Embracing and Shaping Change: Creating connections with users in small to medium public libraries

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Small to medium libraries need their users to see the library as their place, creating connections which result in stories to change the way our funders/Councils base libraries success on numbers/issues.

Small to medium libraries are under threat. Libraries are struggling with reduced staffing, static or reduced materials and book budgets and delays, or cancellations, for buildings.

With limited resources and staff how do libraries make sure they are creating connections between library staff, library services and library users, delivering added value services and creating an awareness of the potential of their library. Libraries need users to become the voice for their library and the experiences of using their library becomes as addictive as online shopping. Promotion has to become the ‘it’ word and for some ‘it’ may mean survival!

This presentation will outline value added services that can be managed, will wow users, and go beyond being just another library event or service to create connections.

The importance of enhanced online access and services for rural users will be highlighted. There will be practical tips and tricks and examples that can be adapted and used.

The paper will identify ways to ensure that there are real benefits both professionally and personally for the extra efforts of the staff and most importantly the community.
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Small to medium libraries can be the heart of their community. Public Libraries need users to see the library as their place and an opportunity to transform their lives and thus they tell our story. Small to medium libraries should be creating connections which result in stories from us and our users to change the way our funders/Councils assess the performance of libraries.

Small to medium /rural libraries are working with a static or reducing population and in many areas fast aging population. The income levels of their districts vary but statistics show that % earning more than $50,000 p.a. is generally only 33% of the national average.

Rural councils are struggling with high debt and the subsequent high rating levels for small communities. They must still meet the costs of regulation and legislation compliance and provide quality infrastructure over large geographic areas to meet central government requirements.

There are great pressures both to provide quality library services and to meet the social needs and wellbeing of their communities. Decision making is often influenced by vocal factions resulting in for example the provision of an all-weather track for the local athletics club serving a 20,000 population and used only once or twice a week. Libraries take from the rates bucket comes after all these other demands have been met and rating levels have been set. Library budgets are often set to meet the available funds.

One reality for the future is the threat, or possibilities, of amalgamation and the workloads and related costs, some of them invisible, associated with this. Library staffing and services will potentially be facing huge changes which will need to be embraced. Rural libraries will need to put aside their reluctance to change and do this well in their own interests and for their communities.

Rural communities are traditionally more conservative than their urban counterparts and councils are slow to adopt change. Most library performance measures are still very statistics based. It is almost impossible to get Council’s to recognise the library as the ‘jewel in their crown’ and to see the full range of activities and services offered as being valid and essential. Libraries are the one council activity or service that people can choose to use at no cost and one of few positive sides of council operations.

What can we do to change this perception and tell our story in a way that Councils understand and resonates in a way that ensures we have a place in the future and makes us sustainable? It is Important to have verbal and written support from community to do this we and our users need to tell our story. We need to grow brand loyalty in a small static market. Meeting user needs must be the top priority of the librarians of rural/small to medium libraries.

Many of us are working within an environment of:
• Limited existing resources
• Declining resource budgets
• Static staffing levels
• Delayed or cut building plans or upgrades
• Static/reducing population

We need to rise above this and find ways to create connections and become ‘as addictive as online shopping.’ To do this Promotion needs to become our ‘it’ word. We need to unashamedly throw off the historical image and get rid of our librarian inhibitions, promote our libraries at every opportunity and manufacture as many opportunities as we can. We must become sales and marketing experts, using our knowledge and contacts within the community to deliver enhanced and innovative library services.

How do we promote value added services with limited resources?

• No Council PR or marketing support
• Little or no budget for colour copying, professional design and printing
• Struggling or no local bookshops or associated businesses to partner with for promotion
• Reduced or historically low staffing levels, staff ceilings
• Library technical resources often handed down from Council or very low level.

Councils struggle to recognise or understand the extent and level of technical equipment, connections and support needed to run public library services in the 21st century. Libraries are seen as low priority for rate investment in these areas.

We must acknowledge the assets of our rural libraries particularly our human resources, including library staff who are truly dedicated and work with very limited resources. The volunteers, friends of the library and loyal library users can also be included with this.

To summarise our assets:
• Staff – local knowledge and understanding of how the community thinks and operates
• Multi-generational supportive users
• Library building often the only up to date, comfortable, accessible building with staff for community events and displays, only local government presence in rural communities
• APNK
• Local community organisations and philanthropic trusts
• Volunteers and Friends of the Library

We need to view our assets as the glass half full and move our libraries to a positive, strong position. Identifying our assets will mean that mutually beneficial connections can be made between those assets and scarce resources can be stretched even further making an even greater impact for the benefit of the community.

Make of use of free opportunities for information to promote and report on the value and use of public libraries. Use the following:
• Lists – NZ-Libs, APLM
• Finding Heroes and other blogs
• Local and National Government reports such as -Kiwis Count: New Zealanders’ satisfaction with public services.
• Respond to surveys so you can use the information generated and share information.

