



Contributing Editor
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Joanne is currently reading *The Dream Lover* by Elizabeth Berg.

Best Practices focuses on innovative ideas from libraries nationwide.

The Tipping Point

Library people have an abundance of creative ideas. Sometimes, what seems like the best program or merchandising scheme will fall flat, even though you know that the community wants and needs it. Below are tales of successful turnarounds. These libraries had underperforming materials or programs and discovered that a slight change in presentation made an enormous difference. Suddenly, they had a hit! Read on to learn more about how little things can mean a lot to how your library performs.

Lending Packed Backpacks

FRISCO (TX) PUBLIC LIBRARY

There is magic in clever merchandising and packaging. The Frisco (TX) Public Library (FPL) has created great momentum by lending curated “kits” of topical materials in grab-and-go backpacks. Children are crazy about the clear plastic kits. For adults, the library offers travel kits and technology kits in sturdy canvas. The backpacks are just eye candy to encourage library customers to sample the contents.

FPL is data- and customer-driven. Staff know that 70 percent of their circulation is youth materials, and customer-use surveys indicate that their service population likes to travel, so they have chosen contents that align with the community’s needs. Travel backpacks include a guidebook, a DVD, a laminated list of fiction titles about the destination, and some curated material evocative of the place, such as a cookbook or language tips. The backpacks have an embossed library logo and a luggage tag with an illustration in the style of vintage luggage stickers. They are zip-tied closed and hang from carabiners on a slat wall. The most popular backpacks are Paris, San Antonio, and the Texas Hill country. They also offer storytelling kits for young children. The kits contain four to five picture books, a music CD, and one or two interactive objects, such as a puppet or a puzzle.

Previously, library staff had packaged similar materials in black boxes, but they did not circulate well. Once the clear plastic backpacks were introduced, the library couldn’t keep them on the shelves. “They have curiosity built into them,” said Jennifer Cummings, FPL youth services manager. The kits are popular with parents and caregivers, as well as with grandparents who have young visitors. “We’re putting the literacy tools in the hands of families,” she said.¹

For school-aged children, FPL has STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) backpacks with a few books, a DVD, an interactive learning object (a human body apron with stick-on organs, for instance) a write-on/wipe off quiz, and suggested experiments on the STEM topic. Most cutting-edge are the technology kits for older students and adults. These follow the maker movement and are intended to encourage tinkering at home. Examples are Arduino Kits of electronic components to facilitate creativity and invention. FPL Adult Services Manager Thomas Finley said the library is seeking state funding to expand the number of available backpacks. Assistant Director of Public Services Mayra Diaz said FPL is committed to evaluation and measuring the outcomes by putting surveys into the backpacks

to inform future development. For further information, email Diaz at mdiaz@frisco-texas.gov.

Library Literacy for ESL Learners

WHITEHALL (PA) PUBLIC LIBRARY

Whitehall (PA) Public Library (WPL) serves an unusual demographic. Located in suburban Pittsburgh, WPL serves a population of 14,000 middle- and upper-class residents with the exception of 7-8 percent of the town who are refugees from Nepal and Bhutan. The newcomers were resettled into a very small physical area after having lived in refugee camps for many years. The population is high need, in terms of library services. Most of the adults are not literate in their own language. English proficiency is very low.

While the library and its staff worked hard and long to bring literacy opportunities to the target population, they simply could not interest them in coming to the library. English as a second language (ESL) classes and daycare took place within the refugees' apartment block, which only added to their insular tendencies. When Paula Kelly became the WPL library director, she also became a literacy tutor and had the opportunity to get to know the community. She realized that they had absolutely no concept of what the public library was, or what it could do for them. "No wonder they are not coming to the library when library means absolutely nothing to them," Kelly said.

Her next outreach effort was to bring the library's LEARN bus to the apartment block where most of the refugees live. No one came. Kelly and colleague librarian/literacy tutor, Denise Ignasky, went back to the library and wrote library lesson plans for their ESL learners that were very visual and used very simple language ("What is a library?" "A library is free, a library is welcoming." "I am going to the library. The library is fun."). They created ESL worksheets that were library-related. "We spent two weeks doing a show-and-tell and brought library materials into their

classroom," said Kelly. Vocabulary words included "library card" and "borrow." This population did not have a cultural context for "borrowing." It was a new idea for them. The next month, when the library bus came to the apartment block, there were 200 people standing in line!

The long-term result is a loyal customer base of forty to eighty for their monthly bus evenings. Several times a year, the library bus has special events. They go to borough council meetings. Government and civics is a big interest for the group, some of whom are on their way toward citizenship. The library partners with the Greater Pittsburgh Literacy Council. They have citizenship classes in the library and ESL conversation groups. Some of the ESL learners are transitioning into home ownership, which is a very big leap. Several have become citizens. They are fierce library advocates. Because they are now comfortable in the library and accustomed to seeing Kelly and her staff, they are more confident about asking for specific materials to meet their needs. "Two years ago, they would not have asked for anything," Kelly said. The lesson learned was to really get to know your target population. "There was a disconnect between the library and the refugees. You just can't hang a sign on the door and expect them to come," she said.² To find out more, email Kelly at kellyp@einetwork.net.


TeenZone Volunteers

OAKLAND (CA) PUBLIC LIBRARY

Brian Boies, TeenZone librarian at Oakland (CA) Public Library (OPL), has realized a highly elusive goal: engaged teens who plan and execute a great, well-attended program for their peers every day. And there is a long list of teens waiting for the privilege to volunteer. OPL's TeenZone has a lot to offer, with computers, gaming, graphic novels, and space to exhibit teens' own art work. However, that age group is notoriously hard to engage and even harder to direct. Boies has approximately thirty active volunteers

per week. They assist in programs such as video-gaming and button-making crafts. He says the secret is to make it easy for the teen volunteers to succeed.

When he started, he had only two volunteers. He started to build it out by offering special privileges: running the video-gaming programs, providing snacks for the volunteers, and being given access to the staff room. OPL views the TeenZone volunteer program as a loose job-training program. To that end, a list of responsibilities was developed. Boies said you have to be direct about what the expectations are and what the volunteers' tasks are. They need to ask questions. They need to be responsible about coming when they are expected and calling if they cannot make it in. They have to understand the way they set up the games, how to set up the projector. He finds communicating with them to be absolutely essential: they need the feedback to do better. Volunteer turnover is extremely low and there is a waiting list of at least twenty at all times.

TeenZone volunteers are between the ages of fourteen and eighteen and must have parental permission. They volunteer for two two-hour shifts each week. They are not compensated except in snack food. It is also a potential pathway into the library's Ready-Set-Connect program, a paid internship. What keeps them coming back? "It's fun. I encourage people to relax and have fun. It's quasi-work training and I write letters of recommendations all the time for colleges and scholarships," Boies said.³ To find out more about what inspires teens in Oakland, email Boies at bboies@oaklandlibrary.org. 

References

1. Jennifer Cummings, Thomas Finley, and Mayra Diaz, phone interview with the author, Mar. 2, 2015.
2. Paula Kelly, phone interview with the author, Mar. 6, 2015.
3. Brian Boies, phone interview with the author, Dec. 20, 2014.

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