

## Public Libraries Briefcase

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# 2018 NJLibsGrowBiz Summit: Building Business Outreach and Services from the Ground Up

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In New Jersey, there is a constant refrain in the corporate and political realms about making the state "business friendly." When they say this, they are talking about corporate taxes, the state's workforce, financial incentives, regulations, reporting, and myriad other topics. Maybe they should also think about libraries.

The New Jersey State Library has prioritized business outreach and services throughout the state for over a decade. Through contracts for statewide database access to business resources and a dedicated consultant to work with public libraries, the State Library has leveraged its assets to support New Jersey's business community and has attempted to communicate this to key business stakeholders.

When I was hired in March 2016 as the Consultant for Small Business Development and Technology, I had a strong framework from previous project managers to build upon and refine. However, coming from a background of working with nonprofits, there was a steep learning curve for working with businesses and entrepreneurs. If this was the case for me, I realized other librarians may be intimidated by business topics as well.

New Jersey is home to several public libraries with outstanding staff who are passionate about business services and have garnered reputations for adding value to the business community. These librarians, including Cathy DeBerry at Somerset County Library System, Joan Divor of Burlington County Library System, Karen Parry at East Brunswick Public Library, and Nancy Polhamus at Gloucester County Library System, are exceptionally generous with sharing their best practices with the broader public library community.

Even so, professional development and training for business services in New Jersey has been limited. The Reference Section of the New Jersey Library Association sponsors programs on business topics at the NJLA Annual Conference and Adult Services Forum periodically. Other opportunities arise through ALA and PLA, but there was no network of support for public business librarians in New Jersey.

At the same time that the gap in professional development and support became clear, I also found that business organizations, particularly nonprofits supporting businesses, want to work with

libraries. At the most basic level, public libraries provide information and space—both are valuable to potential partners. For example, Taxation University, the training and outreach unit of the New Jersey Division of Taxation, was able to increase the number of business workshops they offered in 2017 by over 500% by partnering with public libraries.

While there are many opportunities for partnerships, I discovered that public libraries had varying degrees of success when attempting to leverage them for future benefits. For example, some libraries might view a SCORE event as an outside organization using library space. Others might seize the chance for collaboration—marketing business databases and services as well as upcoming events to attendees and organizers. The difference came down to which librarians saw the bigger picture and fully understood the value that the library brings to business as well as business brings to libraries.

Eventually, I formulated guiding principles to direct how I saw my role at the New Jersey State Library, both in terms of the value I could bring to public libraries and the ways I could connect to business organizations, business owners, and governmental entities:

- Strong and engaged libraries are reflections of communities where people want to live and work
- Libraries are investments in and for members of the community
- Community economic development is a library issue
- Business services at public libraries promote social equity, including livable wages and financial security for community members

While these are not radical ideas, they are important points that would interest most potential partners and key stakeholders, not to mention librarians who may question what they have to offer.

In order to address these various issues in New Jersey, I developed an approach that worked at two main levels. First, to strengthen the public libraries already making great strides in business outreach and services, I assembled the NJLibsGrowBiz Steering Committee. The 15 members of the committee would become my advisors in terms of planning how the New Jersey State Library could support the business community through libraries. In addition, the group could share ideas and best practices with each other to increase their skill set. Second, I began planning the 2018 NJLibsGrowBiz Summit, an event designed to educate and inspire librarians to connect with their business communities, no matter their experience and comfort level with business outreach and reference. Through this approach, I aimed to “lift every boat” in the state while utilizing the existing knowledge base to create a community of practice.

Planning for the NJLibsGrowBiz Summit began in June 2017, and committee members were involved throughout the process, with ideas and suggestions as well as by volunteering to lead breakout sessions. We chose Barbara Alvarez, author of *Embedded Business Librarianship for the Public Librarian*, as the keynote speaker because her message resonated with the group.

The main message from the New Jersey State Library’s 2018 NJLibsGrowBiz Summit could be summed up in one word: listen.

The Summit, held on May 9, 2018 at the Monmouth County Library Headquarters in Manalapan, NJ featured presentations from a variety of professionals, including academic librarians, public librarians, representatives from business support organizations, and microlenders. However, they agreed that to meet the needs of 21st century businesses and entrepreneurs, librarians need to listen for those needs rather than guess what they may be.

This event was intended to bring focus to the important role of libraries supporting businesses and entrepreneurs in their communities. Often, the needs of businesses can be intimidating to library staff members who do not feel they have the experience or expertise to offer assistance. Each aspect of the summit, from the keynote to the breakout sessions and partner tables, was designed to empower attendees and increase their skill set to better reach their business communities.

The day began with a keynote by Barbara Alvarez, author of *Embedded Business Librarianship for the Public Librarian*. The points she made were echoed throughout the day during breakout sessions, but focused on how librarians are more than qualified to assist businesses, no matter their skill level.

- True embedded librarianship develops over time and requires continued effort
- Outreach presentations should not be the extent of communication to businesses
- Librarians are entrepreneurs in their organization and should view businesses services through that lens
- The rewards of embedded librarianship can be significant

Participants then attended breakout sessions led by volunteers from the NJLibsGrowBiz Steering Committee. Each program slot included a session that was more “basic” for the beginner and one that could be considered more “advanced.” Topics included business reference, outreach, and working with nonprofits.

During breaks and lunch, attendees were encouraged to visit tables where representatives from organizations that support businesses could talk about their services and opportunities for partnership. The other groups that participated were:

- UCEDC, an economic development corporation with a contract from the New Jersey Economic Development Authority to provide entrepreneurship and business training throughout New Jersey
- Taxation University, New Jersey Division of Taxation
- New Jersey Small Business Development Center Brookdale Community College
- Small Business Administration
- Monmouth SCORE
- NJIT-PTAC

InfoGroup also sent a representative to promote Reference USA, one of the statewide databases available through the New Jersey State Library. Reference USA provides detailed, current directory information on businesses, residents, and healthcare providers in the U.S. and Canada for market and prospect research. It is a valuable tool for entrepreneurs and businesses at every level and provides the backbone of statewide library services for businesses in New Jersey.

The Summit ended with an interactive session led by Caitlin Seifritz and Gillian Robbins from the Business Resource and Innovation Center at the Free Library of Philadelphia. They discussed the business model canvas as a way for libraries to develop their business services to the public. For librarians unfamiliar with business plans, the business model canvas also frames the process in a way that is easy to understand and creates actionable next steps.

Since the response to the event was positive, I will continue exploring new opportunities for professional development, networking, and skill building in these areas. The NJLibsGrowBiz Steering Committee has new members after several librarians expressed interest in becoming active with the group. For the next year, the Committee will look at statewide marketing templates to assist libraries with promotion, create business guides for libraries on the New Jersey State Library

website, and plan a business-focused program for the New Jersey Library Association Annual Conference. I am looking ahead to another Summit in 2020 with speakers from the business community to share their needs directly with librarians, but the design of the event will be based upon suggestions from the Committee.

In addition to the reasons I mentioned earlier, I also selfishly designed the Summit and Committee to assist me in my work: when I meet with government officials and business stakeholders at the state level, I want to confidently refer them to their local public library. I want to know that they can then refer their constituents, clients, friends, and family to the library and know for sure that if they go to the reference desk for business resources, they will be satisfied with the results. Of course, with over 400 library locations in New Jersey, and such an array of communities with their own needs, I know not every public library will be able to answer business questions or provide outreach at the same level. But when the debate continues about whether New Jersey is “business friendly,” in terms of libraries, the response should be a resounding yes.