

## **ABCs of Marketing Virtual Programs**

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**Abstract:** Plano Public Library shares tips based on experience marketing over 650 virtual programs since March 2020, drawing more than 15,000 participants. Ideas for building and promoting quality programs are outlined with respect to audience, branding, and coordination. Suggestions provide direction for connecting with adult audiences, as well as children and families. The authors advocate collaborating with community partners to add credibility and reach new audiences. Suggested keys to effective coordination include an inward focus on communication and processes within the library team and an outward focus on developing effective promotional partners and plans. Strategies for continual process improvement are recommended.

**Keywords:** Virtual; Program; Zoom; Marketing; Branding; Promotion; Partners

## Introduction

The environment for library marketing is constantly evolving in response to new technology, philosophical shifts, and community needs. Plano Public Library (hereafter PPL) in Plano, Texas, has made use of traditional marketing tools such as bookmarks, signs, and brochures, and in recent years pivoted to utilizing video as part of its promotional toolkit. Selecting and integrating these tools required ongoing reevaluation of the overall branding strategy for PPL. World events in 2020 provided an impetus to move library programs into the virtual world in a significant way. With this backdrop in mind, the authors observed in a previous publication:

The nation changed dramatically during March of 2020. In Texas, many schools were out for spring break when the threat of coronavirus became severe, causing broad event cancellations and closures of schools, gyms, businesses, and social activities. At the time of the pandemic, PPL welcomed an average of 4,000 people to five locations each day and offered well over 300 programs per month. Once the libraries were closed due to concerns regarding the spread of COVID-19, library staff had to move quickly to continue providing programs to meet patron expectations. From mothers of preschoolers to job seekers and small business owners, community residents found learning activities, help, and hope at PPL. The pivot to virtual programming required quick engagement, enthusiastic staff, and a plan! (Hadidi & Linscott, 2021, p. 53)

Building and promoting quality programs in the virtual space required a thoughtful look at intended audiences, branding to set library programs apart, and a great deal of internal coordination. With an inward focus on communication and processes within the library team and an outward focus on developing effective promotional partners and plans, virtual programming is now a key service that PPL expects to remain impactful.

## Literature Review

Building and promoting quality programs in the virtual space requires a thoughtful look at intended **audiences, branding** to set library programs apart, and a great deal of internal **coordination**. Much of the supporting literature for the recommendations in this paper is based on in-person library events; however, many of the core perspectives that support traditional programming also apply to virtual programming. While the authors' article "Meeting Patrons in the Virtual World" (Hadidi & Linscott, 2021) covered shifting programming from in-person to virtual, this paper concentrates on promotional factors for virtual programming.

Both in-person and virtual library programming exists to engage an audience. Utilizing market research is a foundational element of designing library programming in response to community needs (Conley & Tucker, 2005; Kim & Little, 1990). In both in-person and virtual program settings, "a clear definition and understanding of target audiences must be paired with appropriately selected media and specifically tailored messages" (Conley & Tucker, 2005, p. 48). A challenge then is to market not only specific resources and services, but also the overall value of the library and librarians to diverse audiences based on the known needs of the end user.

Branding now emerges as a critical element to connect with the audience of library users, in turn supporting the reach of virtual programs. Effective branding helps preserve connections between the library and library users that might otherwise be lost to distance. Lasky (2016) demonstrates the value of creating a consistent branding platform and applying it to all aspects of library events. By utilizing style guides, numerous analog and digital channels of communication, and a targeted approach, libraries can connect identified audiences to the library's mission. At its core, branding is about reinforcing the mission of the library in that it serves "to retain users, it provides clear direction and motivation to your employees and plays a vital role in acquiring new library users" ("Library Branding, Moving Beyond," 2018, p. 1). Moreover, effective branding initiatives "build brand recognition and help to establish reliability and trust" (Lasky, 2016, p. 10). Virtual programming as branding actively reinforces the value of the library by combining visual, emotional, and functional elements, a fact that is especially important when physical interaction is limited or unavailable.

From a marketing perspective, these benefits of virtual programming indicate that it will remain a viable and necessary part of library service to say nothing of the practical good for the library user. As noted by Shumaker (2021), “virtual programs can overcome transportation distance barriers and attract attendees from a wider geographic area than programs offered solely in person on a single branch library” (pp. 14-15).

