

Making the Library Visible to the Business and Nonprofit Communities

By: Jason Hatton, Denise Wirrig, and Dave Miller

How does a library let the local business and nonprofit communities know that we are here to help them? That was the challenge our director placed before the Reference Department at the Bartholomew County Public Library last year. At first, we were floundering, sputtering, and having few successes as we struggled to become an important resource to the business community, but we now feel that we are on the right path, thanks to the support of community organizations and local businesses.

Since we have a large reference staff, we realized that a smaller group of individuals would be needed to create the vision for business outreach and carry out the majority of the work. Three reference librarians stepped forth to create the Business Team. Dave Miller was already in charge of selecting business, career, and nonprofit books for the library collection. Jason Hatton had an interest in nonprofit agencies and also had several connections in the community with these organizations. Denise Wirrig, the team leader, had a background in the computer software industry, enjoyed new challenges, and was eager to see the library take a more proactive attitude towards assisting these groups.

LIBRARIES MEAN BUSINESS

With our team assembled, we were excited to begin our work. However, we still had no idea where to start. Luckily about this time, INCOLSA was piloting its "Libraries Mean Business" sessions to showcase INSPIRE resources to the same communities we were targeting. Dave and Denise took the opportunity to go to all three sessions that were offered as part of this program. They attended Resources for Business Development, Nonprofit Development, and Career Planning.

Pleased with what they had seen at these sessions, the team saw great potential for this type of program in Bartholomew County as well. However, as this was just a pilot program, we had to figure out a way to run the program ourselves. So, each member took one session topic and crafted a presentation that was filled with information.

Designing the presentations was immensely helpful, as it allowed each of us to get a better grasp on beneficial resources that our library could already access. Not only were we touting our books, journals, and INSPIRE, but we also were highlighting our newest database- Reference USA. It was purchased especially so that we could increase our ability to target the business communities. We felt it was very important to have a resource that would really wow the businesses and nonprofits. (Our presentations are in the INSPIRE Clearinghouse- <http://www.inspire.net/bcpl.html>)

After marketing the sessions through our website, flyers, and personal invitations, we held our three programs. However, turnout was not quite what we expected. One person showed up for the career portion, three for business, and 12 for nonprofits. We were encouraged with the nonprofit attendance, but were very disappointed with the business and career turnout.

GO WHERE THE USERS ARE

At our wrap-up meeting, we finally had our epiphany. Why should we expect the businesses to come to us? They have not done it for the past 100 years, so why should

they start now? Instead, we needed to go to them. We need to start networking and being a very visible presence in their community. We need to show them that the library is not just for beach reads and children's programs. In short, we needed to reintroduce ourselves and recreate the image of the library.

The obvious question was how we would accomplish this goal. We decided to put ourselves in the mindset of any new business. How do they get started? How do they get help? The answer for us was to join and become involved in the local Chamber of Commerce, as they exist to help businesses succeed.

The team decided that Denise would be our Chamber representative and start attending all the programs and events that the Chamber had to offer. This involved several networking events and other types of programming. Through this, she had several people start to mentor her and offer advice as well as introduce her to other Chamber members. As Denise has such an extroverted personality, she used it to her advantage to start changing the image of the traditional librarian.

Around this time, the Chamber started undergoing a major reorganization to change how they operated and conducted programming. Thankfully the library was there and able to get in on the ground level of this reorganization. Part of this change was to start having a business book discussion once a quarter. Because the library was represented at Chamber meetings, Denise was selected to head this group. If this would have occurred three months prior, the library would not have had any influence or impact on what is an essential library service. We viewed this as a huge victory, and this only proved our point that we needed to continue to focus our attentions on gaining visibility within the business community.

VISIBILITY, CREDIBILITY, PROFITABILITY

One business tip we learned early on is that the key to creating more users is to really build on word of mouth marketing as that is how people most often decide whether to attend an event or use a service. They want to know that someone else has had a positive experience before attempting it themselves. The key to increasing our word of mouth marketing was to build relationships with those people that we met through the Chamber and other networking events. Those people would then tell others, who told others, etc. It follows a pattern in business known as visibility, credibility, and profitability.

There is a continuum that the relationships you build should follow, with the ultimate outcome, in the case of libraries, of having more library users.

Our first step to increase visibility was to just continue doing what Denise had started. We would attend every Chamber event we could. We would be at all the local nonprofits' annual meetings. Anywhere there was a large group of potential users, we would try to be there.

One of our biggest events we attended was the Business to Business Expo sponsored by the Chamber in the fall of 2006. This was an excellent opportunity to talk to many businesses and ask them how we could help. We worked the floor, talking to the various exhibitors and handing out brochures and business cards.

This leads to another important lesson we learned: if you are going to co-exist with businesses, you have to be on the same playing field. This means that you need

business cards, professional looking materials, and a general attitude that you are serious about being there and getting to know them and their needs.

CREATING PARTNERSHIPS

We also have had some wonderful partnerships come out of this increased visibility. SCORE, which is a nationwide nonprofit organization of retired executives who help people start businesses, refers many people to us for materials and information after talking to them. In return we refer many people to them [for practical advice on business startup](#). They also give many of their publications to us to hand out to those needing help starting a business.

Several public programs have been born out of our outside partnerships. For example, a local life coach has done four programs talking about setting goals and career development. Also, a local business coach has done programs on time management.

Soon we will be partnering with the local senior center to teach basic computer classes to their clientele. These classes will be in addition to the computer classes that we teach at our facilities. We are also talking about other ways in which we can contribute to the organization as they get ready to move into a new facility within the next two years.

We have also been in contact with several United Way partner agencies asking for title suggestions for our collection that would most benefit their clients. We plan to purchase the materials and create bibliographies that they could distribute.

MOVING FORWARD

Even though we are only a little over a year into our business outreach plan, we feel very positive about the outcomes we have achieved. The library's visibility with the business community has increased immensely, and the "buzz" about us is very good.

We plan on continuing our push towards being a more visible library and working on nurturing those relationships that we have made as well as creating new ones.

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