Geek the Library Campaign Evaluation
Case Study: Manatee County, Florida
September 2015

The Geek the Library campaign was initially imagined by OCLC, a nonprofit library cooperative. Via a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, OCLC, in partnership with Chicago-based marketing communications agency Leo Burnett USA, created and launched Geek the Library in 2007. The campaign, designed to be easily localized, aims to inspire conversation about public libraries, and convey libraries' strong value as well as the urgent need for increased support.[1]

ORS Impact's evaluation of the Geek the Library campaign explores how the campaign contributes to changes in libraries' capacity to implement effective advocacy, public relations, communications, and marketing; changes in community perceptions about libraries; and changes in library support. The Manatee County Public Library (MCPL) has implemented Geek the Library since 2011. MCPL was selected as a case study to highlight outcomes for a county-wide library system. To prepare this case study, ORS Impact conducted a focus group with library staff, and interviews with community members (n=6), including library volunteers and representatives of the Library Foundation board.

About the MCPL Service Area

Manatee County is located in west central Florida, and includes the municipalities of Bradenton and Palmetto, northern Longboat Key, and rural areas to the east.

MCPL is overseen by Manatee County government and library funding is determined by the county's elected commissioners. MCPL is a division of the Manatee County Neighborhood Services Department; the library system maintains six branch locations as well as online resources. The service area population is about 315,000. In 2014, the use of MCPL's resources reached the highest count ever at 3,520,111; Internet and Wi-Fi use increased by 25%; and the use of virtual resources increased by nearly 65%.

MCPL's Geek the Library Campaign

MCPL's local Geek the Library campaign was spearheaded by youth services librarian, Stacy Reyer, in 2011 and is the longest-running local campaign among U.S. libraries. Following Reyer's departure, incoming MCPL Library Director Ava Ehde continued Geek the Library, which has included a wide variety of activities and materials such as posters featuring notable locals, MCPL librarians, and other community members; movie preview ads; wraps for each of two library vans; stories and editorials in local newspapers; inclusion of Geek the Library templates in visual

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[1] See: http://geekthelibrary.org/about/about.html

displays both in libraries and in a variety of community settings; targeted outreach and engagement with the library Friends group, the Library Foundation, and the library's board volunteers; and partnerships and co-marketing with other community organizations, in particular, the South Florida Museum and the Bradenton Marauders, a minor league baseball team.

To implement Geek the Library locally, MCPL has combined support from OCLC with funding from other sources—the Library Foundation helped with the van wraps and the library Friends group paid for movie preview ads—and in-kind donations. With the campaign, MCPL aimed to "pique the community's interest and challenge their thinking" about the library. The local campaign's aims were to emphasize how the library can be valuable to individuals and the community as a whole, and to share information about how the library is funded as well as the library's funding needs.

Reflecting on the value of the campaign, Ehde noted that Geek the Library was "a godsend" in terms of the resources OCLC has provided and how it has spurred interaction between the library and the community. "For a long time, our library kept its head down, and didn't draw attention to itself; we needed to do it differently and the campaign has been a great mechanism." Library staff elaborated, noting that the library's marketing and communications was an area that needed some refreshing: "We needed to make a different effort, and the fact that Geek the Library was out-of-the box gave us confidence to go out and do it. We started doing more outreach, and people immediately responded."

Outcomes

Implementing Geek the Library has helped foster greater awareness, appreciation, and capacity for marketing and communications among library staff. Library staff involved in planning and implementing the campaign recalled that when they first started talking about Geek the Library internally, colleagues were puzzled by it. Over time, the staff has come to see the campaign as a way to alter the library's image—something all staff now view as an important effort. As Geek the Library got underway, "there were a lot of aha moments" among library staff regarding the concept of what a library could be, what the library could say about itself, and how the library could communicate this to the public. Ehde described making the videos that would become movie preview ads featuring MCPL: "We met with our IT staff, and they didn't get what we were trying to do at all. They even intimated that we should go back to being librarians and stop trying to be tech people. We made the videos, and later one of the IT guys went to the movies and saw the library ad [and he started to get it]."

Ehde and others reflected that in general, marketing libraries to a broad audience (e.g., users and non-users) is a challenge since "libraries do not boast. We are not the best at talking ourselves up. That's a challenge for all libraries." Geek the Library has prompted MCPL to overcome this challenge. As Ehde remarked, "with the Geek campaign, we can try new things, we can take risks." Staff are now united in their belief that trying new things, and having "new ways of talking about the library" is valuable, and staff are on board with the need to promote the library. As a group, MCPL staff ("even the shy ones") have committed to actively participating in the Geek the Library campaign. In addition, the campaign has been a vehicle for staff to learn more about the

library's budget and operations. Ehde explained, "we used to be more compartmentalized. The campaign helped bring us together."