Coordination between the audience and branding is essential. Returning to Lasky’s (2016) integrated marketing approach, the use of internal communication tools, clearly stated branding standards, targeted marketing activities, and evaluation of outcomes all point to the needs identified in the community. Virtual programming is simply these same concepts packaged and delivered through a new medium and with different constraints.

Virtual programming faces unique challenges. Internally, staff may need to accept new ways of addressing old policies and practices. Virtual programming can feel disconnected from the familiar physical space of the library, and as Shumaker (2021) points out, “this new imperative runs counter to the library’s mission to be a community hub where people come together” (p. 15). Syosset Public Library in New York adjusted its policy for handling “lapsed” patrons to maintain engagement (“Syosset Public Library”, 2020). Traditionally these “lapsed” patrons may not have received communications regarding programming or services. Syosset Public Library’s adoption of this revised approach resulted in the renewal of memberships and subsequent use of virtual materials, thus maintaining connections. As with this case, traditional views of library service require contextual reexamination and coordination with staff to reach effective outcomes.

Finally, coordination between the library and community partners can enhance branding initiatives related to virtual programming. Saunders and Corning (2020) argue that events are more successful when libraries collaborate with partners in the community since “each organization can expand its service community and reach new audiences” (p. 5). By exposing new audiences to effective branding efforts, both libraries and partners can establish nascent relationships in previously unserved communities.

## Audience

### Meet a Need

Librarians and library staff are in a unique position to know about the interests and information needs of their community. In addition to regular patron interactions, there are circulation statistics, requests, news, and external data to help identify hot topics. And of course, patron interests can always be asked directly with a survey.

**Figure 1:** PPL staff member filming storytime



Start program marketing by looking at WHO your library's priority audiences are, rather than WHAT programming to offer. A critical element to marketing programs is knowing the intended audiences. Are families a focus? Parents and caregivers of small children? Readers, researchers, or creatives? Job seekers, or adults in general? For successful marketing, focus program efforts on meeting a need. During the summer, families are seeking ways to keep their children engaged and learning. Parents of the youngest learners want to help their children develop literacy and prepare for school. Plano library staff enjoy making storytime accessible virtually, as well as in-person (see Figure 1). Adults want to keep up skills for the fast-paced technology world. When times are tough, offering skill-building in technology or business can be especially valuable for adults who are focused on earning a living.

During COVID-19, PPL identified a community need for job search and career classes. Partners presented programs on time management, goal setting, preparing for virtual interviews, and conversational skills. Library staff complemented these programs by providing career exploration and resume classes, as well as teaching Excel Basics and how to use Reference Solutions for job searching. Since beginning virtual programming in April 2020, PPL has seen increased engagement from adults and teens, particularly in the areas of financial education and business/career skills, including technology training. Offering timely programs with useful information brings success!

Program success with adults requires an intentional approach. Libraries already contribute community-building benefits through author events and crafting circles. Adding programs that build productivity and economic value can only add impact. Critical adult needs include developing skills for the workforce, identifying resources to support business development, building financial capability through education and tools, gaining digital competency through technology training, and forming social connections. Engaging community and corporate partners in program planning and delivery can be an effective way to broaden the scope of adult programs and to reach new audiences.

## **Partner Up!**

Add expertise and supplement staff capacity by involving partners in program plans. For instance, PPL partners with SCORE (Service Core of Retired Executives, a partner of the US Small Business Administration) to provide classes and one-on-one coaching for small businesses. Staff present additional small businesses workshops, including *How to start an online business*, *Build your business with Reference Solutions* and *Get your business on Google Search & Maps*. Together, this schedule of programs provides ongoing promotional opportunities and keeps patrons engaged with additional learning.

Initiate conversations with community partners to gather information about community needs. This also provides the opportunity to share information about the library's schedule of programs. Involve partner organizations in program promotion; this is a great way to reach new audiences who may be unfamiliar with library resources. PPL began a series of programs to assist job seekers, which local nonprofits shared with their clients who were out of work. There are many opportunities to help. Reach out to schools, senior living facilities, job search networks, homeowners associations, nonprofit

organizations, coalitions, and local leaders. Connecting with these community leaders will keep the library connected to current needs and engage other organizations in sharing the value of the library.

