

Public Libraries Briefcase

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Building Business Connections: Outreach 101

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The purpose of a library's business collection and services is to be responsive to the needs of its business community. Establishing connections with the business community to insure that the collection is responsive to the needs of its business community should be part of the Library's mission.

Collections that consist of an array of specialized resources and services must be based on an understanding of the needs of the business community. However, the library cannot be considered responsive to its community's needs unless these resources are both widely known and fully used.

Suggestions on how to market your library and its resources are available from many sources. Public Libraries Briefcase published "Marketing Your Library's Business Collection", No. 10, 4th Quarter 2004, by Jennifer Bernardelli. With this information in mind you might want to take one more step to reach your customers.

Several years ago the Village of Arlington Heights, Illinois redeveloped its Central Business District with an eye to establishing a stronger business environment.

It was around this time that the Library was reevaluating its mission and goals. The mission was simply stated as *Providing information, reading enjoyment and a sense of community.*

Ten goals developed from this statement and one of them was that *Members of the local business community will have access to an array of specialized library resources and assistance in using these resources in support of their businesses.*

This opened up the flood gates to a wealth of ideas. The Library had already developed a Business Collection with an eye towards the large base of small businesses in the community. Its resources and programming already reflected a good understanding of the business community and fit in nicely with the new mission and goals but we needed to better market the resources and services better.

Our established marketing program consisted of working with the local Chamber of Commerce, advertising in newspapers, newsletters, brochures, space on the Library's website, workshops and a maintaining a dedicated Business Room.

However, approaching marketing from an information management and delivery perspective helped us recognize the necessity of aggressively marketing our message by showing our clients what is possible when they combine our resources with their resourcefulness. We had the tools to enable our customers to virtually reinvent themselves and their future; we simply needed to make our tools known and available. In talking to

individual businesses it became clear that they do not have a lot of time to visit the library for programs or research.

Background

The Village of Arlington Heights had a population of over 75,000 people in the year 2000 and approximately 4,299 businesses. Two thousand, three hundred and eighty-three of these businesses had 1-4 employees and 3,275 had 1-9 employees.

Along with one of my colleagues, Rosalie Bork, we developed a marketing campaign and submitted a proposal to send a liaison team to local area small businesses to introduce them to the print and computerized resources they need on a daily basis. These resources included demographic information, financial ratios, and company background information and opportunities to utilize our staff of reference librarians.

This Business Outreach Plan went through many revisions. Our target market, goal and objective had to be revised to be reasonable, doable and affordable.

We were given six months to complete this project, three months for visiting the businesses and three months for follow-up. Considering this time limit and our regular job responsibilities, we decided on the following proposal:

Business Outreach Plan

Target Market - 50 businesses mostly in our Central Business District, which is an 8-block area of downtown Arlington Heights. We knew that many of the businesses would not be available for personal visits, so some would have to be contacted by telephone.

Goal - To make a personal connection with the small business community to facilitate fuller usage of our resources.

Objective - The liaison team will visit the targeted businesses in order to network and introduce the library's services and partnering opportunities through handouts and bibliographies specifically customized for small businesses.

Measurement - Record and measure progress through monthly statistics which included the number of businesses contacted for appointments, the number of appointments actually made. Positive and negative response factors would be noted.

Projected Outcome - Increase the Library's visibility in the small business community. Strengthen connections and find out what their informational needs are and find creative ways to fulfill them with library resources.

Budget - To be approved by our supervisor for staff time and additional material needed such as handouts and promotional giveaways.

We then prepared an Action Plan to accompany our proposal. We needed the "hook" and were charged to come up with ideas that we could sell to our customers, a basic nuts and bolts sales pitch which we could present in 15 - 20 minutes. We came up with several ideas.

- Databases which can find articles on business and economic topics, provide Interlibrary Loan services for these articles not available in full-text, and create business lists. This was an easy sales pitch as we just needed to expand on the possibilities that our existing databases already provided.

