

5 Ways to Transform How Your Library Works With Your Community Webinar Q&A Log

Questions from Live Demco Webinar, as answered by Erica Freudenberger, Outreach & Engagement Consultant at [Southern Adirondack Library System](#)

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Q: Are you a department of the city, and if so, how did they support you in this endeavor? If your Library Board is the governing body, were they involved in the endeavor?

A: Red Hook Public Library is a municipal library, but for us that just meant that the Mayor appointed our Board of Trustees. In order to get my Trustees on board, one of the first things we did was use one of our Board meetings to do an Aspirations Exercise (available at ala.org/ltc). This gave them a chance to see exactly what we would be doing when we were going out to talk to different groups, which is really important. I cannot stress enough that you should do this work with your staff/team and Board before you hit the streets — you want everyone to know what it is you're doing and why you're doing it before taking it to the public.

While my Trustees were not active in going door-to-door or leading the exercises, they were a valuable resource for helping to identify groups to talk to and, when we didn't know anyone to approach, for helping us get an introduction. They helped us expand our network and gave us time to do this work, with the understanding that it meant that other stuff might not be happening.

Q: How many staff members does your library have?

A: When I began, I was the first full-time staff member the library had ever had. We had six part-time employees, and two pages (teens) who worked a couple of hours a week. All in all, we had four FTE. By the time I left six and a half years later, we had three full-time staff members — myself, my assistant, and a program coordinator — as well as a dozen part-time staff and three or four pages, for a total of six and a half FTE.

Q: What size was your staff?

A: See above

Q: Could you put up the list of questions again that were used in the community surveys?

A: You can find all of the tools — and many more — that I mentioned at ala.org/ltc. It's a robust resource with tons of cool stuff.

Q: I think your ideas are fantastic. I work for a large system in a highly diverse area with almost a million people in the county. How does some of what you are doing work with a situation like mine? There is a lot of competition of leisure activities, great schools, many civic groups, etc. We would not be going into people's homes. How can I adjust to gain the same results through different channels? We too, although large, are trying to bring value to the community.

A: This work is absolutely scalable and has been successfully implemented by libraries of all sizes. The Spokane County Library District jumped right into community conversations, and they're a large library system with multiple locations throughout the county. (You can find info about it here: <http://www.ala.org/tools/librariestransform/libraries-transforming-communities/case-studies/spokane>.) They held something along the lines of 80 community conversations — out in the community, not in the library — to find out what was important to people. They then took what they heard and did the same thing we did — figured out how to address what they could, and communicated with stakeholders about the issues that had been identified. They also changed job descriptions, creating community librarians, to emphasize that it wasn't the role of one particular staff member to be engaging the community, but the entire staff.

Q: I'm wondering how these changes went over with the staff, and/or how you inspired them to align with the new vision of community engagement?

A: My team was composed of a wide variety of people. When I returned from our training, one of the first things we did was an Aspirations Exercise at one of our monthly staff meetings. Some people got really excited about it and one or two were not as enthused. As the DNA of our organization began to change and we shifted our focus from internal to external, some people chose to leave, which is absolutely OK. I believe strongly in running with the willing — if other people aren't into it, that's OK; they can do their thing. Work with those that share your vision and are excited about it.

Q: In your experience, does doing more off-site programming increase on-site traffic?

A: I don't know and I wasn't worried about it. We really embraced the idea that the library wasn't a building — it was people and experiences. What I do know is that over the course of the six and a half years I was there, and when we embraced this approach, our budget more than doubled, and our circulation increased by 23%, so it was clearly resonating with our community and keeping us really busy. And most importantly, we were recognized as a leader in our community — the library was *the* place to go if you were trying to get something done (which was pretty cool) — so people expected us to be at every table and a part of every conversation.

Q: What are all of the ways you promote your community events? What social media apps do you use? Who on staff handles promotional tasks? How much time and money do you spend on promotion of events?

