



FOSTERING CREATIVE COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

CASE STUDIES

Case Study 2: Richland Library

Short Story Dispenser Sets Stories Free in Richland Communities



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Columbia South Carolina's Richland (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 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 Richland County locations, including Mast General Store, a popular retail outlet. 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 the information [about Short Story Dispensers] first came out and before the PLA grant opportunity, I remember posting on my personal social network, saying ‘wouldn't it be awesome to do this?’ A little over a year later, here we are. It's almost too good to be true,” said Tony Tallent, former Chief Program and Innovation Officer at [Richland Library](#) (Columbia, SC). He may be Short Story Dispenser's number one fan—both his enthusiasm and his creative strategies for integrating Short Story Dispensers into Columbia have proved fruitful. In their initial year, more than 34,000 stories were generated, an average of 93 per day.

“From the get-go, we proposed that we'd use the Short Story Dispensers throughout the whole community. We had two anchor sites, including the Columbia Museum of Art and Drip on Main, a popular coffee café downtown.” A third Short Story Dispenser “roams” to various locations around town including the delightful boutique hotel, Hotel Trundle, and a retail outlet, The Mast General Store. Although neither were in the original plan, both have become great partners in this endeavor. “We put one in the Mast

General Store, which is one of the busiest stores in downtown Columbia,” says Tallent. “It’s a fun, old fashioned store, complete with squeaky wooden floors and to discover an incredible piece of technology there has been a great surprise to customers.”

>> Extra Steps Pay Off

Although Tallent did not anticipate that the community would take such a quick interest in the project, under his direction, the Richland team took some extra steps that may have generated the excitement.

“We have a microsite up and running on our website that mirrors everything available on the Short Story Dispensers themselves.” This online presence provides constant access to the Short Story Dispenser content. “It translates wonderfully onto your smartphone, so it’s like having 100,000 stories on in your pocket.

“Another thing I did early on was create a simple feedback board with sticky notes at the library, stating ‘Tell us what you think about the Short Story Dispenser!’ We received a lot of feedback, so I started answering people’s questions on a different colored note. Some of the questions were about the machine itself: how does it work? doesn’t it use a lot of ink? We could answer questions about the integrity of the machine and it really helped us understand the interests people had in this inventive offering.”

As part of the grant application to PLA, Tallent created a campaign called Set Stories Free. “We encouraged anyone who encountered a dispenser to take a photo of themselves, the machine, or their story, and put it on social media with the hashtag, #setstoriesfree. Tallent says the campaign became an even better way for Richland Library to promote and talk about this initiative. “Just doing a search for the hashtag on social media showed us that the project has gotten a lot of love and wonderful feedback.” The Set Stories Free campaign was so successful that PLA and Short Édition adopted it for its national story writing contest.

Richland Library now has local organizations lining up to host Short Story Dispensers, from a family health clinic to a dentist office. The waiting list has a wide range, says Tallent, noting that the local transit hub ordered one independently after being inspired by the library’s Dispensers. “The Short Story Dispensers offer us a chance for more experimentation. We are able to offer library service in a new way, almost as if we are showing up in unusual places.” Unfortunately, deployment was paused with the COVID outbreak.

>> Going “Touch-Free”

COVID-19 has presented a number of challenges and reduced services for libraries. Fortunately, Short Édition has devised new “Touch-Free Consoles” that are being implemented in all of the pilot libraries, including Richland.

“We’re back up and running with two of the dispensers thanks to the touch-free consoles,” says Tallent. “You essentially pop the top off and replace it with the new touch-free one. Now, you simply wave your hand over it and a story dispenses.”

Short Édition also quickly responded to recent social unrest through a writing contest called “America: Color it in,” where writers were asked to submit works dealing with social equity. They’ve also created a catalog of materials that represent the African-American experience, for and about African-Americans. “Short Édition has responded so quickly to needs. The idea for the contest came out of a check-in meeting. I asked if they could do this, and within a week they had a date for the contest and for the catalog. What remarkable service!”

>> Behind the Glass

Tallent says he has received calls from libraries across the country regarding the Story Dispensers. “They were very curious and they thought they’d be more complicated,” he explains. “It’s probably the least complicated, yet eloquent system of technology that I’ve worked with. It doesn’t take a lot of upkeep. It uses thermal printing so there’s no ink. It doesn’t require any wiring except a standard electrical plug. It prints anywhere from 400-600 stories before you need to replace the paper...and the paper is sustainably sourced.”

“The dashboard allows up-to-the-second details for activity on each dispenser. You can change out story genres via the dashboard, and program the machines to complement library programming. For example, for Women’s History Month, we selected to dispense stories by female authors only...you can help it complement library programming.”

Tallent served as project lead and wrote the initial grant. A small team was involved, including the marketing director and programming staff, all of whom functioned as an advisory team. He suggests that libraries have a point person and he says, “it’s smart to have a handful of staff who know how it works and also get the spirit of it.” An FAQ was created to help keep staff informed “It’s so easy to teach,” he adds. “Basically, all you need to know is how to load the paper. You plug it in and about three minutes later, it’s ready to go.”

In addition, an open lab was created where both staff and customers could learn about the dispensers and try them. “We did this and found it was a clever and fun way to inform. People are really interested in what’s behind the glass, so to speak.”

Once a Short Story Dispenser reaches a host location, partners maintain the machines. “We did training sessions with the key people at the locations, so they’d understand how to maintain it and share information about the initiative,” says Tallent. He notes a minor downside with this approach: “When you’re working with a retailer, sometimes there is staff turnover, so the person onsite would not realize what was going on, if the machine was out of paper or offline. So, we’d call and remind them. It was no real hassle, though created some brief downtime for customer use. It’s important to establish your key point people on the partner side.”

Overall, Tallent is beyond pleased with the initiative, which brings together both traditional concepts and innovative approaches to delivery. “With Short Story Dispensers, we are at a crossroads between service delivery, marketing, and a new type of outreach. They hit the sweet spot with it. All around it’s been a great experience.”

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 Richland Public Library’s mission is to inform, empower and enrich the community.