There is a strongly held myth that with e-books, online databases and Google that people need library services less. The reality is that:
• E-books represent an expansion of the market rather than a takeover
• Libraries are interacting even more with the community
• It is all about chatting!! And being the intellectual glue of our community
• Interaction between people is absolutely fundamental in knowledge creation – This is part of libraries in the 21st Century

Today’s library users are about:
• Self service
• Fast service
• Service in any medium they choose
• 24/7 availability of service
• Virtual library

What are we doing in our libraries to create connections and get our people to?
• Tell our story to others
• Tell us their library good news story
• See us as essential in their lives and their future
• ‘Become their trusted brand’ and a safe place to be
• Use and value the connections we create people to people

How have Masterton District Library and Central Hawkes Bay District Libraries embraced change and delivered services that ‘wow’ their customers into telling their story.

**Online services**
Take advantage of the growing number of people who don’t have access to the equipment they need to access services only available online – [www.newzealand.govt.nz](http://www.newzealand.govt.nz)

Technology and the online community especially have become a big part of peoples’ lives. Many are more at home with the computer than face to face. Young people are embracing their high tech world and they are increasingly ‘online.’ We take the library to them in their spaces and if you give them an interactive space to work and communicate with you in, then they will i.e. Facebook - CHB Libraries has the 8th largest Facebook and Twitter following for public libraries in New Zealand. Masterton District Library has a fast growing following and is getting responses to questions asked of its Facebook community about library services and the perceptions of libraries. Remember to connect your customers with what is happening
in their library and how their library operates. Create your article or information once only, and then post it everywhere you have access to blogs, Facebook, newsletter, Web page etc.

Our OPACs provide the 24/7 service and we both actively ensure that our users are aware and capable of using these services to their optimum. Masterton found that some users after being shown at registration would then forget and never use the service, or be unsure. We now have a dual screen setup and wireless keyboard and mouse and expect all new registrants and reregistration’s with a PIN to login for themselves access their online account and reserve an item. CHB and Masterton both do one to one tutorials for all IT services available in their libraries.

Promote your staff skills and knowledge to offer new services. E-books and readers are creating a new area of technology for people to become competent with.

**Book launches and author promotions**

Build relationships with publishers and local authors to hold book promotions and make sure of their success so you can ask again and they may even start to get in touch. CHB Libraries are very successful at this they have had author events with Alyson Gofton, Christine Fernyhough, Jacqueline Wilson (200 kids – 2 sessions) and Nadia Lim to name a few. These events are so much more appreciated by smaller communities where literary events are not common. Use these as fundraisers as well. Always fundraise for something particular for the library – additional shelving, new equipment. People need to know where their money is going and that it is something they place a value on. This can be an opportunity to network with other libraries to share the costs. The E.C.READ’N Summer Reading Programme is an example of libraries working together to tour artists and authors on a shared cost basis.

The Wairarapa event Yarns n’ Barns is organised by a local bookshop. The library sells tickets, does the publicity posters etc. and is part of the organising committee, 2 events are held in the library and both prove extremely popular.

Make better use of your space and your ability to organise events and don’t hesitate to make changes to your libraries that don’t cost money but remove the barriers to customer interaction with the staff. Change your shelving around regularly and try different collections in different areas. In Masterton Library the fiction is in one long run and every 2 years the run is changed so the A-Z is completely switched. It is really interesting to see what starts to issue all of a sudden as a result.

**Children’s Connections**

- Win, win you get kids and parents
- Only as successful as the time you put in - be inventive: kids are not judgemental so virtually anything goes.
- Encourage word of mouth publicity and keep/start running regular programmes for babies and pre-schoolers and mothers.
Whatever you do make sure that you do it efficiently but use the KISS principle and ‘Keep it Simple Stupid.’ Don’t raise expectations that you will struggle to meet in the future. Expectations not met will only result in loss of patronage.

Successful events and activities held in and out of our libraries include:

- Bingo
- Quiz evenings
- Fear factor
- Discos
- The Great Race
- Dress up dolls (Kate and William a huge hit)
- Storytellers
- Authors
- Craft, craft, craft – use your imagination

**Adults Too**

- Bookclubs – you can do it very simply – encourage members to add reviews to your catalogue and run regular sessions about new or useful library services – e-books, online accounts, searching the catalogue and reserving items.
- Lecture series – Seniors Celebrate Masterton – local history and local knowledge speakers monthly – contact rest homes and seniors groups – regular attendance 50 plus Masterton
- U3A meetings at the library
- Create strong links with your local genealogical society they have speakers, workshops etc.
- Take up every possible opportunity for links with local community groups
- Masterton Library has a leaflet that we have copies of at the WINZ office setting out the services we have to support those looking for employment. We have the standard WINZ CV templates available through our free Internet.
- Careers NZ have trained Masterton staff on use of their Website and offer CV assistance sessions monthly in the library.