A: The best way to promote anything is through word of mouth. One of the benefits of taking a democratic approach to the library — having it be by and for the people — meant that as we curated our community and asked people to lead programs, they told their friends and neighbors. This brought in a new circle of people who may not have been following us on Facebook or Twitter, or getting our (totally awesome) newsletter (it rocks, check it out here: <http://mailchi.mp/1a18815a81c8/70ysevrrl8-1317745?e=b979471897>).

For social media, the library uses Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, and everyone on the team is responsible for helping to spread the word and create content for our social media and newsletter. I nagged everyone into documenting what we were doing, using our iPads, phones or whatever we had, to capture what was going on at the library. Four of us had permission to post on social media, and we tried to have several posts a day. And we also used our social media to promote other community events, because not everyone in town was as comfortable using social media as we were, and we wanted our community to be successful. So it wasn't just about telling our story, but the story of our community. We did spend time, but I never tracked it; it was organic, part of our daily routine. If I had to guess I would say maybe three hours a week at the most. We never paid for any advertising or promotion, but we got a lot of coverage through local (and not so local) media. Writing press releases took more time than anything.

Q: What role did your personality play in building community engagement?

A: What personality?

One of the great things about being in a small town is that people can really get to know you — and love you — despite any quirks or eccentricities. And I am forever grateful that the Red Hook community accepted me and worked with me. It's an incredible place to work, filled with a lot of scarily smart, creative and talented people.

I do want to say one thing — people often assume that I'm an extrovert, and that being out in the community is easy for me. It's not. I'm a closet introvert, and it can be exhausting to do this work. But — and this is a big but — I really believe that this is the work that we're here to do, and it's important work, so we need to do it. It's always easy to find reasons to not do or try something. It's more difficult to try something new or something that people don't understand. It doesn't mean that we shouldn't challenge ourselves to do it.

I truly believe that anyone can do this work, and introverts can excel at it because we're really good at listening to people and asking questions. And we're here to make the world a better place, which requires a bit of effort.

Q: How did the size of your community impact getting the library's message out?

A: We made a deliberate decision to focus on the Village of Red Hook for the first round of this work. We did so because it wasn't overwhelming and it would give us a chance to get comfortable with the process and learn how to most effectively do the work. We divided the village into quadrants and went door-to-door in each quadrant. So starting small made it seem less intimidating. Getting the word out in a small town with no newspaper can be a challenge, but people that we approached got excited about it, and word began to spread (and as we worked with different stakeholders, they spread the word to their communities). Our plan was that after doing the village, we would (after getting permission from

the Town Supervisor and Board), begin doing the work in the town, which is a bit of a challenge because it's spread out over 40 miles. That's the next step.

Q: What suggestions do you have for strengthening the relationship between the public library and the elementary school libraries? I feel like right now it's an opportunity that is being missed.

A: School librarians are the absolute best! Invite them out for lunch or coffee, and talk to them. Find out what they're doing and if there are ways to work together. Approach it on the human level, not organizational, and build a personal relationship. Figure out ways you can make their lives easier or how you can collaborate on projects. Begin with something small so you can get a quick win, which will help move your relationship forward. Be aware — developing relationships takes time. It may not happen all at once (it didn't for us), but keep at it. Be engaged, persistent and passionate. Have I mentioned how much I love school librarians? They will rock your world!

Q: When inviting community members to lead programs or workshops, what is your policy or attitude towards ensuring that the programs are high quality? Do you meet with community members who are teaching classes or workshops prior to their class offering?

A: The only policy we had in place regarding programming was that no one could try to sell a service or anything else to our patrons. We had several people (not necessarily from our community) offer to do a wide variety of "programs" that were really sales pitches. We were fiercely protective of our patrons, so we said "no thank you" and shared our policy with the solicitors.

We always met with people who were doing a program, mainly to talk about how we could help them be successful. Our assumption was that we were living in a community with a lot of talent — we just had to tap into it. Programs that weren't run well didn't develop a following and didn't continue, and we're only talking about one or two out of hundreds. We trusted that people who were willing to put in the time and energy to do a program for us would do it well, and we were almost always amazed by the incredible things that we got to share because of that. If you trust your community and amplify their talents, you won't be disappointed.