating area on both levels and to reopen the former entrance to the library. This entrance opens onto a large patio and community space between

our Fine Arts Center and is a heavily used thoroughfare at various times of the day. As Dean Binder began working on the logistics with the various organizations on campus to bring his vision to reality, he also conceived of having an ongoing series of live entertainment and cultural events within the café. The library could become, in a way that it had not before, a center for culture and university life. To this end, he formed a committee to 1) develop a vision for the cultural program, and 2) an organizational plan for its management. He recruited several faculty and staff from the library and solicited members from WKU academic departments that were likely to participate in and benefit from such a program. As a result, faculty from the Music, Theater, English, and Art departments agreed to participate. I was appointed committee chair, because I am, in addition to being a faculty member and librarian, a working musician with a background in nightclub management and connections to the local and regional entertainment community. We developed a mission for Java City:

“To provide adequate and appropriate planning, networking and implementation required for the establishment of a regular schedule of live entertainment programs and events in the ‘Java City’ coffee shop in the Helm-Cravens Library Complex.”

Our initial planning sessions were lively, our discussions and brainstorming were very valuable, and this created an atmosphere of a collective effort. Among the topics discussed were:

What kinds of entertainment did we want to offer?

When and where would these events take place?

Who would provide the initial funding for materials like sound equipment, a stage, and staff?

How would we be able to support an ongoing series if it became successful?

Were we going to offer money for these performances?

Who was going to manage the events and bookings?

Should we have a performance contract? Who should be signing these contracts with agents?

How were we going to publicize these events?

After several meetings, we decided that the library would essentially fund and manage the entire process with input from other departments. The result was the Java City Noontime Concert Series, and over the past few years has become an exclusive library-managed operation. Multi-departmental input was initially valuable in inaugurating such a program, but anyone planning a similar program should consider that in the end, the actual work will be conducted by a small, cohesive, dedicated group of people.

The Java City Café opened in August 2002, and we began the concert series in October. Western Kentucky University has historically been and essentially still is a regionally-based “suitcase” institution, with most of its students returning to their homes each weekend. As a result, we decided we would offer the one hour performances in the middle of the week during lunch hours from noon to 1:30 p.m.

There is now a tremendous amount of foot-traffic into and past the library. The opening of the Java City Café was

responsible for a lot of this traffic as people come to buy food and beverages. The library decided to allow covered beverages into the library in recognition of the presence of the Java City Café and the changing personal dynamics in our patron population. I must admit, as a book-preservationist, I expressed real concerns about damage to our books and facility. Patrons have been very respectful and seem to understand and value the privilege of bringing beverages into our facility.

Organizational Structure

As we progressed in the planning process, we soon realized that we need a core of reliable, available people to manage the concert series. Our Dean of Libraries appointed a committee of library employees with me as chair, one professional colleague from Public Services and two staff members from Public and Technical services who responded to our call for interested people. The Java City Live Entertainment Committee initially met to plan the logistics, approve the performers, and purchase the sound equipment. We were initially funded from the Office of the

Dean from discretionary monies. Today the committee rarely meets in a formal manner but functions like a well-oiled machine around the concert events. Everyone knows what to do and how to do it, and we are a very cohesive group. In addition, everyone is cross-trained so that if someone is sick or absent, the position can be covered. One piece of advice to anyone planning an event like this would be to keep the working group small and use great care in selecting who is to be involved.

Location

Initially, we decided that our concerts would be held inside the entrance lobby of Helm Library (inside the Java City Café) to be able to control the effect of the noise on the surrounding area. We had to install and maintain an additional security gate in this lobby as a new library entrance/exit had been created. This arrangement worked well until warm weather drew our audience outside. We soon realized that we could have an expanded audience for the events by moving the concerts out onto the patio just outside the library entrance. As a result, some outside concerts

have had estimated audiences of up to five hundred people.

Sound Management

We quickly realized that few of our performers had the ability to manage their own sound, and so we decided that we would employ a library staff member to operate the sound system. Fortunately, we have another employee who is also a professional musician and understands how to set-up and balance the sound. He is paid a small fee per event for this service.

Booking management

I took over the task of booking the performers because of my personal connections within the local entertainment community. Our original decision was to solicit performers who would perform without charge. We also decided to allow them to sell their music CDs, t-shirts, or other promotional materials as an inducement for performing. The college circuit is a very lucrative one for the traveling performer and many aspiring artists really want to get into this market.

Over the years, we have gradually been able to offer a small

stipend to performers. We still do not offer what would be considered an attractive amount of money, but we can offer the value of self-promotion and publicity. On occasion, I have an agent who calls me only to dismiss our venue because of our small stipend, but most realize it is better for promotional value to book a low-paying event between more lucrative ones.

