Communicating the Value of the Library

Goals

Talking up the value of the library is nothing new for staff at Wallkill Public Library in Wallkill, New York. However, according to Director Mary Lou Carolan, Geek the Library helped strengthen community engagement efforts.

"Geek the Library resonated so well because it is a progressive awareness campaign that leads up to what we all need to do, which is ask for support," said Carolan. "You can warm people up, you can take them out to lunch, you can show them the programs, you can show them the smiling faces of the kids, but at some point, you have to say, 'Look, we really need your support.'"

Carolan ran a lengthy campaign—launching in April 2011 and wrapping up in fall 2012—purposefully building in time for staff and the community to take notice and engage with the campaign. All staff were expected to be part of the effort, but Carolan provided more opportunities to staff willing and interested in gaining new skills. "It's important not to just focus on the director, but look at the entire staff and who will be the greatest promoters," she said.

The Wallkill team concentrated mostly on integrating the campaign into what they were already doing, and making the activities even more impactful. One example is the annual scavenger hunt designed to create interest in

downtown businesses. The Geek the Library scavenger hunt featured clues leading patrons to local businesses, and participants received extra points if they asked the store owners what they geeked. Everyone received a prize and was entered into a drawing. The program provided a natural opportunity for Carolan to visit business owners to inform them about the campaign and reintroduce an important partnership opportunity with the library.

"We consider ourselves the downtown anchor business for the hamlet of Wallkill because we have repeat visitation from families every week—we draw them back downtown. So, if you consider us a business, we have 100 new customers for just this month."

Campaign

The campaign had peaks and valleys in terms of activity, but it culminated in a sponsored event at a local minor league baseball game. Carolan reached out to other libraries in the area to come together as a group—some were also running local

AT A GLANCE

- Service area: Town of Shawangunk and Wallkill School District in Ulster County
- Service area population: 5,941
- Staff: 1 full-time, 9 part-time

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Geek the Library campaigns, but others simply saw the value in spreading a unified message about public libraries. In the end, 19 libraries, two library associations and two library systems joined in to pay, promote and take part in the event.

The event was a huge success, showcasing the campaign and the value of public libraries to over 5,000 baseball fans—many who are not regular library visitors. And the stadium was buzzing about Geek the Library, said Carolan, as the event coordinators did a terrific job of including the name in promotions prior to the event and during the game. The participating libraries provided goody bags with information, hosted tables featuring library technology and started hundreds of conversations about the library. Carolan was even given center stage and addressed the entire stadium!

The experience provided tremendous exposure, but also gave participating libraries a new experience in pooling resources for a bigger, more impactful event. It showed the possibilities, said Carolan, and that area libraries really can come together for the greater good. "It gave us a platform for libraries. It was something we could do and it didn't create any competition. It was bigger than our individual libraries."

Outcome

Carolan feels strongly about spending as much time as possible away from her desk and being out in the community building relationships. And, she's adamant about informing stakeholders about how the library adds value for individuals and the

community. Geek the Library was, in her opinion, a perfect package to push out key messages. "Public libraries bring a lot to the table for their local communities. We need to talk about it and be proud of it—we can't afford not to."

Geek the Library's professional materials forced people who may not normally pay attention to look twice, added Carolan. Asking people what they geek, she said, also gave the team new ways to discuss the library's accomplishments. "If people see what you're doing and they understand that it impacts the community, whether they use it or not, they will nine times out of 10 support it."

While partnering with local businesses is always a priority, said Carolan, it's not always easy. Geek the Library created unique opportunities to get out there and introduce the library—because, she added, if they don't come to you, you can go to them. Whether it's asking someone to hang a poster or give them an info sheet about the library, "sometimes you have to physically walk it to the businesses. It takes forever, but it's so worth it."

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The campaign, she said, is more than just an awareness campaign for the community, it's an awareness campaign for the library. The program takes libraries through a process— create awareness, generate engagement and encourage action—that can be duplicated again and again, "and it is a reminder that awareness isn't something that can be created in a day, it's an ongoing process."

For more information about Geek the Library, visit

geekthelibrary.org