

# KEEPING THE OUTREACH 'BRAND' VIABLE (or, 12 Steps to Developing a Dynamic Outreach Program)

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My background: a librarian for 31 yrs.; all but a few months were in outreach of some kind. This included 6 years running 3 library programs at a large state mental health facility (where I learned to write grant proposals, worked with older adults, and discovered BiFolkal kits and realia), 11 years as a consultant at the State Library of FL working with state institution libraries & services for persons with disabilities (where I really learned about grants, put on many conferences, and learned to help librarians survive on small budgets), and 13 years in my present job as Manager of Outreach Services. That includes Bookmobile, Books-by-Mail, Literacy and ESL, Assistive Technology, Senior Outreach, a Talking Books subregional, and a new Multicultural Program.

I'm telling you this because I want you to know that even with all this experience I am still learning. It never stops. And, I'm still making mistakes. That doesn't stop either.

Your Outreach program can be a fringe service. We all know what that looks like: the stepchild that gets the hand me down clothes – or books in library parlance, an after thought at budget time, the first program to be cut back during hard times, and the last program to receive the new computers. We also know the libraries with these marginal programs. We see their questions on discussion lists and we hear the frustration in the voices of their staff.

Or, on the other hand, Outreach can be an integral part of your library and the community with all the benefits that that entails: an adequate budget, sufficient staff and space, up-to-date equipment, etc.

In most libraries, you have some control over the success of your program -- even if you're not the boss. There are some steps that staff at any level in the organization can take. Today I want to touch on some of the factors that can strengthen your outreach service and move it into the ranks of the other stellar programs in your library and the community.

1. See the BIG PICTURE

- Understand how your program fits into the library system's operation and into the community: this means you really have to understand how your library works
- Know your library's Long range plan – include and be able to cite (grants)
- Develop a separate plan for your outreach service

2. Hire the best

- People who can work independently without direct supervision
- Consider older workers and those who are making career changes
- Library experience can help, but attitude, work ethic, and personality are often more important
- Look for useful skills and work experience, customer service, and experience working with children (or other specific group of people)
- Keep the position open until you find the right person
- Test: Invite candidates to meet us at a Bookmobile stop; or visit Talking Books and talk to staff. Watch how they function in this environment.

3. Get staff the best training you can –

- Have new people work in your branches to learn the system (and start to get that Big Picture view of their job)
- Send staff to visit similar programs in other library systems
- Computer training at all levels
- Send people to this conference, state library assoc.,
- Get training in related fields: older adult services, literacy, community development, disability services ... (Ex: One of best conferences I ever attended was the annual Points of Light conf.)

4. Listen to your users and potential users

- Remember the civil rights model – **Nothing About Me Without Me**; involve them at every point in your planning and implementation
- Seek informal input: actively listen to requests and comments; ask customers for suggestions. ex. Do a walk-around at a library, stopping patrons w/ disabilities to ask them how accessible they found the library
- Formal: surveys, interviews, focus groups, advisory groups Ex. Experience with ADA survey and the #1 response from our users for more book drops that you can reach from your car
- Heed Yolanda Cuesta's message: listen first, then talk about the library and how it can help

5. Don't do it alone

- Partner with the agencies and organizations serving your users
- Build on the strengths of your partners: ties with the community, knowledge of the people you serve, acceptance
- Recognize the possible barriers of your ethnicity, age, color...
- Ex: annual lunch meetings with Bookmobile contacts and Literacy partners; people turn out for free food – even partners
- The library can offer its reputation, long-term stability, and array of resources; this is important as some groups struggle to survive year to year
- Your partners can help with promotion, share staff for a program ....

6. Network at every level

- Attend meetings of related groups; serve on boards and committees
- Both you and your staff
- Use discussion lists such as the ones sponsored by (now) Assoc. of Bookmobile and Outreach Services (ABOS), ALA, & REFORMA
- Ex: Aging consortium, neighborhood development groups, literacy coalitions, Human Services networking groups

7. Get involved in the profession

- Join state and local library assoc. (ex. Staff member chairing FLA group)
- Contribute articles to publications like Clarion's Bookmobile & Outreach Services and the ABOS blog; share your story so others can learn from your experience
- Get involved with ALA's Office of Literacy & Outreach Services (OLOS) & other ALA divisions that share your interests. Visit [www.ala.org/olos](http://www.ala.org/olos) for all types of information related to outreach and literacy.

8. Get ownership of outreach services from all library staff

- Have them see outreach services as an integral part of the library and not a marginal service
- Get outreach staff active and visible on library committees and teams (Ex: youth services, programming, staff development)
- Encourage library staff to work on the Bookmobile or at an outreach event
- Ex: articles in staff newsletter, copies of your flyers in all libraries, share your patron newsletters, presentations to new employee orientation and at staff training days
- Keep administration informed of your plans and activities
- Remind library staff of their role in your success: making referrals & promoting

9. Gather information that helps you justify your service

- Use traditional and specialized statistics: circ, # visitors, programs, circ/hour, visitors/hour; monthly reports (document everything)
- Compare statistics from other years; compare yourself with your branches; Ex. Our bookmobile often has higher circ than two branches, accounts for 25% of the system's juvenile Spanish circ.
- Compile the annual costs to operate your program
- Keep notes from satisfied customers; "Would you please put that in writing?"
- Take photos of your activities (special and mundane) to help you tell your story EX: community relations is always looking for good shots of customers using your services
- Gather useful demographic info for your community

10. Change and evolve as situations demand

- Plan ahead and look for opportunities
- Be flexible and anticipate change
- Ex: See your bookmobile as a mobile library with opportunities for different applications
- Ex: Local changes included Literacy focus going from adult basic reading to ESL; the bookmobile target changed from retirees to low income families and new immigrants

11. Promote your services well to the community

- Work through your community relations people (you have the good people stories); remember specialized publications like senior magazines, church bulletins, & assisted living facility newsletters
- Produce attractive flyers (easy to read language; **large print**) for libraries and agencies as well as customers
- Distribute info where ever potential customers congregate: corner groceries, WIC clinics, day care centers, etc.
- Use your web site to inform: photos, application forms, newsletter, Google maps with your Bookmobile stops, links to community resources...

12. Learn about the field of community development

- Get training for your staff from United Way, community development agencies, etc.
- Become familiar with titles such as Building Communities from the Inside Out by John Kretzmann