To make our low-paying venue more attractive, I began to make personal connections with cafés and clubs in the area that book live entertainment. I offer to send people I book for Java City to their venue so the performer can get possibly get two small paying gigs while passing through Bowling Green. Sometimes, acts can perform for us at noon, and then do a second performance that night before going out on the road again. I also keep a list of venues with contact information to email to the aspiring performer or agent so that they can arrange another event for themselves. I provide a potential for additional performances in the area, but I leave the details to the performers or their agents. I have, on occasion, called a club owner and made a recommendation, but I

do not act as anyone's agent.

In the early years of Java City concerts, we had more performances by faculty and students of the WKU Music and Theater departments, but within a few years, those types of performers became the exception rather than the rule. We maintain good relations with both departments and our door is always open to their performances. One of the major reasons for the decline in student and faculty performances is schedule conflict with mid-day classes. Our one exception is an ongoing series of evening "poetry slams" by the Department of English. They are our one night event and we provide them the set-up and sound system, and they manage the acoustics. We come in the next morning and break down the equipment. We also host sales by the art department, occasional student events and selective lectures by approved speakers and community groups.

We still have an occasional free performance, usually by university faculty and staff, whom we are not allowed to pay. The majority of our performers, however, play for a set fee, so we can

stay within our annual budget. As we progressed into paying performers, we enlisted several other people onto the committee from the Dean of Libraries' office, to help with promotion and payment processing, but they do not actively manage the events themselves.

As our popularity as a venue grew, we found ourselves in the enviable position of being besieged by people wanting to perform. For a couple of years we tried two to three performances a week but that proved too costly and too much additional work for the committee to manage. All members of the committee have full-time jobs in the library, so we have now returned to booking a single performance per week. If a performer should cancel, I keep a list of folks I can call on short notice and who are willing to perform.

We soon realized that the Java City Café was a good vehicle for outreach to the local community as well as the campus. To this end, I have always made a special effort to seek out and recruit performers from the southern Kentucky region.

From the earliest years of the Java City Café concerts, I used social networking resources and electronic booking services to locate potential performers. I have used Facebook, MySpace, Sonicbids and ReverbNation to explore local and regional talent. After nine years, I no longer have to search for performers; they come to us largely and by word of mouth recommendations and through our social networking presence. The social networking sites are excellent showcases for performers' information, photos, video clips, music samples, and touring schedules. All of this information is very valuable in evaluation and promotion of those selected.

When a performer or booking agent contacts me about performing at Java City, I look them up and listen to their musical samples. I then forward the information on likely performers to the Live Entertainment Committee members for their input before scheduling a performance. If the committee approves the selection, I use the performer's online information to promote them after confirming the booking.

I also seek out committee and library administration input when booking an act that may be controversial. Good communication must go in both directions. On rare occasions, we have denied access to our space based on the act's content and the possible negative impact on our library.

Free speech is an important right, especially on a college campus, but we do not see Java City's role as a speaker's corner, and we have clarified that in our performance policy. It is important to clearly state the role of your performance venue and other policy objectives in the mission statement and working documents. The mission statement and policy documents provide protection for you as organizer and your organization. The value of clear policies cannot be overstated. Our statement is as follows:

“The events scheduled for ‘Java City’ are for entertainment purposes only and hence the committee shall not approve presentations which include partisan political rhetoric or speeches espousing political, racial or religious agendas. This does not include the presentation of religiously oriented music but refers to

polemical or evangelizing oratory. The “Java City” events are also not a forum for public debate.”

During our planning process, we had a university attorney review the wording and overall policy documents related to Java City, before we booked the first concert. Generally, we book acts only one semester in advance and do not book during summer or holiday seasons. Booking too far in advance becomes problematic in terms of cancellations and changes in touring schedules. In addition, we do not book acts the week before final exams or during the week of graduation. On average, we book eleven to thirteen concerts per semester.

Sponsorship

Many small public, college, or university libraries do not have the discretionary funds to set up and maintain a performance venue. Sometimes start-up monies may be available through competitive internal grant programs. Seeking funding from a local sponsor or sponsors is a way to partner with local businesses with an interest in supporting community projects. Here are some tips

for preparing for meeting with a potential sponsor:

Have the project working documents ready: policy, mission statement, goals and objectives.

Negotiate in good faith regarding potential sponsors' logos, name recognition, etc.

Try to be flexible about the types of support offered. Keep an open mind and work with your administrators to build a potential long-term sponsorship program.

