Small Michigan Library Becomes the Talk of the Town

Goals

Although they consider themselves a well-supported public library, a down economy and looming local budget cuts motivated library leaders at Marshall District Library in Marshall, Michigan, to think outside of the box for a focused community awareness campaign. Library Director, Angela Semifero, found Geek the Library and made the case that it could place the library at the forefront of the community in a unique way, while educating people about the value of the library and how funding really works. She brought the campaign to Denise Connelly, senior library assistant, who coordinates much of the library's publicity and adult programming. Library leaders and staff were not disappointed.

"We loved it more each day," notes Connelly. "At first it just seemed like a very clever idea, but then we discovered how much the community embraced their inner geek—it was amazing."

Campaign

The Marshall team started a soft launch of the campaign in the fall of 2010. The first priority was to make sure library staff were all on board. To do this, Connelly and Semifero made staff a literal part of the campaign by asking everyone to pose for a custom poster and create a display about what they geek. This, along with custom posters

for a handful of well-known local residents, set off a frenzy of interest about the campaign.

"It really got people talking about the library and all of the things we do," says Semifero. "It also gave staff members a chance to show off their personalities in a different way."

Semifero adds that much of the campaign's success can be attributed to the efforts and talents of her staff. For example, staff used photography skills, volunteered to be featured on the library's monthly TV program and be interviewed by the local newspaper, and promoted the campaign at local schools. "It really was a team effort," she says.

The Marshall team spent a few months integrating 'geek' as a verb into library displays and public promotions until their official kick-off at a local holiday parade. From there, they put extra effort into really making it a community campaign. They

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—Angela Semifero, *Library Director*

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Continued

partnered with local businesses and leaders, and worked with schools to find innovative ways to integrate the theme and spread the word.

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>
> —*Denise Connelly, Senior Library Assistant*

Geek the Library literally took off in Marshall, says Connelly. "It was the talk of the town. Everywhere I went people would ask me about it or tell me what they geek."

With the help of an aggressive public relations campaign, the local media also embraced Geek the Library, which solidified the message and helped maintain interest. "Much of the campaign involved talking about the nonbook items that the library offers and the technology support that the library offers," says Semifero. "Many people were unaware of how much we work with information literacy, workforce development and small business support. People place their priorities on school and public safety funding, and this was an excellent opportunity to let them know how the library supports schools and continuing education."

There was so much interest in the custom posters that the library staff decided to hold a contest in order to accommodate requests and to maintain their minimal campaign budget. The community response was tremendous.

Geek the Library broadened the library's appeal and provided a unique opportunity for the community to take ownership, says Semifero.

"It was so much fun. It was more than just, here are the facts and this is what we offer. There was so much interaction. It sets the bar pretty high if we were to do something like this again."

Outcome

Geek the Library fever has died down a bit in Marshall since the campaign wrapped up in March 2011, but the positive effects will influence the staff and the community for years to come. According to Connelly and Semifero, Geek the Library fundamentally changed the library's relationship with much of the community—a crucial development in a still-struggling economy that can bring future concerns. There have already been signs of possible impact, such as increased library usage during the campaign period and a recent library budget renewal millage that passed.

"This was a huge celebration of the library and what we do that's never happened before. It spoke to everybody—especially young people. This made us seem interesting and cool," says Semifero. "The campaign helped teach the community that the library is there for everyone. It has made it easier to go out there and tell people about what the library needs. They now see the library as a part of them and an important part of the community."

For more information about Geek the Library, visit

geekthelibrary.org