## **How Much Tech?**

Consider the technology knowledge and internet access of each intended audience when planning and promoting programs. Seniors may be less confident with technology, but partnering with organizations they know helps connect them with programming (e.g. AARP or local Area Agency on Aging). Teens are tech-savvy and are likely to respond to online classes relating to college and preparing for adulthood. For less tech-savvy audiences, schedule staff to assist with technical issues and be sure participants know they can use a telephone to call into the virtual session instead of using a computer. Providing a simple tutorial video in the registration email can help overcome some groups' hesitancy to engage with technology. This can be included in automated registration follow-up, or staff can reach out before the class with the information.

For teen programs, consider partnering with a college or university and provide participants with virtual handouts and links to library resources as a way to find more information. To meet the needs of participants further, PPL workshops are recorded live and added to the library's YouTube channel (Library, 2022) for later viewing. Recordings are also included in recaps on the library's blog, (Library, 2020) along with additional learning resources from the library's collection.

## **Create New Library Enthusiasts**

What segments of the population are less engaged with the library than desired? What are the priorities of the library? For example, should the library be looking to build connections with adults, seniors, or homeschool families? Meeting a need with quality programs and credible presenters is the first step to success. When interest in a particular area or topic is clear, schedule more than one related program a few weeks apart to offer opportunities for continued learning. Setting up a series of programs gives patrons options and presents the library as an ongoing source of learning. Series for children, as well as adults, can be beneficial for promotion on various external communication channels, as well as through partner organizations.

Beginning with a well-defined audience helps program planners determine what is important to them. Name programs distinctly, and describe them with enough information to give a clear picture of the learning outcomes. Think about the description from the point of view of the intended audience, avoiding library jargon and including information about how to access the program. For ease of access, provide hyperlinks to registration and share information about how to use the platform for those who may not be particularly tech-savvy.

## **Branding**

### **Tie It All Together**

In the new world of online programs, how will library programs stand out? Begin with an appealing look by incorporating the library logo or signature colors into the visual components of program promotions. Using one standard, the recognizable look is a great option, or perhaps utilizing different designs by program type or audience. One example is the sample reminder for a Zoom program sent out to registrants prior to a program, shown in Figure 2. There are a surprising variety of ways to add visibility to the library brand. Create a virtual background for Zoom presentations. Add the library logo or visual branding to registration pages, follow-up emails, and post-program surveys. Develop an appealing first slide for virtual programs that welcome participants and provides basic instruction/ guidelines for the virtual session. Use a standard layout and background for PowerPoint presentations. When developing graphic elements for a particular program or series, be sure to use the same graphic in all program promotions.



**Figure 2:** Sample reminder email before a program



Hi Rachel Hadidi,

This is a reminder that "TEST: SAGE Expo" will begin in 1 day on:  
Date Time: Feb 4, 2021 01:00 PM Central Time (US and Canada)

Join from a PC, Mac, iPad, iPhone or Android device:

[Click Here to Join](#)

Note: This link should not be shared with others; it is unique to you.

Passcode: mockpwd

[Add to Calendar](#) [Add to Google Calendar](#) [Add to Yahoo Calendar](#)

Or Skype for Business (Lync):

<https://plano.zoom.us/j/97182608646>

This webinar is also streamed on our YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/c/PlanoPublicLibrary/featured>

If you need help getting started with Zoom, please view our tutorial: <http://www.planolibrarylearns.org/2020/07/13/getting-started-with-zoom/>

Check our website PLANOLIBRARY.ORG and blog PLANOLIBRARYLEARNs.org for more resources

Still have questions? Call any library for help: <https://www.plano.gov/1433/Visit>



Continue branding efforts to include the “feel” of the programs. Play music during the entry period while participants are joining the virtual program, for instance. This assists patrons in testing their audio and asking tech questions before the program starts. Use a standardized welcome message to introduce programs and any partner organizations participating. Let participants know how questions will be handled and how/when to ask them. Provide participants with prepared messages and links to related resources during programs by using the chat function. Plan for follow-up and inform participants so they know what to expect in terms of communications, links to additional resources, and any post-program surveys. End programs with information about upcoming library programs and additional resources. Consider using a wrap-up script, too. Audiences will sense that the program is organized and professional.

