

REFERENCE AND INFORMATION SERVICES FOR THE NEXT GENERATION

by Susan Bannwart



WHO IS THE NEXT GENERATION?

In their article, “Born with the Chip,” Abram and Luther (2004) discuss the next generation of library users. At 81 million, NextGens are next in size to boomers. Born between 1982 and 2002, this next generation represents an underserved user group that may not be well understood by current libraries. This generation who grew up using computers does not think of them as technology but as part of their everyday culture. Abram and Luther (2004) reveal the following key points that explain the significant impact this user group will have on the services that libraries provide.

This next generation group does not recognize differences in information content nor do they differentiate between print and media formats. “Format agnostic,” these users gather information from all sources, print or not. Their media literacy skills will need to be highly developed, a skill that libraries and librarians can help develop. Their ability to critically evaluate sources of information quickly and effectively is also essential. The authors predict that libraries lacking wireless capabilities will be rendered irrelevant. Libraries will need hardware that fits the next generation’s information access needs and ability to share and then mesh them with their workflow. Information-seeking skills will utilize exploration, navigation, and discovery. The digital divide between generations may widen, but libraries must serve all populations. Research being conducted by the PEW American Internet and Life Project is an excellent resource for gaining an understanding of teen Internet and technology use (Lenhart, Madden, & Hitlin, 2005). A key point is that librarians must be integrated with the virtual environment in order to fill the roles of coach, mentor, and information advisor. If Abram and Luther’s (2004) outlook proves true, libraries that change will survive while those that do not will fall victim to irrelevance and disuse.

THE FUTURE IS NOW

The advent of technology has increased the library’s ability to practice the profession with greater efficiency and to serve a much wider audience. As the former

president of two separate Canadian library associations and the current VP of Innovation for SirsiDynix, Stephen Abram (2005) knows librarianship and technology. With his article, “Web 2.0 – Huh?! Library 2.0, Librarian 2.0,” Abram takes Patrick O’Reilly’s seminal work on Web 2.0 and applies it to libraries and librarians. Just as significant as O’Reilly’s work, this article started a wave of blog discussion among LIS technology gurus such as Michael Stephens and Jenny Levine. By presenting his personal perspective on the evolution of the Web and developing a vision for the future of libraries and librarians, Abram has created the roadmap of how we can meet the needs of the next generation.

Abram’s article has had repercussions throughout the library profession. He explored the ways that Web 2.0 creates opportunities in the library world. Primarily, these changes will involve library websites, databases, OPACS, Intranets, and portals, allowing users access and communication through their mode of choice. These points of access and modes of communication are what the next generation users expect and demand. Librarian 2.0 will implement these changes by understanding the library users’ work flow and social and content needs. Thankfully, the new library 2.0 environment is one that librarians are, by their very nature, well equipped to learn. If librarians do not learn this environment, the Googles of the world surely will and library users will be served, though perhaps not well, by them.

COLLABORATION, THE KEY TO SUCCESS

The next generation user has unique information needs that are addressed by experienced YA librarians Byczek and Vaillancourt (1998) in their article “Home-work on the Range: Public Librarians Can’t Afford to be Lone Rangers.” The authors state that public librarians need to partner with teachers and media specialists to make the information seeking and research experience of these students a positive and satisfying event. Librarians must respect the teen patron by giving them full attention when students are brave enough to ask for help. When teens are roving aimlessly through the stacks, librarians need to approach them and provide

friendly assistance. The mission of the library as well as reference policies should reflect the ways that librarians will interact and assist teen patrons. Just as with adult users, librarians need to conduct reference interviews to clarify what students need. If the student is unclear what the assignment is about, their questions will be just as unclear. Librarians must take the time to ask about the assignment, what they have already found, when it is due, etc. They must make the research experience positive by ensuring that materials are easily found and that computers are easily accessible as is the ability to print and photocopy and by making sure that the patron does not leave empty handed.

RELEVANCY THROUGH THE COLLECTION

Kathleen Sullivan (2005), librarian and member of the boomer generation, explores the changing information resources in her article "Collection Development for the 'Chip' Generation and Beyond." This article goes beyond who the next generation is, as addressed by Abram and Luther (2004), into the collections and resources that will best meet next generation user needs. Sullivan tells ten expectations that identify quality and format of information sources and address the "self help" library user trait, as well as listing overall satisfaction with the information seeking process. By overcoming fears that libraries and books will cease to exist, she offers solutions that can be implemented over the coming decades to keep libraries relevant. By addressing user expectations of choice, functionality, and flexibility, Sullivan offers sound advice on collection building. Reference services for the future will involve electronic resources even more than today. Over time, users have learned that audio visual and Web sources frequently offer more timely and pertinent information than print resources. As a result, users want to see more full text articles in databases, and they want to be able to search the database easily and quickly to find the information they need.

YA LIBRARIAN = ENDANGERED SPECIES

In a recent study of public library reference and information services available to young adults, Winston and Paone (2001) reveal trends in library reference and information services. They state that young adults comprise 25% of today's library users, and this number will increase. Their article highlights the lack of focus and attention given to young adult services within public libraries. Information needs of young adults include homework, research help, personal information, career and college guidance, reading for fun, and entertainment found through library programs and services. Less than half of the libraries surveyed in New Jersey employed an individual responsible for working with young adults. Ironically, over half of Winston and Paone's (2001) survey respondents stated they believed

teens are more likely to try to find information independently although many felt this group needed the most assistance. Unfortunately, reference policies and procedures often do not match identified user needs. Libraries need to remedy this deficiency by supplying trained staff to help meet the needs of this significant population of library users.

CONCLUSION

The lack of formalized library services and specialized staff for young adults are the leading indicators of an underserved population. The ultimate result in under serving this population is that they will go elsewhere for their information needs and will not gain the multi-literacy skills that libraries are skilled at teaching. Hopefully, change is coming. Within the last few years there are indications in library literature and on the Web that information professionals are starting to transform the ways in which reference and user services are delivered. Campbell (1994) interprets *The Fair Garden and the Swarm of Beasts*, a book written by Margaret Alexander Edwards (1969), and challenges us to constantly strive to lure the "beasts" into the library by providing books, information, and services that young adults need. This may be accomplished by conducting surveys, focus groups, and programs that enable each organization to understand this generation of library users and, more commonly, non-users. Employing young adult librarians, designing physical spaces for young adults, and offering materials and services via multiple formats and channels are also important. Library professionals are beginning to realize they cannot wait for the next generation to come to them. Instead, the library must go to them by creating teen Web sites and by collaborating with youth organizations and schools. Such efforts will "lure" this population into viewing the library as a relevant and vital organization of primary importance in their lives.

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