

Opportunity for Change and Development

Goals

Several years of political and personnel issues at the highest level had left the administration at East Baton Rouge Parish Library in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, wondering what could be done to rebuild internal and external relationships. According to Mary Stein, assistant director, administrative services, Geek the Library came along at the perfect time. “We were able to reconnect with the fact that we do have a good product and we are awesome, and Geek the Library was a way to communicate that to the public in a positive way.”

Stein and her team used the campaign to get attention, rebrand the library as a place that’s relevant for everyone and to make community connections. The approach was well-planned and focused on utilizing the campaign as an opportunity for change and development in all areas of the library, especially with staff. “The staff are on the front lines, but you spend such little time with them that they can be a potential weak link in any typical campaign,” said Stein. “But the staff understood Geek the Library. It was easy to embrace and everyone could meet the campaign at their level, and then meet the patron at their level.”

Staff buy-in, involvement and enthusiasm drove success—which, according to Stein, was



AT A GLANCE

- Service area: 455 square miles
- Service area population: 441,438
- Staff: More than 500

intentional. “I wanted staff to ask themselves, ‘What’s my mission?’ First of all, selfishly, ‘What do I geek and how does the library support it?’ and then take that conversation outward and think about what our library does for community members.”

Campaign

The campaign launched at the state book festival in the fall of 2011 and started winding down in summer 2013. This lengthy timeframe called for a solid plan and continuous development, something Stein viewed as another opportunity. Planning and looking inward first, she

noted, was critical and set the stage for impact during and beyond the campaign. With a large system, including multiple branches and more than 500 staff, Stein’s plan posed challenges. For example, once strategic planning moved forward and management was trained, communication to staff needed to be well-timed and purposeful. To

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ensure every individual was informed, managers used a planned evaluation meeting (something that's completed one-on-one with every staff member) as a key touch point to introduce the campaign, provide printed material and ask employees what they geek. Staff also received a t-shirt (paid for by the Friends group) and a custom button, as well as incentives (such as allowing blue jeans with t-shirts) to wear them in and out of the library.

It was important, said Stein, that staff saw this as their campaign—that they understood it, made a connection to it and felt comfortable talking about it. To help, staff engagement was encouraged throughout the planning period, something that helped buy-in turn into excitement. Efforts were also made externally to generate interest with key stakeholders, including the media. And while no additional marketing dollars were originally earmarked for the campaign, advertising (including everything from billboards to posters on college buses) grew in size and scope as the campaign progressed. Stein used each advertising venture as a pilot to prove its effectiveness, and she has since doubled the marketing budget and plans to request more in the years ahead.

Even with activity at each branch, cobranded programming and speaking engagements all over the area, Stein still feels she could have done more. (More customized posters would have been good, she said. They focused on custom buttons due to time and resources.) “You can’t do everything,” she noted, “and that’s part of the beauty of the program. There are no strings. There’s no set prescription. And it’s totally scalable. You can make it fit whatever your capacity is...and you’re only limited by your own imagination on how to make it work.”

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Outcome

Using geek weeks and a digital forum, Stein’s team cleverly engaged the community in sharing more than just what they geeked. Geek boards, sticky notes and tally walls served as the icebreaker to gather more robust input. As a result, one of the most tangible outcomes of the campaign was data gathered at each individual branch’s geek week (some held two), which included community insight about strategic planning questions.

The Geek the Library experience also provided ideal circumstances for staff to actively contribute to the library’s mission—including evaluating how they fit in and the important role they play.

The ‘What do you geek?’ question allowed even the most reserved staff to partake in meaningful conversations that often led to partnerships or other referrals. “The staff is more practiced, and now they know that ‘if I just do one thing, and speak up with more than just a thank you, and ask a question, I may get a conversation out of this—not just with me and this person, but with the library and this person’s group.’ And then the ripples start going out from there.”

Stein is also quick to point out that the experience helped her own professional development. “I’ve been giving public presentations since 1960 when I was three years old. I’m not afraid of the public and I will fill up all available space and time like a gas. But over the past two years, I’ve really improved because Geek the Library crystallizes everything—it ties it up with a beautiful red bow.”

For more information about Geek the Library, visit

geekthelibrary.org