## **You’ve Got the Look**

For pre-recorded programs, think about the background visuals, lighting, and framing of the staff to be filmed. Pay attention to background noise and use a good microphone to ensure audio quality. For a program series, use a standard structure for each video, including a similar introduction, program format, and closure. Providing a script and an orderly structure helps staff to be at their best and also facilitates video editing. Any video recordings that will be made available on-demand after the program

via YouTube, Facebook, the library website, or other platforms should include a frame with contact information for the library, the library logo, slogan, and graphics.

PPL records all webinar-style programs for access at a later date. Before the programs are posted to YouTube, branding elements are added, including the library logo and end screen animation. Adding the end screen animation to a video and uploading it to YouTube encourages people to subscribe. When people subscribe to a channel or playlist, they receive notifications each time something new is uploaded, which expands the reach of the programs and videos.

Support participants in exploring the topic further with supplemental information and resources. After a program ends and the video is uploaded, PPL staff send a post-event email (this can be automated in Zoom) with the following elements:

- Link to YouTube playlist
- Link to a post-program survey
- Link to Google Drive for any handouts
- Link to information on upcoming classes and/or related library resources

Sending post-event emails provides a direct way to send handouts, links to upcoming programs, etc. The opportunities are endless – create blog posts, develop reading lists, connect participants with other library resources and services, and more!

For meeting-style programs, PPL does not record to protect patron privacy. PPL facilitates book clubs and conversational programs via Zoom Meetings. Since these types of events are not recorded, staff members write blog posts about the content or create book lists to drive content to their attendees. In addition, Zoom does not send automatic reminders for programs that are set up as meetings, so staff takes the extra step to email attendees before and after the program.

## **Consistent Follow-up**

PPL uses the library blog “Plano Library Learns” ([planolibrarylearns.org](http://planolibrarylearns.org)) to provide supporting information. An early learning section provides parents and caregivers with concrete ways to continue the learning experience for their children at home, including recommended reading. Sections are also designated for business and career resources, technology, and arts & culture, which includes genealogy. These sections are utilized for embedding recordings from virtual programs, as well as providing additional links, book

recommendations, professional development resources, and other related learning opportunities.

Select a format based on the intended audience. Considerations include use of technology, time of day, length of program, platform, and supporting handouts/resources. When hosting programs, determine what type of programs will be most suitable — for interactive programs in which attendees share thoughts, meeting style is the way to go. For lecture-style programs, webinars are appropriate. Also, requiring registration allows for automated email follow-up with the attendees to share handouts, follow-up resources or surveys, and upcoming class information.

Zoom Webinars can be set up to send reminder emails before the program and follow-up emails automatically. This provides the opportunity to brand communications and send participants library resources. Include information about how to access a Zoom library program and how to contact the library for technical assistance or questions. In the follow-up emails, PPL includes links to a survey, handouts on Google Drive, the library blog, the library website, and a calendar of upcoming events.

## **Coordination**

Preparing, promoting, and delivering a selection of virtual programs takes an immense amount of coordination and communication within a team. Below are four steps to lay the foundation for success:

1. Establish effective internal coordination among program staff and the promotional team
2. Collaborate with community partners on programs and promotion
3. Develop a comprehensive promotional plan including external platforms
4. Review outcomes and make adjustments regularly

