

No Limits: Small Library Success

Goals

Do size and resources matter? Maybe, but Mary Stenger, director of the smallest library in West Virginia (service population of less than 500) and 2013 Best Small Library in America Award recipient from *Library Journal*, believes size shouldn't limit big thinking or doing. Even with a part-time schedule, only one part-time staff member and a handful of volunteers, this former CPA has turned limitations into opportunities. She takes community engagement seriously and actively works to promote the value of the library.

"It's vital for small libraries to hone their message, get marketing skills, get public speaking skills and get some ideas about how to build community and widen their circle. And once they have those skills, they need to go out and talk to the community and get people on board, so that everyone knows the importance of the library and will try to make sure that funding isn't cut."

Geek the Library helped Stenger reflect on her community's current perceptions (or misconceptions) about the library, her marketing activities and her network. Most importantly, she said, the campaign made having a conversation easy. "If you say, 'I support the library,' people will just keep on walking, but when you use the term 'geek' people want to know more. I was able to explain



AT A GLANCE

- Service area: Approx. 1 sq. mile
- Service area population: 496
- Staff: 2 part-time

the campaign, but also local funding. Geek the Library helps start a dialogue with many people, not just your regular supporters."

Campaign

Stenger used Geek the Library as an opportunity to think about what resources she has, versus

what she doesn't have—taking advantage of the flexibility built into the program, which accommodates minimal resources. "A small library can't do everything," said Stenger, "but they are vital to the community and certainly have stories to tell. And, a community's size shouldn't factor into support possibilities.

Even though our community is small, community members value education and libraries. This thinking helped me frame a new message and put the library in front of new audiences."

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No Limits: Small Library Success *Continued*

Stenger approached her Geek the Library campaign as a learning experience. She hoped to improve on what she was doing well and try new ideas—focusing on her current support network, but also thinking about people who don't normally visit the library. "Among other things, it helped us think about how we can look for community partnerships. Are we looking in the right places? Are we doing enough? It helped us evaluate what we're doing and encouraged us to do more."

The campaign launched in November 2012 and lasted six months, debuting with images of community leaders and culminating in focused speeches to local groups to educate them about the value of the library and how library funding works. Stenger engaged people over the course of the campaign by promoting a 'Geek of the Month' contest and using geek boards to capture local interests. She found all aspects of campaign support helpful, but especially appreciated the three-phase approach. "It kept me fresh and focused," she said. "Each phase provided a boost, new ideas and momentum."

Outcome

According to Stenger, locals really enjoyed sharing their geeks and talking about why they care about the library. As a result, Stenger was able to get a good sense of local interests, which will help inform future planning. Taking the time to do the campaign also helped encourage her to stray

from her routine, which is incredibly important, but can be difficult on busy days. "It was a good opportunity to step back and think about the bigger issues, because you can fill your work hours with your daily routine and not stop to evaluate your progress. Geek the Library helps you to think outside the small daily things and promote a more unified message."

Stenger considers her campaign a success in that it resulted in more people understanding what the library does and how they can help support it. "Our Geek the Library campaign helped get attention and provide information about the library to more people than just our regular supporters like our board or patrons. It got us out in the community to talk to the people who may not come in, but still support us."

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Stenger doesn't hesitate to recommend Geek the Library. In fact, she's on a mission to get more small libraries, especially in West Virginia, on board. She advises any library—regardless of size—to use this campaign as a springboard to reach a broader audience and to help library staff become better

communicators. Her advice: Don't be afraid!

"Just try it. Obviously, the more you put into it, the more you'll get out of it. But if for some reason you are overwhelmed and you can't do all that you hoped, it's okay. Whatever you are able to accomplish is going to bring the library rewards. I'm still learning from my experience!"

For more information about Geek the Library, visit

| geekthelibrary.org