

New Jersey Libraries NEWSletter

Enhancing the Library as a “Third Place”

Peter Bromberg, Assistant Director
South Jersey Regional Library Cooperative (SJRLC), Gibbsboro, NJ

A unique convergence of three societal trends is creating an unprecedented opportunity for libraries: 1) people are increasingly using the Internet in the privacy of their home for activities that were previously conducted in public spaces, i.e. shopping, banking, conversing, researching, listening to concerts, and watching movies. 2) Americans, as pointed out by Robert Putnam in Bowling Alone, are experiencing a marked decrease in social interaction as they become increasingly disconnected from family, friends, and each other. 3) businesses are increasingly becoming a “destination of choice.” Instead of going to the hardware store to buy grout or drywall, customers go to learn how to tile a bathroom or put up a wall. Banks now offer retirement planning seminars and bookstores offer music, coffee bars, and story times...our customers now have a greater need for shared spaces and social interaction than ever before, but they also have more options regarding how and where they spend their free time.



Libraries are transformative places and offer people a “third place” (not home, not work) where they can come to explore, imagine, think, learn, play, and reflect. Our function as a “third place” has never been more important to our continued health and relevance. If libraries are to survive and thrive we must redouble our efforts and refocus our energies to ensure that we are not only “third places” but “destinations of choice.”

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Thinking of “library as place” invokes the big question: why would someone in our community choose to spend their time here rather than somewhere else? Related questions might be: What does the library look, smell, feel, and sound like? What do our signs communicate? What kind of environment are we offering and how do library staff contribute to a friendly, welcoming environment?

The thriving library of 2010 will have thoroughly considered these questions and be guided by the answers they have discovered. Many NJLA members are probably familiar with Mount Laurel Library’s success with their use of retail merchandising techniques implemented as part of the “Trading Spaces” project. A do-it-yourself kit, replete with documentation, signage, photos, furniture vendor contacts, prices, and more is available at the project website www.sjrlc.org/tradingspaces. Look at this resource page if your library is interested in becoming a “destination of choice.”

Detailing a strategic direction for your library is outside of the scope of this short article, but here are six things you can do to enhance your library’s status as a true “third place”:

1. **DO A SIGNAGE AUDIT:** Have everyone on your staff, and some customers, walk through your library with these questions: What makes it easy and difficult to find something? Are signs readable from a distance? Are signs jargon-free? Do you use Dewey numbers instead of natural language? (don’t) Eliminate ripped signs, visible tape and handwritten notes. Use positive, respectful wording and avoid parental tones.
2. **OFFER FOOD AND DRINK IN THE LIBRARY:** (Notice, I don’t say “permit.”) The role of our olfactory senses in creating a positive or negative impression of our environment cannot be underestimated. Translation? Coffee smells like comfort.
3. **OFFER A VARIETY OF PROGRAMMING FOR DIFFERENT AGES/INTERESTS:** This fits in very well with our traditional role and mission, and many libraries already do a wonderful job with programming. Do more. Take some risks. Ask yourself who’s NOT coming to the library and try to offer a few programs for that demographic. Think of five new places to advertise your programming (bulletin boards in laundromats, the Y, the Rotary Club, the carwash, etc.)
4. **MAKE THE COLLECTION THE STAR:** Use themed displays of face-out materials to highlight and promote portions of your collection. Tie themes in with current events, pop culture, current library programs, or anything else that seems relevant, playful, or fun. Make your collection browseable and your customers will reward you by circulating materials in record numbers.
5. **INVOLVE YOUR CUSTOMERS:** Ask customers what they would like to see in the library, for help with walk-throughs and signage audits and for display ideas. Enlist their help in creating displays. Any way you can directly involve your community will pay off tenfold by giving you an inexpensive and highly effective marketing tool: a cadre of invested community members who will promote the library through word-of-mouth.
6. **GO WIRELESS:** Wireless Internet access is a must-have. If you’re not offering it already, do it now. It’s cheaper than you think, and your wireless customers will come out of the woodwork.

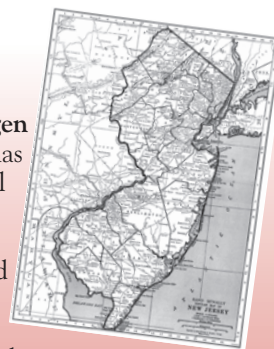
For more information, go to our “Looking Further” section or contact Peter at: 856-346-1222 bromberg@sjrlc.org

Around THE STATE

ALA reports that over 1,400 libraries participated in the “Step Up to the Plate@your library.” In its press materials ALA highlighted the Gloucester County Library in Mullica Hill for taking the message to the community, passing out information about the program to all coaches of the local softball and little league teams to pass out to parents and players.

The Outreach Committee of the Bergen County Cooperative Library System has been developing programs to help local libraries identify and address the needs of ESL residents. Based on the Bergen County census, the Committee determined the most popular languages (Korean, Spanish, and Russian) and is working toward establishing model libraries for these groups.

Invited guests will speak to librarians about building cultural awareness for ethnic groups. Currently in the works are: participation at the Chusok (Korean) Fall Festival and plans to partner with HRLC, INFOLINK, and the State Library to sponsor a World Language Vendors Fair in early 2007.




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