

Collaborating to Tell the Community's Story

Goals

Chelsea District Library in Chelsea, Michigan, is located in the heart of an active downtown that is working together to keep this small community strong. Library Director Bill Harmer believes collaboration is a critical component to why the library—and the community—continue to thrive.

Implementing the campaign as part of the library's strategic plan and using well-established connections, Harmer and his team took localizing Geek the Library to the next level. The goal was to actively engage community members and increase awareness about the value of the library. According to Harmer, the campaign was an opportunity to hold a mirror to the community.

“Public libraries have struggled to tell their stories. Many assume that the public shares their passion for the cause, and so they rely on traditional methods such as statistics to build their case. I believe it is important for us to remember that stories are essential to the work that we do. Stories spark emotion, and they help us understand what is important about the library from the community's perspective, which is why building these personal connections is so important.

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AT A GLANCE

- Service area: City of Chelsea, plus Dexter, Lima, Lyndon and Sylvan Townships
- Service area population: 15,000
- Staff: 12 full-time, 12 part-time

Campaign

Planning began six months prior to launch. Harmer and Marketing Coordinator Anna Cangialosi hit the streets to educate and motivate major community players. The early legwork, noted Cangialosi, defined success. In addition to getting staff buy-in, it's also important to get feedback

and endorsements from potential partners.

“The planning is about getting out into the community and really talking it up, and showing Geek the Library images featuring community members,” said Cangialosi. “We did a soft launch using images featuring staff and local stakeholders, so we had local examples to show. We found that it was difficult for people to understand the campaign until they physically saw it, so doing presentations was important. Once people see it, they get excited about

it and they start talking about it.”

A targeted short list of community influencers led to the development of large banners and an official unveiling as the kick-off event. The launch, which included the featured community members, pushed the campaign into high gear and

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Geek the Library Case Study: Chelsea District Library *Continued*

excitement grew quickly. “Within a week of our unveiling,” added Harmer, “people would literally stop me on the street and mention something about it. It happened that quickly.”

A local professional photographer was hired to take the initial photographs and subsequently volunteered to help the library fully localize the campaign. What began with a few photo shoots with community members turned into a broad-reaching story of people associated with local businesses and organizations, and city workers and community leaders. Hundreds of localized posters became the story of Chelsea.

Each photo shoot was an opportunity to make connections on many levels. These events, big or small, said Cangialosi, fueled organic growth of the campaign, and ultimately initiated conversations about the library.

During the six-month campaign in 2012, the library focused promotional efforts on localized Geek the Library posters. These posters were used in the library, at events and online; participants received a printed copy and a JPEG file, and were encouraged to share with friends—especially via social media. Many featured community members were asked to provide additional information, and these testimonials were turned into articles for the library’s e-news, blog and social media.

The photo shoots even started to take on a life of their own, said Cangialosi, providing value beyond the campaign to the organizations and businesses taking part. “A lot of the photo sessions turned into team-building experiences for many of the organizations as it allowed people to come out of their shell and share their story.”

Outcome

A good lesson, according to Harmer, is to not make the mistake to try to do everything alone. Find experts to help—within the library and in the community. “The librarian’s job is to take advantage of the creativity, networks and expertise that exist in all communities. In doing so, we are able to work together to do things that we could not achieve by ourselves or could only achieve with great difficulty.”

Even with a solid track record for effective partnerships, Harmer and Cangialosi agree that Geek the Library helped enhance and expand their current network. Most importantly, Harmer added, their local campaign united the community and allowed the library to develop deeper bonds that are crucial as the library continues to transform in the coming years.

“Geek the Library is an opportunity to connect with your community to build those all-important personal relationships. Our survival depends on demonstrating that we are deeply connected to our communities—that libraries are essential to the success of our communities. In the end, it’s really all about building social capital. Libraries that are effective at it will continue to be relevant for a long time and those who aren’t, won’t.”

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For more information about Geek the Library, visit

[| geekthelibrary.org](http://geekthelibrary.org)