



FOSTERING CREATIVE COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

CASE STUDIES

Case Study 3: Akron–Summit County Public Library

Short Story Dispenser Offer Joy of Reading in Akron–Summit County



The Akron–Summit County Public Library was one of four public libraries to pilot an unusual project called Fostering Creative Community Connections, a partnership between the Public Library Association (PLA) and French publisher Short Édition, whose ingenious Short Story Dispenser was already a success in France. The Short Story Dispenser, a freestanding machine that produces short stories at the touch of a button, was placed in unexpected Akron locations, including a public transportation hub. The project was funded by the Knight Foundation.

Stories originated from Short Édition’s collection of 80,000 one-, three- and five-minute stories and was increased to include local stories. All libraries involved call the project a success, resulting in stronger partnerships, broadened community engagement, and a renewed understanding of the value of the public library by their communities.

When someone from the library visits the Short Story Dispenser located at the Akron Metro RTA Transit Hub, it’s not uncommon for a crowd to form. “When staff stops there to replace paper, kids start dancing around the machine and adults come up to say, ‘thank you for this service’,” says Pam Hickson–Stevenson, director of the Akron–Summit County Public Library (Akron, OH).

She talks a bit about the people who travel there, often reliant on public transportation to take them on long commutes to and from work, and a socio–economic disparity that becomes apparent in a place like the Transit Hub. “In a smaller, Midwest city like Akron, we are so car–intensive. Many of the people are riding the bus because they can’t afford a car. There is a disparity between people who take public transit and those who come to the library in cars.” Short Story Dispenser allows the library to meet this hard–to–reach segment of the population where they are—literally.

“The fact that the library could provide three minutes of escape through reading—where you didn’t have to check anything out, or worry about getting it back, you didn’t have a special electronic device to read it. It was on a piece of paper. [The idea that] you could keep it, you could share it, or you could throw it away was a great way of reinforcing the importance of the joy of reading in a way that required so little of the people who used it.” Branding at the footer of the story also reinforces the connection to the Akron–Summit County Public Library.

>> Strategic Locations

The Short Story Dispenser at the Transit Hub has the highest use of the three strategically deployed in busy locations, including the Akron–Canton Airport, and the Akron Children’s Hospital. “Our plans to place the Dispensers in high–traffic locations worked well,” says Hickson–Stevenson. “The airport location has also generated unexpected excitement.”

“Within the first 12 to 18 months of deployment, staff would find random tweets and posts on social media that showed a photo of the Short Story Dispenser and said things like ‘One of the highlights of my business travel is printing out one of these short stories at the airport.’”

The Short Story Dispenser proved an easy collaboration between the library and the airport. The two had yet to find a project that was mutually beneficial, but Hickson–Stevenson said the will to partner was there. “Akron is a very collaborative community. The Short Story Dispensers were just another example of ways that organizations work together here to support organizations and our communities.”

Despite a positive ribbon–cutting event at the Akron’s Children’s Hospital that generated press attention, use was not as robust as hoped in this location, possibly due to its placement in a fast–paced outpatient surgery area where there wasn’t much waiting time for the young patients. “The printed stories just did not have the same impact as a really great picture book with this particular audience,” Hickson–Stevenson stated.

In addition, the collection of stories available reflected a more European sensibility. “It wasn’t a significant challenge but certainly, an adjustment was needed, “ says Hickson–Stevenson, “and an understanding that there are differences between French and American tastes and standards in subject matter.” Although the second issue was resolved, the library is still considering moving to a location with a potential for higher usage.

>> Hindsight

Overall, Hickson–Stevenson feels that the project was a success, citing user engagement, strengthened community partnerships, and media attention as the highlights. A large team worked on initial implementation of the Short Story Dispensers, including Hickson–Stevenson, a marketing director, and the IT department, which set up and tested machines. Once deployed, just a few staff members work to maintain the paper supply and do occasional troubleshooting, for a total of one to two hours weekly, with most activity at the Transit Hub.

That said, Hickson–Stevenson said that staff capacity was a challenge. “I was guilty of not delegating this project,” she admits. Designating a single point person to shepherd and coordinate the project will be helpful going forward. She is already considering new partnerships with city offices, and has re–signed with Short Édition. “But in this COVID world,” she adds, “finding places where people gather is more challenging. One possibility is grocery stores.”

>> Advice for Libraries

“Initial outlay could be considerable,” notes Hickson–Stevenson, “particularly for smaller libraries. It’s probably a good candidate for a foundation or for local benefactors. We were very fortunate that Akron was the original Knight Community and were able to apply for the grant. The initial outlay for the piece of equipment could lend itself to really good publicity for a funder. It’s fun and really promotes reading. The bigger challenge would be ongoing expenses.” She cites paper costs, especially for well–used machines, as well as overhead, which consists of electricity and a cellular connection.

“If libraries have the money or can find someone to fund it, go for it,” says Hickson–Stevenson. “It’s been a quirky and surprising thing that people in Akron have discovered. It adds to the surprised reaction that people have about so many things we do. There is such delight that people experience when learning something new, especially about an organization that they might not know very much about.”

Funded by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, through a grant from the Public Library Association (PLA), Fostering Creative Community Connections pilot project supported four libraries in Knight Foundation Communities to bring short stories to unexpected places via the Short Story Dispenser. For more information on Knight Communities, visit <https://knightfoundation.org/programs/communities/>.

French publisher Short Édition with the Public Library Association partnered to install machines in libraries in Knight Communities and to produce a nationwide short story contest whose winners were added to the Short Édition catalog in selected machines. For more information, visit <https://short-edition.com/en/>.

The project aimed to increase public awareness for libraries, while renewing interest in literacy and literature, and increasing civic engagement through community outreach, partnerships and empowerment of emerging literary voices.

The Akron–Summit County Public Library provides resources for learning and leisure, information services, meeting spaces, and programs for all ages that support, improve, and enrich individual, family, and community life.

