

Electronic Collections as a Basis for Advocacy and Collaboration

by Nan Carmack

Virginia public libraries are community institutions that are often referred to as “best-kept secrets.” In my efforts to let the cat out of the bag in Campbell County, our e-collections have proven to be great assets for growing advocates and collaborators. Originally engaged in marketing efforts for newly acquired databases, our e-collection relationships have grown exponentially as we realized their power. I hope the following examples inspire other libraries, regardless of size, to think big.

As a response to the economic challenges of our patrons as well as increased requests for résumé assistance and the ongoing theft of hard-copy reference books, the Campbell County Public Library System (CCPLS) subscribed to Gale’s *Career Transitions*. This one-stop shop for job searches, résumé development, career advice, and interview skills is a favorite among patrons and staff. However, we still needed to obtain a certain level of usage to justify the expenditure, so we began to design a marketing plan. As with any marketing effort, our team met to identify the following:

- Who could benefit from this database?
- What organizations are trying to help people find jobs?
- Where do job seekers currently look for assistance?

By asking these questions, we found a number of opportunities to promote the database that

created not only users, but advocates. Our local community action group, Lyn-CAG (Lynchburg Community Action Group, <http://lyncag.org/>), offers a job-readiness program for former inmates and had just lost funding for their career teacher. *Career Transitions* created an environment from which

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another employee could guide the Lyn-CAG participants. Now supporters of Lyn-CAG are also library supporters.

Further, collaboration with our local Virginia Employment Commission representatives eased their intense spike in service requests and allowed them to send applicants away with something concrete to do between application submissions and VEC interviews, creating a direct pipeline of new users. Our public school’s technical and vocational division also implemented *Career Transitions* as an assignment for seniors that is completed together in the classroom. All of these collaborations created new library users, particularly in the hard-to-reach, eighteen- to thirty-year-old-male

category, while also opening lines of communication and dialogue with other community groups and creating statistical data to demonstrate our efficacy to our funding bodies.

Using the same approach with LearningExpress Library, this test-preparation database became the basis for new partnerships, new users, and new advocates. LearningExpress Library created opportunities to make presentations to an entire unit of military recruiters and to partner with the Virginia Technical Institute, which offers trade education and certification in welding, plumbing, HVAC, etc.; school guidance counselors for PSAT, SAT, and Achievement Test preparation; and two private cosmetology schools. We begin making presentations to our first-response recruiters for EMT and firefighter certification next month. Again, these efforts created a presence, awareness, and participation in an underrepresented demographic among our library users.

This year, we began an Overdrive collaborative with our geographic neighbors. This joint effort allowed our localities to offer downloadables to our patrons—something we would not

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have been able to do on our own. The presence of e-materials has stimulated a rush of new card applicants whose primary interest is in e-reader usage. This mid- to upper-middle-class demographic represents a group of people who previously might have preferred to purchase a book from an online or big-box venue rather than conform to library hours. Now that they may utilize library materials at whatever time they access the Internet, they have become great fans of the library, moving from “probably supporter” status to “super supporter” status, as defined in *From Awareness to Funding*, the 2008 study of library support

from OCLC. This is further demonstrated by an increase in Friends

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members, unsolicited donations, and tribute gifts. Their presence is

felt on our website as well as in our Facebook fanbase.

In these times of economic hardship, there has been a shift in the question I pose to myself and CCPLS staff, trustees, and supporters. I no longer ask, “Can we afford this?” Now I inquire, “Can we afford NOT to do this?” By viewing our collection as an asset, not just an offering, we’ve been able to create an environment of awareness, collaboration, and use that positions us well for more relevant programming, new supporters, and increased use. What can your assets do for you? **VL**