The campaign spurred county commissioners to make marketing and communications a more permanent part of library operations. Community members, including MCPL board members, noted that libraries typically lack infrastructure for marketing, communications, and fund development. To realize and sustain increased resources, community members emphasized the need for library marketing and communications to be ongoing rather than ad hoc.

> "It is a big job to educate people about why the library is important and why the library needs resources to make things happen. The library needs a marketing arm, just like higher education institutions and non-profits. And, fund development can't just happen in a crisis—it needs to be ongoing. Let's talk about bequests, endowments—that is a big job. It is seen as a luxury, and shouldn't be seen as a luxury. The library needs to have staff that do this."

The campaign helped convince county commissioners, and staff reported that commissioners recently approved the addition of a marketing coordinator for MCPL.

The campaign increased awareness about the library, elevated the library's profile, and refreshed the library's brand. Geek the Library's visuals and tagline captured widespread attention; the campaign was described as "ingenious," "personal," and "fun." The visuals, the use of the word 'geek,' and the interactive nature of the campaign has helped draw people in. As library staff recalled, "the posters are graphic, so their effect is immediate. There's no reading necessary, so they speak to everyone, even kids." The campaign's interactive elements, such as asking people to share what they geek, were a great way to engage community members. "At first, people were like 'what is this?' and now they can't get enough. People love talking about what they geek!"

When library staff participate in community events, they now receive lots of attention and recognition: "[The community] definitely knows who we are." There is also greater visibility about what the library offers beyond just books. As one person described, "a good segment of our community didn't realize that everything—from job applications to applying for social security benefits—starts online. If you don't have access to a computer at home, you depend on the library."

> *"Geek the Library has expanded people's thinking about the library, and certainly there is an improvement in the library's profile—now libraries are cool, you want to be affiliated with them."*

A local newspaper editorial that ran as part of the Geek campaign drew attention to this, and there is now increased awareness about the importance of the library's technology. Campaign activities have also contributed to increased visibility about the library's funding needs; staff, board, the Friends group, and the community at large report knowing much more about the library's funding.

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Early on, library director Ehde saw the Geek campaign as "an opportunity to brand ourselves." Staff noted that in Manatee County, like many other places, "people had such outdated perceptions of libraries—libraries are nerdy, not fun." The campaign aimed to "shift the community's perceptions about the library—the library is not little old ladies with glasses whispering 'shhh'."

Evidence suggests the campaign successfully re-booted MCPL's brand. According to staff, the campaign "put us in a new light" and "added a cool factor" to libraries. A board member noted that the library now occupies a greater share of community attention and conversation, and that "the Geek campaign is absolutely a factor." A community member said, "the campaign definitely got publicity for the library and got a wider range of audiences to come to the library." Another said, "Geek the Library has expanded people's thinking about the library, and certainly there is an improvement in the library's profile—now libraries are cool, you want to be affiliated with them."

The campaign contributed to increased community support—more volunteers, more champions, and strong participation in library events and programs. As noted earlier, the Geek campaign has paved the way for MCPL to try new things, such as sponsoring a local Comic-Con and a recycled fashion show. There has been great response to these events: in 2014, MCPL drew over 3,000 attendees to its Comic-Con event and about 1,000 attendees to the recycled fashion show. The level of interest and enthusiasm creates a virtuous cycle; one person described how these kinds of events and the Geek campaign have "woken people up," and "made people realize that if we don't show our support, we're going to lose a really great thing." Library staff talked about all the different people who were "geeked," including business leaders who participated in the campaign, journalists who wrote stories, and community members who showed support for the library in a variety of ways— including visits, volunteering, and speaking out.

> *"Instead of waiting for the library to tell us what they need, we need to be asking the library 'how can we support you?'"*

Across the MCPL branches, there has been an increase in both visits and volunteers, and there is greater age diversity among those who use libraries and volunteer in them. Youth, seniors, and many in between have all been drawn to the library. More people have also expressed their willingness to "do something to support the library," such as speaking with community members or decision makers about the value of the library and the need for sustained local funding.

The library has also garnered greater support from local leaders, including county commissioners, state officials, and civic leaders. The MCPL was one of only two county entities to receive increased funds in 2014, which library staff attribute to the commissioners' increased awareness and appreciation for what the library is offering to the community. As one Foundation board member observed, the Geek campaign has sparked "tremendous support for the library in our community. It's incredible! Volunteers, youth coming to events, a good board—it's all there!" This same board member also noted an opportunity for community support to become more automatic and proactive: "Instead of waiting for the library to tell us what they need, we need to be asking the library 'how can we support you?'"