Several years ago, we were approached by a local bank willing to sponsor our concert series for a five-year period. We gladly accepted their offer and made certain that their generosity is recognized in all our promotional efforts.

The key to our success has been in selecting those acts appropriate to our particular venue and audience. Our most popular indoor concerts are often a singer-songwriter, duets, trios and small acoustic bands. Outside on the patio, larger bands and dance troupes are the most popular acts.

I try as much as possible, to present a wide variety of

musical styles. Over the years we have presented all types of music from classical, contemporary Christian, rap, hip-hop, soul, Celtic, folk, old-time, bluegrass, rock, and jazz. We have had comedians, poetry groups, theatrical productions, percussion groups, belly-dance troupes, and performers from all over the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and from as far as Peru.

Every once in a while, we book a performer whose work or style just does not resonate with the crowd, and the audience always let us know their feelings on this matter. As an example I often book rap artists for the patio. Knowing that rap and hip hop can have lyrics that are challenging to some people, before the performance I counsel them on what language will be acceptable and most of the time they have complied.

Our mission statement contains the following statement:

“Presentations which contain questionable lyrics or language. The committee reserves the right to request transcripts of presentations in advance of the performance and reserves the

right to refuse or terminate a performance that violates the above-mentioned standard or violates established community standards for public behavior. Part of the standard for appropriate language shall include the guidelines of the F.C.C. for words, which may not be said on broadcast radio or television.”

Usually, if a performer gets really negative reviews or reactions from the audience or, if they fail to appear for a show without contacting us, they are not asked back to our venue. Often when they contact us for a rebooking, I always defer to a kind refusal because this is a word-of-mouth business. Ill-will and condemnations can cause problems for all parties involved. In a small community, relationships are close-knit, and it is important to use great tact and diplomacy in all types of communication.

Promotion

Promotion of these events is a critical element of our success and requires a multiple-step approach by several people. A few

strategies we have developed involve the following: Campus-wide e-mail announcements are sent out a few days in advance of the event. Those e-mails are carefully worded to promote the performer, brand the library as the host, and give credit to our community sponsor. Logos and branding are key elements with all our promotional materials. Photos of the concerts are posted to the Libraries' blog after the event.

Our Library Marketing Coordinator supplies me with monthly group and individual performer posters, which are uniform in design and size, complete with our logo and the logo of our sponsor. Once a week before each concert I distribute them in high-traffic areas on campus.

We also promote the events through local radio announcements. I send copies of our performance schedules to local DJs and post the schedule online in the regional online entertainment paper and the library's webpage.

As a part of our community outreach, I often interview a performer before or after the performance and that interview are

published in the monthly regional entertainment newspaper in a column called “Music From The Hill.” “The Hill” refers to a well-know nickname for the university and the column has been read and accepted by the local community. Finally, when I go out for an evening, I am often approached by someone with a new idea for a performance or performer. In addition, when I see a performer that will fit our venue, I am always quick to introduce myself and recruit them for Java City.

Event Management

Before each performance I personally go and greet the performer, making sure they have what they need to be able to start on-time. If problems arise, I am there to insure that they find a quick resolution. During each performance, after collecting the necessary information for paying our performers, I stay for a while to do the sound-check with our technician, and then I take photos of the performer. Within an hour of the performance, those photos are posted to our assistant with a promotional blurb to be uploaded onto the library’s blog. The request for their payment,

along with their W-9 tax form, is delivered to the library's accounts manager for payment. I often reappear at the end of the concert to be certain the performer is can easily pack their equipment and get back on the road. This personal touch has helped to create a very positive impression of Java City as a desirable venue.

Conclusion

The growth and development of the Java City Noontime Concert Series and facility is a case of evolution from humble beginnings to the phenomena it is today. To date, we have hosted over 250 events and hundreds of performers. A number of those who have achieved national recognition have passed through our venue. One immediate effect was a sharp rise in our library gate-count and surprisingly, a measurable increase in the amount of traffic to our Reference Desk. The table below shows the rise in inquiries at our Reference Desk over four-month in a two-year period. The higher numbers reflect increase in foot-traffic in large part as the Java City Noontime Concert Series grew.

<u>Reference</u>	<u>2002-2003</u>	<u>2001-2002</u>
August	1,514	500
September	2,528	988
October	2,259	1,231
November	1,994	1,331

We have, without question, achieved our mission and become a cultural and community center for the university. We have also increased our public awareness as a cultural venue within the greater community of south central Kentucky. I am grateful that the Java City Noontime Concerts and other events have been a part of the library's overall successful outreach mission and I am sincerely grateful to all the people that have worked so hard to make it happen.