- Customized training and orientation for local area businesses to teach research techniques for developing sales leads, company research, demographic research, and use of databases and the Internet at the place of business or in the library.
- Direct requests to the Business Librarian; we would make sure we had business cards for our visits.
- Selection of books on a business topic for check-out. You often hear people at a business expo saying that they just love the library and are there often to get DVDs and books for their kids, but business people do not often associate the library with information they could use for their business.

The Action Plan resulted in the following steps.

- Visit 50 businesses.
- Call each business to introduce yourself and explain that they have been selected to participate in a new business service pilot project in the Library. Offer a coupon worth three hours of personal business service. This service could include personal demonstrations of the Library's databases, research on a business topic more detailed than our regular ready reference would provide, the printing of lists or articles, or selecting materials for check out.
- Each business visited will be given a packet of material including: "It's Good Business to Use the Library" brochure; letter explaining the Library's Business Card; list of databases available by remote access; coupon for personal business research; letter opener with a special telephone number set-up just for this project; notepad with selected business resources listed.
- Statistics will be collected. Since this project was a new initiative with no precedent the parameters were set without knowing the challenges and difficulties that would be encountered. As it developed, the quantitative factors proved to be less important than the qualitative results.

Overview of the Project

Each initial telephone call involved researching and selecting a business, gathering preliminary ideas and targeted services to discuss in the initial call; and attempting to contact and arrange a visit. Some basic research into the business is critical to a successful conversation.

The next steps include the on-site visit, a follow-up "Thank You" letter personalized to the needs of the customer, delivery of requested research materials or further consultation.

Forty-five telephone calls were made, five messages were left without return calls, some businesses were not interested in our visit, some did not have answering machines and one called back to cancel the appointment. Thirty-two visits were eventually made. We also made some cold calls as we walked from one appointment to another.

Results of Project

We received requests for 25 articles from one chiropractor and he continued to request services. We researched 23 artists for a store's catalog for national distribution and found historical weather reports for a lawyer. Several businesses requested a business card; we provided several demonstrations of some of our databases and also created a mailing list for one business. Many of the businesses identified themselves as a result of our program when they called the library with basic reference questions such as spelling and grammar for business communications. A restaurant even called in for a recipe!

Complications and Challenges

This project took more time than had been expected when we made the initial telephone call and occasionally we had extra time in between the appointments. This is when we made our cold calls. Often the visit took

longer than 20 minutes. This was good if the business owner was really interested and asked questions. There was difficulty in scheduling appointments as the time of the appointment did not coincide with regular library hours. Before work hours often had to be arranged.

Recommendations for future business outreach activities

- Develop an "identity" for a Business Program. This program would include services and resources identified as the Business Resource Center.
- Create a Business Resource Center link from the library's home page with information available from the library and the outside business world. This link will include subject guides of the Library's print resources, electronic databases, and suggested internet sites, business programs sponsored both by the library and other organizations, such as the Chamber of Commerce.
- Develop the Business Room to include selected newspapers, magazines and newsletters.
- Provide demonstrations of the library's resources, print and electronic, to local area businesses. These demonstrations can be provided at the business itself or in the library.
- Send out letters to targeted industry-specific businesses, e.g. Real Estate offices or CPA's explaining the library's resources which could be of value to them.
- E-mail news releases to businesses announcing new acquired materials, programs in the Library and other news of business significance.

Summary

The main result of this project was that we now had a better understanding of the small businesses in our community. We learned business owners do not have copious time for attending business programs or even coming into the library and we had to fashion better ways for them to utilize the library's resources and services.

I have found that often I can just drop in on a business, introduce myself and give my three minute elevator speech. A pad of post-its with the library's telephone number, website and a simple "Got a Question, Ask a Librarian" and my business card is all I need for a nice brief introduction. Often these businesses have a computer at their counter and I can give a short demonstration such as creating a mailing list with Reference USA. This style of outreach seems to be an effective way of building connections with our business community and helps us shape the collections and services of the library to be responsive to these patrons.

It is important to design a Business Outreach Plan based on the nature of businesses in your community which may be quite different from what we encountered with primarily small businesses. The results of your plan may suggest other approaches to match the "personality" of your business community.

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