The campaign provided the right opening for productive community partnerships. Staff reported that the emergence of "very fruitful" partnerships—such as MCPL's connections with the South Florida Museum and the Bradenton Marauders minor league baseball team—was a particularly exciting result of the Geek the Library campaign. One Geek campaign poster featured Snooty, the oldest living manatee in captivity who resides at the South Florida Museum, and another featured the mascot of the Marauders. The Geek posters advertised both MCPL and each community partner, and that has in turn sparked a "wonderful collaboration." MCPL has participated in special events at the museum and on the baseball field, publicizing the library and signing up hundreds of people for library cards and library programs. The South Florida Museum and the Marauders have also supported and participated in a library literacy program. The relationships have continued to deepen over time, and are seen as mutually beneficial; as library director Ehde noted, "we advocate for them, and they advocate for us." Ehde believes that the partnerships are rooted in the shared commitment to preserve and strengthen the local community.

The campaign stimulated enhanced cooperation and alignment between the library, its Friends group, and the Library Foundation, which led to increased support. Several respondents described increased engagement from the Friends group and the Foundation trustees which coincided with the campaign. Early on, library staff took the time to meet with the Friends group and the Foundation to explain the campaign and its purpose. Both the Friends group and the Foundation were excited by Geek the Library, and have offered funds to support specific campaign elements. These groups also gained greater awareness about the specifics of library funding; one Foundation board member said, "we got educated about how many people walk through the doors, how many books are checked out per hour, how many hours the computers are used, and what percent of local tax dollars to MCPL. I learned that the dollars are not enough." Recognizing the campaign's effectiveness and seeking to capitalize on the public's heightened interest and commitment to the library, the Foundation organized a campaign fundraising event where author Stephen King was the featured guest. The event was co-chaired by a local elected official and generated over $300,000.

Foundation board members noted a more organized approach to library advocacy. In the past, library staff took primary responsibility for advocacy and called on the Friends or Foundation board when there was a real crisis. Staff now approach advocacy differently, and Foundation board members understand they need to be involved and take steps on their own, not just when staff ask them to do something. For example, the new Library Foundation president "speaks publicly and advocates with decision makers. She is the one who master minded talking people in to giving large donations as part of the Stephen King event." Many see a deepened level of coordination and alignment between the library, Friends group, and the Foundation, and believe that the campaign, as well as Ehde's leadership, have contributed to that change.

Takeaways

Explore possibilities to generate revenue. Library staff reported "people loved the Geek materials [T-shirts, bags, posters, bookmarks] and always wanted to buy things from us," but the campaign wasn't structured to sell the materials. MCPL ended up giving away many of the Geek

materials, which prompted reflection about whether there could have been a revenue-generating aspect to the campaign. Now that they have a stronger relationship with the Friends group, library staff hypothesized that if they do something like Geek the Library again, they could involve the Friends group to purchase materials to be sold for profit.

The long-term nature of the campaign made it incredibly effective, and it is hard to sustain the campaign effort. Library staff talked about the importance of keeping the campaign "fresh," describing how they continually tailor the campaign materials (e.g., posters, buttons, goody bags) to the different events or opportunities. For example, at the time of a local food festival, a Geek poster featured one of the community's well-known chefs; for the gardening festival, Geek buttons featured gardening themes. Using the Geek colors and materials generates brand recognition, and tying campaign materials to what is happening at the moment keeps the campaign from seeming like the "same old thing." Library director Ehde also emphasizes that having the staff fully on board with the campaign is key to sustaining momentum: "We rely on our staff to represent and promote the library. If they are not on board, if they get tired of the campaign, it won't be effective." One person described the campaign as a catalyzer, and felt that the campaign's longevity reflected a virtuous cycle that's been created—the campaign has generated enthusiasm and support within the community, spurring the community to add to the richness of the campaign, spurring more enthusiasm and support.

The strength and vision of MCPL's director enhanced the campaign's influence and effectiveness. Many noted that library director Ava Ehde's energy and leadership is "off the charts," and the fact that Geek the Library coincided with her arrival is believed to have added to the campaign's effectiveness. As one person observed about Ehde, "she has been able to keep things going and that is key. That's how you can tell if a leader is really good—they can sustain that energy and enthusiasm." Besides being committed to the campaign, continually generating new ideas, and serving as an excellent leader for staff and an effective liaison with the Friends group and Foundation, Ehde did other things that helped to refresh the library's brand and build support. For example, Ehde oversaw minor renovations in branch libraries, such as new furniture and rearrangement of the space that added to the brand refresh and made the library seem more modern and inviting.

Wrapping Up

MCPL is the longest-running Geek the Library campaign and its energy and appeal have been consistent. The campaign has had a tremendous impact on MCPL's self-image, expanding staff's view of their role and relationship to the community, and contributing to greater library communications capacity. The level of community engagement and support has also grown and deepened, and the library has experienced an increase in funding—via both significant donor contributions and allocation of public funding. With a relatively small financial investment, dedicated leadership, committed staff, and very productive partnerships with the MCPL Friends group and Foundation along with key external organizations, MCPL has garnered significant returns.