

Geek the Library Campaign Evaluation

Case Study: Austin Public Library

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 Austin Public Library (APL) implemented Geek the Library between 2013 and 2015. APL was selected as a case study to illustrate outcomes in an urban, metro-funded library setting. To prepare this case study, ORS Impact conducted a focus group with library staff, and interviews with community members (n=7), including library partners, local business owners, and a Library Commissioner.

About the APL Service Area²

Located in central Texas, Austin is the state's capital and home to the main campus of the University of Texas. Austin's residents are a diverse mix of students, government and university employees, musicians, and those who work in high-tech as well as blue-collar industry. During the 1990s, several technology corporations were attracted to the area and as companies opened local offices, Austin earned the nickname "Silicon Hills." In addition to its recent growth as a tech hub, Austin has a long-standing reputation as a vibrant cultural and musical center. With its many arts and music venues, Austin hosts the popular South by Southwest festivals and thousands of artists and musicians call Austin home. Austin is known for its independent spirit and a deeply-held ethic to protect and preserve "Austin culture" and the unique local businesses that define it.

APL is comprised of 20 branches, online resources, the Austin History Center, and Recycled Reads, a used bookstore. A new central branch in downtown Austin is under construction and will open in 2016. APL's service area population is just under one million. APL is funded by an appropriation of the Austin City Council; an appointed group of Library Commissioners maintains oversight and advises on matters relating to the library. To supplement city funding, the APL Friends Foundation raises funds that support a variety library programs.

¹ See: <http://geekthelibrary.org/about/about.html>

² Material in this section is from <http://library.austintexas.gov/>, <http://www.austintexas.gov/>, and <http://www.austintexas.org/>



APL's Geek the Library Campaign

Among libraries implementing the Geek the Library campaign, APL is somewhat unique in that it has a marketing department, which led planning and implementation. Thus, APL invested significant staff time and resources on its 18-month local campaign, which included posters, displays, and other visual materials; online marketing via the library's website and Facebook page; billboards; media spots; community photo booths; and participation in local events.

As the local campaign was being developed, APL marketing staff immediately saw an opportunity to “set up a clear library brand” via more consistent messaging and a different set of approaches. APL's strong investment in the campaign helped enhance and expand existing marketing and communications activities. APL staff saw the need to refresh the library profile and identity, and felt that the Geek the Library campaign provided a promising mechanism: “With our new central library, we needed people to think about the library differently.” Staff also wanted to be able to show the value of library marketing efforts, which are sometimes relegated to the background. “We'd never done anything at as large a scale. The campaign was a way to prove [to library executives] that something like this has value and that our department is capable of pulling it off.”

Posters were designed to appeal to Austin residents and many featured national and local personalities, including artists and musicians. One librarian described, “we had some connections to well-known musicians, and Geek the Library was a medium for them to speak out on behalf of APL in a way that we couldn't have done otherwise.” A community member said, “the posters included a combination of Austin people and famous people. And, not just famous people but people who are culturally interesting. That caught my eye.”

An example of a local event in which the library participated was a community march and celebration to honor Cesar Chavez. The march began at a branch library, and library staff used the Geek the Library template to make hundreds of signs which were carried by marchers.

Outcomes

Among APL staff and departments, the campaign boosted enthusiasm and pride in the library. Early in the campaign, when APL marketing staff introduced Geek the Library to their colleagues, they “had a lot of people embrace it and get excited” as they realized that the campaign was unique and promoted a different way of engaging with the public. As one staff member put it, “[the campaign] wasn't about the library, it was about our community—asking people what they care about and showing how the library can help with that.” This contributed to a greater sense of purpose and pride among APL staff. “I think [the campaign made staff remember] what opportunities we have, how the library is making a difference for people.”

The campaign opened the door to more cohesive, sustained APL marketing and communications activities. Though APL marketing staff are trained professionals with existing skills and capacity, Geek the Library was viewed as a different sort of activity. The campaign was intentionally “organic and flexible,” allowing staff to “roll with the opportunities that arose in our community.” That inherent responsiveness, along with more direct interaction with customers, constituted a fresh way of operating for the APL marketing team.



Staff described the learning curve that went along with Geek the Library; early on, they tried out different ways to “draw people in” and felt they got better over the course of the campaign. APL staff also sought regular feedback on campaign materials and events, which allowed them to continually iterate and enhance their efforts: “What worked better? How can we get people the most excited?” Marketing staff also coached their APL colleagues about speaking points and messages, and thereby achieved desired consistency and coherence. And, marketing staff reported that Geek the Library won over library executives, increasing the likelihood that “we can do more things like this in the future.”

