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Outreach Services  
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Library outreach is a difficult concept to define. It is not just one process; there are as many ways to provide outreach as there are patrons in a library. Outreach means different things for children, adults, and seniors, regular library patrons and non-patrons, fiction readers, researchers, and computer users. But in general, outreach can be seen as any service or activity that gets patrons or potential patrons interested in a library.

Pointon (2009) defined outreach in the following way: “Draw a circle around the central or main library building—every library service, program, or library-related endeavor taking place outside that circle is outreach” (p. 2-5). However, this is necessarily the best definition; Ford (2009) noted that with the increase in Internet and technology use by libraries, including offering remote access to various reference services, regular library services are extending into the domain of Pointon’s outreach.

Regardless of the exact definition, the reasons behind offering outreach always apply:

1. Outreach provides library services to those who for a number of reasons cannot physically get to the main library.
2. It turns non-users into users by providing services to those who find traditional library services to be inconvenient.
3. The existence of library outreach services generates invaluable goodwill within a community. (Pointon, 2009, p. 5)

Outreach can be an effective marketing tool. Bussey (2009) wrote that her library designed outreach to make library staff visible in the community and highlight upcoming events

at the library. She stated that “the average person must read, see, and hear the same information over and over several times before it is retained,” which is, as she wrote, an excellent reason for the library to promote itself wherever it can (p. 21). Bringing more, especially new, patrons into the library is important for its continued growth and for maintaining relevancy in this pro-digital age.

Of course, not all outreach has to be bringing people to the library. Some services, especially those to seniors and others unable to personally come to the library, are about bringing the library to the people. Many libraries provide bookmobile services, bringing books and other items into nursing homes, juvenile detention centers, schools, and underserved areas of the community. In this way, libraries can reach patrons who can't come to the library themselves or who would never have thought of the library as a place to go. To the extreme, one library has transformed their bookmobile into an entire portable library, complete with computers and wireless internet access. Users of this bookmobile treat it as an extension of the library, asking reference questions and seeking help in uploading pictures to the Web (Hyatt, 2009, p. 35-36).

Other services are just about people having fun with the library staff. One example of this is a program at the Indiana State University Library in which librarians brought a Wii to a retirement community. According to Gritten (2008), the goal of this outreach program was simply to engage the seniors in lifelong learning and leave them with positive feelings toward the library (p.15).

With the proliferation of the Web and social networking, bringing the library to the people is more important than ever. Ford (2009) posited a strong need for outreach in the age of Google and Facebook, writing that in a world of Web users looking for information, libraries are still better than search engines for delivering targeted services and engaging community

members. This may be true, but users that see coming into the library as an expense of time and effort may decide that timeliness is more important than thorough information. When users are looking only for the best information that they can find quickly, libraries must meet their users where they search, and how.

Changing the library's online public access catalog may be the first step to inviting Web users into the library. With so many resources migrating to the Web, as well as increased use of holds, it is no longer true that users of a catalog are necessarily in the library, where they can be helped in their OPAC use by librarians and can walk to the shelf to see if a particular book is what they need. Many OPACs are becoming outreach tools by streamlining searches, providing previews of books' content, and recommending other books based on a search.

Outreach can also happen outside of a library's official Web site. Jeffers (2009) wrote about his library's implementation of a MySpace page in 2006, which led to a sharp increase in remote users of the library's official Web site over the next two years. The library went all-out with its page, using the bulletin board and blog to promote materials and services, providing links to the library's Web site, and offering a chat client staffed by a librarian. Aside from providing a way for users to get reference help without approaching the desk, the library may also have increased its patron base – Jeffers noted that he had interactions with people who thought that their fines or lost books were keeping them from using the library (p. 22). These patrons, once reassured anonymously that this was not the case, likely came back to the library without their previous fears of recrimination.

Chat services like Jeffers's have become increasingly ubiquitous, with many academic libraries offering Ask a Librarian services during reference hours and public libraries participating in programs like Ohio's KnowItNow24x7, a 24-hour connection to public

librarians. Interestingly, these services, even the 24-hour ones, are most often used by patrons during regular reference hours. In the case of KnowItNow specifically, users said that they were drawn to the service to avoid travelling to a library and because they wanted to use online information (Carroll, 2007, p. 46).

The use of social networking through MySpace, Facebook, Twitter, and the like is also becoming more common. Many libraries use these services to provide updates on events in the library, changes in hours, and new additions to library Web sites. These sites allow libraries to connect with users who may not come to the library often, or stay long when they do come. Another way that libraries use the Web to connect with users is through blogs and podcasts. These may also promote library services, but more often they are used as readers' advisory outreach tools. Some library blogs are a series of book talks, like that of the Williamsburg Regional Library<sup>1</sup>, which provides a brief synopsis and review of one book every day. Each entry is followed by a link to the WRL catalog, providing local users with a way to get a book quickly if they like the sound of it. Others, like the blog of Cleveland Heights-University Heights librarian Greg Fisher<sup>2</sup>, are updated less often but provide extensive bibliographies in various categories, from award winners to read-alikes to books from a specific country. The Twinsburg Library's ABC podcasts<sup>3</sup> provide book talks but are also just discussions of reading and the book world, keeping listeners up-to-date on book news. All of these services are used by readers who already frequent the library, but they also reach infrequent users and people who are library patrons in entirely different states. In this latter case, the outreach may not bring people into the host library, but it does give people goodwill toward libraries everywhere.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://bfgb.wordpress.com/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://heightslibrary.org/wordpress/undeadrat/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://bethandcari.blogspot.com/>

All of these outreach services take some time and money, just like services offered within a library building do. However, they may not cost as much as one would expect. Pointon (2009), in his analysis of his library's visits to senior housing developments, wrote that the cost per item borrowed during these visits (based on staff wages and library overhead) worked out to \$1.72, while the cost per item borrowed at the main library was \$2.02 (p. 5). And outreach services provided over the internet cost only the time spent to build and maintain them. These costs are easy to recoup; if any outreach program results in more customers using the library and its services, or knowing that the services exist to be used, the program can be considered a success.

## References

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