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Serve your Community:

Give Them a Piece of Your Mind

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Long ago and far away, in the era of card files and date stamps, I had a conversation with my boss, the City Manager, about adding responsibility for planning community classes to my librarian duties. Trying to help me see the light, he said, “You know, the way I look at it, the public library provides access to resources. Right now that access is through books and magazines, cassettes and video tapes, art prints, puppets, reading programs, lectures and materials on microfilm and microfiche. These are all different formats for providing access to information. Why, any book you have in this library could be a door to a new program or a new area of service—so isn’t offering a class on brewing beer just as valid a format as a book on brewing beer?”

Although at the time I recall thinking he might be a bit cracked, I came to see this man as a visionary and a great mentor. As I clarified my own philosophy of library service it was wonderful to have someone challenge me to think outside the box. In my case, that box came to mean library walls. My boss was right. Any part of a library collection can be highlighted as a special program or area of service. It all depends on the effort we make to get out there and identify the needs of the surprisingly different groups that live in the areas we serve—and on whom we depend for library support.

A modern, creative library has boundless opportunities available to tailor responsive, meaningful library service around an intimate knowledge of the concerns, issues, interests and quirks of the public it serves. Closely examining sub-sets of need can yield information on the many “communities” that exist within our service areas. This kind of informed, community-focused service becomes the basis for a symbiotic relationship that can help a community,

and its library, thrive.

As we do that extraordinarily important process of needs assessment in our communities, it is very liberating to remember: library resources may come in any format.

I propose that the way a librarian’s mind processes information, the way we think, may be one of the library’s least marketed and most valuable resources. The creative librarian, willing to step outside the library walls and actively participate in the strategic analysis of community needs and issues, can position the services of the public library to become interwoven with community solutions. When the equation becomes, Library Services = Community Solutions, that also means that Community Solutions = Library Services!

Just think of the qualities we may bring to bear on community issues: librarians are organizers, coordinators and planners. We are skilled at seeing needs on the one hand, resources on the other and matching them up in effective, creative, and often innovative ways. Within the library we call this reference service or information and referral. With a shift in focus to the many, unique communities beyond the library walls, these same skills can be applied towards building bridges between organizations and resources to design effective new programs and service delivery strategies. Instead of just pulling print resources together to answer a question, why not also pull real-life resources together to address real-life community needs?

The Internet has shown us that information may be brought to new consumers and put to new uses by synthesizing resources into an easily accessible and user-friendly format. Just as websites organize information on mortgage loans or travel services from many sources and make it easy to find and use, librarians, with



minds steeped in the philosophy of collaboration, can perform needs assessments in their service areas, make connections between disparate community resources, and bring them together in value-added ways. Whether addressing issues of poverty, community development, health care, literacy or planning for a skate park, the Librarian's Mind can be applied to create interfaces between existing organizations to build capacity for the infrastructure our user-communities need to thrive.

Union County: real life example

Targeting illiteracy has been identified as a critical issue in our rural towns. Developing reading and writing skills is a key strategy out of the poverty that impacts too large a number of our local families. Municipal planning documents cited the need for developing literacy programs and services, yet a full spectrum of literacy programs were already available, tucked into the services of public schools, libraries and social service agencies. Until recently, many of these services were not aware of each other's programs. Why not? Are these programs reaching their audience? Are other programs needed? Are the services effective? Could existing programs and services be more effective if they worked as part of a coordinated effort?

This situation provided an opportunity for libraries in Union County to look outward to the salient issues of the community that supports them and to apply our skills to assemble information, collaborate, partner, share—and support the growth of a new “literacy community”.

The Library District Project for Union County provided organizational support to form the Literacy Alliance of Union County. After the basic efforts to create a structure were put in place this fruitful cross-pollination of expertise has grown like Topsy, improving public awareness of literacy services and enhancing the library's involvement in the fiber of the greater community. None of this required anything beyond applying that basic approach of “resources on the one hand and needs on the other”. The resources we've provided are primarily in the format of librarians' knowledge and skills. How librarians think about information resources may be just as important as the “stuff” within the facility walls or even the facilities themselves.

Libraries are being challenged to redefine their purpose in the 21st century. What makes the library different than a bookstore or the Internet? Why is a public library necessary? The challenges facing public libraries aren't that much different than those facing the local, downtown merchant when the “Big Box” store moves into town. We too must work harder at providing specialized customer service. That means doing an excellent job of assessing public needs and identifying the “communities” we serve. When we discuss the significance of libraries we should remember to emphasize that library resources may come in any format; that those formats may be tailored to meet the needs of unique communities within the areas we serve; and that the most valuable resource may be librarians who are willing to get beyond the library walls and offer the public a piece of their mind. 🌿