## **All on the Same Page**

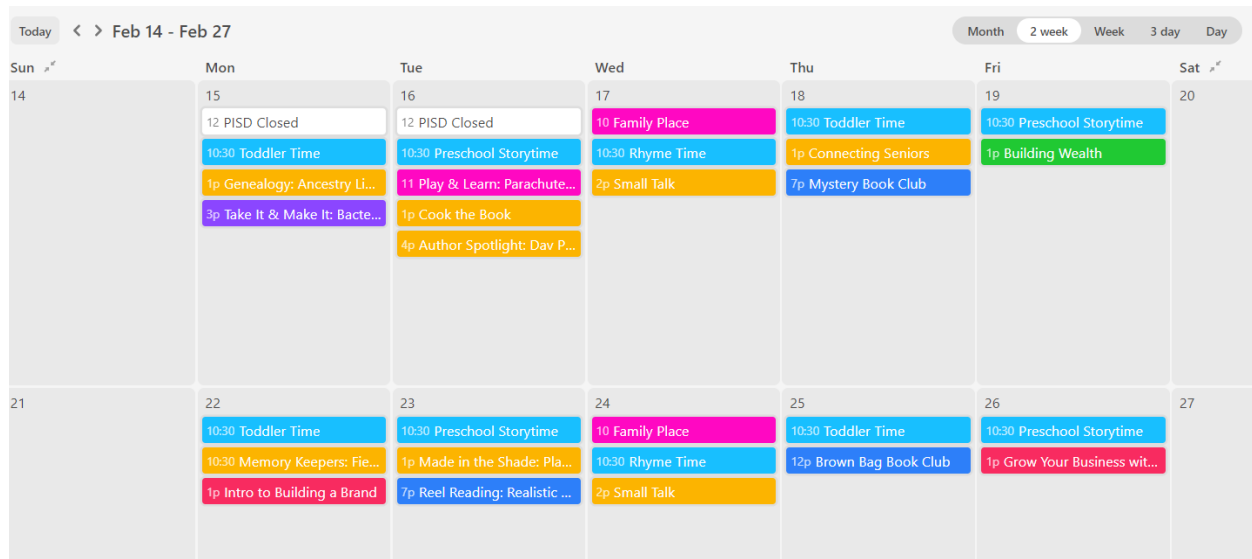
Excellent program promotion begins with effective communication among the library leadership team. Establish clear goals for library programs, work together to plan content that utilizes staff strengths, and include partners where appropriate. Look ahead together to arrange a schedule that is easy to promote and gives patrons a look ahead.

For effective coordination among staff, develop a program timeline and ensure staff planning the programs are aware of promotional deadlines in advance. How far ahead are details needed to be included in a monthly newsletter? How much lead time do local publications/online magazines need to consider promoting library programs? At what intervals are social media and other communication plans made? Provide information for staff to share at the end of each virtual program, promoting related library resources and upcoming virtual programs. Planning and providing information about the schedule of coming events is critical to boosting community engagement.

Facilitate internal information-sharing by maintaining a centralized calendar of virtual programs and providing access to both program planners and marketing/promotions staff. PPL has found Airtable to be an excellent tool for planning, coordination, and promotion of virtual programs, as well as collecting participant program feedback. This customizable database has become integral to the organization of the five-location library. Promotions staff created a calendar for each month, providing a visual schedule of programs that are color-coded by topic/audience (see Figure 3). Each program listing includes vital information such as who is presenting, whether program handouts have been developed, on what platform the program will be held, registration links, contact information for partners, and more.

The PPL programs and promotions team connects with a bi-weekly virtual meeting to confirm program promotions and discuss any concerns or changes to the calendar. Information for all scheduled programs is posted for all staff which helps with the active promotion of upcoming classes. Library staff share this information during virtual programs and as part of interactions with the public.

**Figure 3:** *Example of virtual programming schedule*



## Broaden Program Reach with Community Partners

Engaging partners in library programming provides double value. First, partner presenters can add expertise and increase the credibility and appeal of library programs for adults and children. Second, by collaborating and co-promoting virtual programs, the library can extend visibility to new audiences. PPL has partnered with SCORE, for example, both organizations promote joint programs using their avenues, and each organization has gained new followers. These programs can be delivered successfully on either organization’s platform with clear communication regarding roles and timelines.

Create an appealing visual class schedule with embedded registration links that are easy for partners to send out to their constituents. This can also be used for general community promotion and media. (See the promotional graphic designed to highlight programs relevant to small businesses in Figure 4.) Connect with nonprofits, schools, clubs, and media to alert them to the library program schedule. This sort of promotion is mutually beneficial — the library can provide specific programming to meet the needs of community partners’ constituents, and the community partner can bring a new audience to the library.