Building on learnings and successes, and having upgraded some of their production capabilities, APL marketing staff riffed on Geek the Library’s tagline to create a secondary campaign, I Geek Green, which ran for a month and focused on promoting environmental conservation and sustainability. Reflecting on the interactive, flexible, responsive approach to communications and marketing, staff believe this has become the new norm, and they see the possibilities as endless. “The size and scope of Geek the Library, that it was successful and that we pulled it off—I don’t see us going backwards at all. . . . Next time, we will take all the things we loved about Geek the Library and make it more homespun. We wouldn’t [be able to do that] if we hadn’t gained the confidence.”

The campaign shifted perceptions of the library’s brand and enhanced the community’s positive feelings about the library. Community members described Geek the Library posters and materials as “eye catching,” “clever,” and “visually striking.” One person reflected, “the aesthetics of the posters, the topics, and the people in the photos generated a different sort of image for the library—edgier, more provocative and more fun.” Others commented on the campaign’s tagline—“What do you geek?”—describing it as “bold, striking.” Several respondents commented on the use of the word geek and the tie to the library. A community member remarked, “I thought the undercurrent and feeling about elevating nerdiness was well done—that having a really particular interest is cool, and the library is a place to indulge that interest.”

Others talked about the “personalized” nature of the campaign, which emphasized that the library is “always there for you . . . a place to explore personal interests.” Having recognizable locals on posters enhanced this quality: “Seeing local people on all the posters made it feel like we were really in on something.” Geek the Library posters appeared on APL’s social media, or were linked to the websites and Facebook pages of those featured on posters, and comments came from “around the country, around the world.” Staff reflected, “[the campaign] really dismantled stereotypes about the library,” and “it helps when people see that the library has done something interesting, and that interesting people are talking about the library. It lifts the profile of the library” One person described the campaign as a reminder of something bigger: “I felt like the campaign was connecting us to a whole national movement about the value and importance of libraries.”

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The campaign generated increased awareness and visibility for the library, which in turn contributed to community members' supportive actions. Staff described how Geek the Library focused attention on APL: “People see the posters, the displays, and they ask about it. It gets them thinking about the library.” Community members saw the campaign as having “raised awareness about the library as a positive, interesting place.” Increased visibility helped boost library visitation and use (across APL branches) during the months Geek the Library was running. Some community members engaged in other efforts on behalf of APL, such as joining a branch library committee or advisory board, being ambassadors for the library and its programs in schools or other community settings, helping plan an APL fundraising event, and reaching out to newly elected city council members to talk about the library. Two community groups, Nerd Night Austin and ATX Librarians, were specifically named as having advocated for extended library hours. Library Commissioners also put forward an initiative to the City Council requesting funds for extended library hours.

Takeaways

Overall, APL’s Geek the Library campaign was effective. A few insights can help APL marketing staff as they continue to build the library brand, along with increased awareness and support.

It was a challenge to describe and convey messages about library funding needs. Per OCLC’s intent, the Geek the Library campaign includes a phase aimed at informing the public about how libraries are funded and communicating libraries’ funding needs. For a variety of reasons, not all libraries implement this phase of the campaign. Because the City of Austin is APL’s primary funder, there was some concern among APL executives and staff that talking directly about library funding needs would be perceived as “crossing a line.” However, responses gathered for this case study pointed to the need for greater awareness about library funding. Staff remarked, “There are opportunities to educate people about library funding, for sure. Even APL staff don’t really understand how the library is funded.” A community member noted that the library keeps a “low profile” about its funding, and that it would be helpful if the community better understood library funding and what individuals might do to offer support. “Does the library need donations? Do they need grants? Do they need us to talk to our City Council representatives? . . . If something specific is needed, I would speak up and I know others would as well.” Though not included as part of the campaign, APL staff might look for ways to communicate about funding and funding needs, and invite support as community members seem willing to provide it!

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There are opportunities to expand library awareness and support among key groups. Some saw opportunities for APL to cultivate even greater awareness about the library, particularly among the Library Commissioners and Friends of the Library Foundation. One respondent reported that although APL staff briefed Library Commissioners about the campaign, there could have been even more information provided, more regular check-ins and updates as the campaign progressed, and a more direct invitation to Commissioners and the Friends Foundation to participate.



Wrapping Up

APL staff implemented a dynamic campaign that contributed to greater visibility and greater support for the library. Perhaps most importantly, the campaign launched the APL public information team into a new era of marketing and communications that is more personalized, references Austin's unique personality and culture, emphasizes the library's value and vibrancy, and strives to make the library the heart of the community. APL's Geek the Library campaign was recognized as an outstanding project, and APL staff now have greater support from library leadership and, therefore, increased freedom to continue to promote APL via innovative, inclusive, and interactive strategies.