Engaging the Elusive Non-User | ALA 2013

Meredith
Schwartz

Library consultants Donna Fletcher of Donna E. Fletcher Consulting and Paula Singer of The Singer Group shared their tips and tricks for reaching citizens that don't use the library to a packed house at the American Library Association (ALA) Annual conference in Chicago. They were joined by librarians Su Bochenski, director of Lincolnwood Public Library, IL, as well as Elizabeth Stearns, Assistant Director, Community Services, and Carmen Patlan, Community Engagement & Outreach Manager, Waukegan Public Library, IL.

Among the commonsensical, yet often overlooked, points made by Fletcher and Singer is that non-users cannot effectively be reached by focus groups, surveys on the library website, or other such mechanisms that may be useful for capturing the opinions of active library patrons. To reach this other group, libraries must go where they already are: malls, daycare centers, coffee shops, commuter rail stations, houses of worship, farmer's markets, senior programs, etc. The Pikes Peak Library District, CO, even went to a feed store!

Pikes Peak's efforts were particularly hands-on: some 40 staffers visited five locations each and spoke to ten people at each place they visited, gathering feedback from 2,000 people. (Libraries that can't spare, or don't even have, 40 staffers need not despair: only 400 responses are needed for a reliable survey result, and there are less labor-intensive ways to get them.) Among the things Pike's Peak learned is that certain branch hours were not convenient: that tweak alone increased traffic by 20 percent. In addition to gathering information, staffers used new technology to offer library cards right in their offsite locations: some 80 percent of those new cards were subsequently used. And because non-users reported low levels of awareness of library services, the library put up posters in unusual places, such as bathroom stalls, to educate new users.

For those who can't go in person, one counterintuitive piece of information Fletcher shared is that phone and mail surveys actually get a better response than web-based ones, especially if a self-addressed, postage paid envelope is included. For best results, mailed surveys should have plenty of whitespace and 11 or 12 point fonts; phone surveys should be scheduled at the convenience of the subject and not last more than 10-12 minutes. Mail surveys can yield candidates for phone followups, or libraries with the budget to do so can hire a recruiter to find suitable subjects in the target audience. (A small financial incentive for the interviewee may also be required.) To increase response rates to a mail survey, everything from banners to theater marquees can be used to remind recipients to return their mailings.

To maximize effectiveness, libraries should write their own surveys. These should try to get at why respondents don't use the library: personal reasons such as preferring to buy materials, or library shortcomings. (To test interest in new services, a brief description and reaction will garner a more useful response than an open ended call for suggestions.)

Shortcomings are more fruitful for libraries to address in their efforts to increase usage. Examples can be anything from uncomfortable chairs to a lack of multicultural programs. One often-overlooked place to find non-users is in the library, in the form of parents who bring their children but do not themselves use library services. Their presence in the building gives library staff the chance to do some in-person data gathering. One library, after talking with such parents, moved key adult offerings into the children's section, so parents could browse without leaving kids unsupervised, and emphasized its ability to offer books in many languages via interlibrary loan.

Small, successful solutions

Lincolnwood has developed a strategic plan to increase cardholdership. But before it could even be implemented,

Bochenski managed to increase it from 29 to 41 percent simply by making small tweaks to reduce barriers and negative experiences: from moving furniture to make the outlets visible, to freeing pencils from their vending machine, to relaxing lending and card policies. Once the plan goes into effect on July 1, larger bore initatives such as focusing on a popular collection, increasing downloadable and tech training offerings, and hiring a full time marketing person will help Bochenski attain her goals of 50, then 80, percent cardholdership.

Ambassadors of Engagement

Stearns and Patlan shared the details of the program for which Waukegan recently won the 2013 National Medal for Museum and Library Service. The Promotoras Ambassador Program is something Stearns "stole" from healthcare, where it is a best practice, she said. Waukegan's goal was to reach out to the area's large Latino population—even larger, according to the local school district, than census figures had captured. The first step was to recruit a Latino person who was already respected and trusted in the community. Stearns found Patlan working in a local church. And, Patlan said, she accepted a $13,000 pay cut to work at the library because she felt it was important to help her community.

Once on the job, Patlan recruited volunteers from among Latino users of the library, asking them how the library had changed their lives. She then trained them with talking points, including the importance of kindergarden readiness, equipped them with a uniform, and sent them out to survey. But it doesn't stop there. When new users come in, an ambassador meets them and walks them through navigating the library's system. A ladder of programs are built to help users progress from one stage of English language learning to the next. (The programs were so popular they developed a waiting list, and the library had to build two more program rooms.) Since the program began, Waukegan has attracted 2,900 new Latino cardholders, and some 64 percent of them use the library's services "continuously," according to Patlan.