**Figure 4:** Promotional graphic for Small Business Workshops

**Plano Public Library** Virtual Program Schedule  
SMALL BUSINESS WORKSHOPS

All sessions require registration and meet on Zoom  
See our calendar for details - [planolibrary.org](http://planolibrary.org)

<b>Resources for Small Business</b> September 21 at 1 pm	<b>Microsoft Excel: Charts, Tables and Visualizations</b> October 30 & December 23 at 1 pm	<b>Adobe Photoshop: Product Photography</b> December 4 at 1 pm
<b>Intro to Writing a Business Plan</b> October 7 at 1 pm	<b>Smart Financial Choices in Challenging Times</b> November 9 at 1 pm	<b>Microsoft Excel (Basic)</b> December 9 at 1 pm
<b>InDesign: Design Business Letterhead</b> October 14 at 1 pm	<b>Overcoming Procrastination</b> November 13 at 1 pm	<b>Microsoft Excel: Formulas and Functions</b> December 16 at 1 pm
<b>Business Success: 5 Habits to Embrace</b> October 16 at 1 pm	<b>Building Your Business with Reference Solutions</b> November 20 at 1 pm	<b>Microsoft Excel: Pivot Tables</b> December 30 at 1 pm
<b>Get Your Business on Google Search and Maps</b> October 21 at 1 pm		

## Cover Every Angle

Make it easy for the public to find library events. Create a central online calendar that has all program information, including registration links, descriptive and clear program names, and short descriptions with learning outcomes. Since there is A LOT of virtual content right now, make sure programs highlight local community needs and the library's core services. Listing upcoming program information in one place will make it easy for the community to see all of the program options and add them to their schedule.

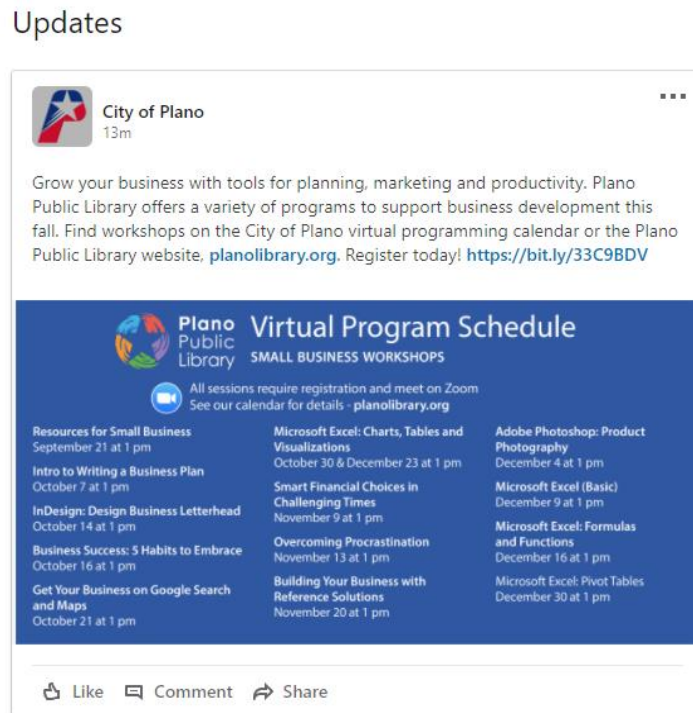
Promote virtual programs through multiple channels, including digital ones that can provide hyperlinks to virtual program registration. Use established communications, including the library website, newsletters, and social media, to notify library patrons about online programs, but also explore other digital communications such as online community event listings. Online event listings and community publications are great ways to reach beyond the library's regular patrons.

Promotions should focus on the value to the participant. How will this help them meet their goals or improve their life or career? Place promotional messaging in places where the intended audience will see them, in addition to regular library publications. For non-library users, where do they find information? Connecting with other organizations serving intended audiences can raise awareness of library programs and resources among those unfamiliar with the library, leading to new followers.

Remember to collaborate on promotions with entities like the local city or county communications department and Library Friends group or Foundation. Those with

whom the library works most closely are a great starting point for promoting virtual programming. Additional avenues for communication could include an organizational LinkedIn page or blog. The city of Plano posted library program information on its LinkedIn page, as shown in Figure 5. Social media is an obvious promotional tool, so be sure to consider all angles and available platforms to reach various audiences.

**Figure 5:** LinkedIn post highlighting upcoming programs



Video is a growing and useful tool for promotional purposes. For libraries not yet using video for promotions, now may be the time to get started! Create a spreadsheet to track how each event is being publicized. What community-based tools are available? Does the local Chamber of Commerce have an eNewsletter or platform for posting announcements? Develop a relationship with local publications and online events listings. Consider using Eventbrite to promote programs, as this could broaden program reach beyond the group of people already looking for library programs.