**Community Connections**

Local organisations and groups are often looking for interesting speakers. You have so much happening in your libraries that there is always a message and information that will relate to any community group. This is a further opportunity to show the professional knowledge and expertise of your staff.

- Home schooled
- PORSE
- U3A
- Bright Futures
• School Library Networks
• Reading Together
• Literacy programmes in schools
• SeniorNet
• Teen Parent Unit

Volunteers and Friends of the Library Connections

If you are fortunate to have an active ‘Friends of the Library’ group you will be able to rely on their support and fundraising for capital items which do not come within the budget. It is possible for Friends groups to apply for funding that libraries are not eligible to do so. The CHB Friends of the Library contributed to the costs of the refurbishment of the Waipawa Library, providing funding for children’s and teen furniture ($10,000) and shelving through applying for funds. They are continuing this with the facelift for the Waipukurau Library where they are providing new shelving. They have continuous raffles as well as author fundraisers.

Masterton and CHB Libraries use volunteers as follows:
• Duke of Edinburgh
• Schools work experience and fundraising work days
• Return to work programmes
• Housebound drivers
• Processing
• Shelving and shelf checking

Collection Connections – Readers’ Advisory

Good Readers’ Advisory services can have a huge impact on the way your users view their library service, the library profession and the library experience. Staff need confidence and knowledge to offer readers’ advisory services.
• Know your collections to create connections and become as addictive as online shopping
• Know your community
• Tell your customers readers’ advisory is what you do and what you are trained to do.
• Staff picks
• Author lists – Who writes like sources
• When a borrower has a previously loaned system alert it gives the staff member an opportunity to put readers’ advisory into practice. An opportunity to offer RA services that should not be missed.
• Open Stack Week

At Masterton ‘Staff Picks’ stickers are placed on books that staff have read and recommend. These books are very popular with customers. It is proposed to have stickers for each staff under pseudonyms so borrowers can follow particular staff person’s choices. A European/Scandinavian crime authors list included not just the recently popular authors but also Fred Vargas the French woman crime writer whose books issued slowly. Inclusion on a
recommended author list, along with very popular authors, and adding a staff pick sticker to her most well-known title more than doubled the issues from this author.

**Library Connections**

You need to take what is happening in your library beyond the library walls. It is no good promoting library events and services only in the library. Your local Chamber of Commerce/Business Development Group and Information Centre will have a Website and be posting information around the business area. You are a business, join them and use them for publicity opportunities and to develop contacts with the business community.

- Media - columns in paper – Council publications
- Articles, blog.
- Facebook
- Website – must be up to date
- Don’t forget the age old word of mouth
- Displays and promotional material out of the library

Both Libraries have displays at Council and community expos. These include displays, information materials, PC setups for OPACs and registrations, e-readers, collection samples, competitions and up and coming library events. Establish working relationships with the staff of your local newspaper to get ‘brand library’ out there. Masterton Library has a fortnightly column written by different staff about their areas of responsibility which has a strong following. To have a huge impact on something assess your charges and remove a charge that does not generate much income but has a major impact on customers’ use of the Library. Masterton District Library removed the charges for reservations (income $2,400 p.a.) as part of joining SMART. The reserves have increased from 3338 (including housebound and staff reservations) to over 7,000 (some staff reserves included only) in the 10 months since the charges were removed.

**Library to Library Connections**

- Sharing/Networking with other public libraries
- School librarians/teacher librarians
- Share resources
- Share knowledge and information
- Use email lists
- Talk to each other online, in person?
- Follow blogs - Finding Heroes
- Share training opportunities – not only with other public libraries but with school librarian teachers and other library groups.

The reason we are standing here together today is that we have had these connections between us for 16 years. We have shared knowledge and resources and supported each other in times of difficulty. Together we have grown undertaken new initiatives and made ourselves and our libraries stronger.


**Staff Connections**

Employing staff with special and different skill sets has opened doors, and created opportunities to deliver new services and offer in house training. Both libraries are in the forefront of the use of technology and social media because they have been able to employ staff with technical skills and strengths. Training and resourcing all staff to deliver enhanced services, think outside the square and deliver customer focussed policies and procedures has created a staff culture that means that staff are happy to go the extra mile – although at Waipawa Library senior staff have suggested that there should be an age restriction on attending discos – no staff over 60 allowed!! Staff at the libraries are proud of the team they are part of and the results of their combined efforts.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion there is a future and an opportunity for all who embrace change and it is up to us to determine the future of small to medium public libraries. We must seize the day and take advantage of all the knowledge and services at our fingertips so we can demonstrate that our libraries are essential to our communities. If we share our strengths we will have a greater impact and ensure our sustainability.

**References**


