

New Ways to be User Focused

In their article “No Easy Targets,” Suzann Holland and Amanda Verploeg (2009) discuss ways in which several example libraries have reacted to the economic downturn and resulting library budget cuts. I’d like to highlight two examples where librarians’ renewed user focus engendered operational improvements. These examples illustrate ways to elicit action and utilize new technology for outreach. This is not to say that libraries weren’t focusing on their users previously—certainly that’s always been the goal. What the examples do is prove that new ways to engage with patrons help to enhance how the library is perceived by these patrons and others in the community, thus safeguarding the library’s future.

The Brooklyn Public Library (BPL) galvanized its users to action. The “Support Our Shelves” program not only brought in significant public donations, but the library also encouraged users to send postcards to elected officials to request the restoration of library budgets (Holland & Verploeg, 2009, p. 34). What began as a reaction to budget cuts in the early years of the economic crisis has since become an annual effort (Brooklyn Public Library, 2012). The library experimented with a fundraising campaign, saw its benefits and then repeated the use of this successful tactic. Donations are one thing; obviously, any influx of funds during a budget cutback will be directly beneficial to the immediate needs of the library. The postcard campaign is something else entirely, and I think it was an inspired use of old-fashioned activism to engage with users and incite them to action—action that was not difficult and did not take up too much of their time, but did give them a voice in how their public funds were being spent. An area for future improvement might be for the library to be more proactive about *providing* postcards to

patrons. The library should be able to work with a local design agency or printing company on some sort of pro bono basis to have the postcards produced, or even engage with their user base in a design contest for the postcards. Having the postcards readily available at the library would make it so much easier for patrons to complete and mail them or even take extras to share with friends. A consistent message on the postcards would also be beneficial, not only from a branding standpoint for the library itself, but also on the receiving end—the message is consistent and clear and overwhelming when voiced en masse. Expanding this user activism to other formats like email campaigns or in-person events is a logical next step and is something that the BPL and other New York City libraries have already done, e.g., the awareness-building 24-hour read-in at the BPL (Asch, 2012). Engaging with patrons to ask for donations and encouraging their political involvement is beneficial to the library as well as to those patrons. Maintaining these activities year after year shows a willingness to accept the budget cuts as challenges to be overcome instead of obstacles too large to tackle.

The Okaloosa Public Library took a different step to overcome funding woes by utilizing a new way to reach out to users—social networks like Facebook and Twitter (Holland & Verploeg, 2009, p. 35). These social services are free to the library and the users and allow for 24/7 access to the library even as the library is cutting back hours. Not only do these outlets provide free advertising for libraries, they also allow for increased interaction with users generally and with a younger, more technologically astute set of users who might not be as familiar with the traditional benefits of libraries, thus creating loyal future patrons. The need to find a free advertising venue came about because of budget cuts, but it created an entirely new method for the library to communicate with patrons thus enhancing the library's services.

The key learning that I take from these two success stories is the need to make user interaction a normal and integral part of ongoing library operations and to look for new ways to engage those users. As Holland and Verploeg so perceptively state, “we know libraries are often undervalued and underfunded. But do those terms have much meaning when we can’t think of a time when they weren’t true” (2012, p. 34)? The realization of the need to be constantly creative with funding and outreach is important, not only to survive current economic times, but to continue to evolve as vital institutions in the future.

References

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