## Program Expansion and Process Improvement

Start small with programs that have an established following. This will allow the library to test out promotions and see what works. Regularly assess community response to virtual programs using surveys, social media replies, attendance numbers,

and staff feedback. Invite library staff and partners to share perspectives on programs they present, as well as ideas for additional topics. Connect with city and community leaders to analyze community interests and needs, and consider areas for program growth. Changes in circumstances/environment in the community and library services should prompt assessment and a fresh look at how resources are being deployed, the impact being made with programs, and what next steps are appropriate.

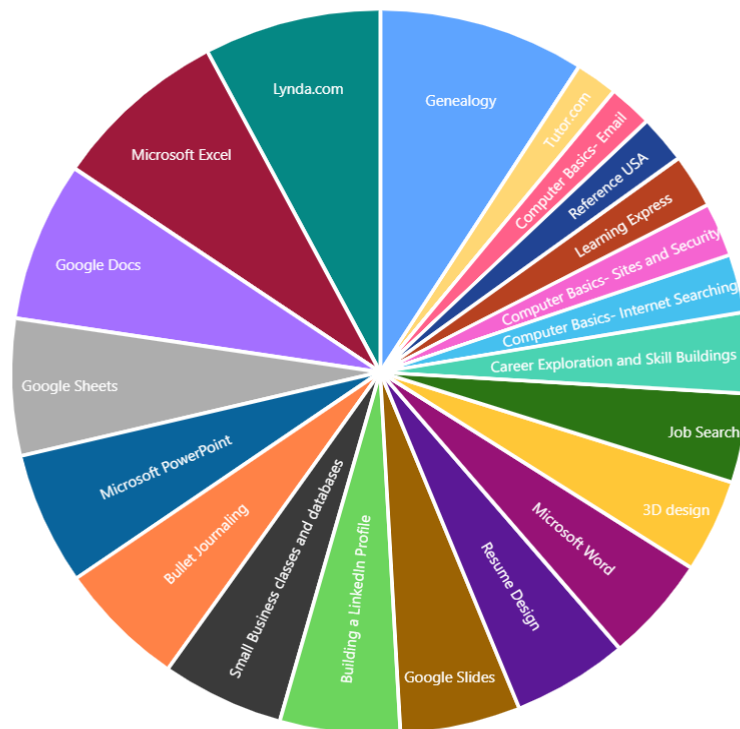
Starting a virtual program or series doesn't necessarily mean it should be repeated, so consider the return on investment for each program or topic. If staff is spending a lot of time developing a program that draws few participants, redirect resources to an area with a larger response.

Ask virtual program participants about their experiences and perspectives with library programs using a post-program survey. Ask about what other topics are of interest to them and about the new skills they gained. Survey results provide feedback to presenters which can assist with program improvement, and responses assist with planning efforts, as well as providing insights into topics of interest in the community (see Figure 6 for topics of interest from Plano library surveys). The post-program survey used by Plano Public Library (Library, 2021) asks participants:

- Was the time allocated sufficient to cover the topic?
- What other topics are you interested in learning about? (provide a list of topics that staff or partners are prepared to teach)
- What did you learn that was new to you?
- Do you have any suggestions for how we can improve this online program?

**Figure 6:** *Survey results from program attendees requesting specific programs*





## Into the Future

While we anticipate patrons will return and libraries will continue to hold in-person programs for all ages, we believe the future of library programming holds a central place for virtual programs as well. Virtual and on-demand recorded programming is an accessible way for people to learn and to connect with others when a trip to the library is not possible or practical. The benefits of virtual programming are clear: making community connections, introducing lesser-known library resources, extending program access for adults, and increasing inclusion for those with limited mobility. The question isn't whether libraries should engage in virtual programming, but when and how. Libraries must continue to connect with patrons in contemporary ways around topics that impact productivity and innovation. Virtual programs are a great investment for advancing a bright future.

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**Kristin Linscott** develops community and corporate partnerships for Plano Public Library as part of the Outreach & Engagement team. Kristin draws on experience in nonprofit management and community outreach to build connections that benefit both the library and the community. She enjoys promoting library services and programs, particularly in the areas of financial capability, workforce development and supporting small business.



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