

Time to experiment? By Ken Chad

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At time of stress on budgets, should libraries be looking to use technology to tap the potential for innovation, rather than restrict resourcing to core services? Ken Chad looks at some examples of what can be done.



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Recently some school teacher friends set up a new children's bookshop¹ and it's been fascinating to see their exciting project come to fruition. They have a very public spirited mission in terms of encouraging reading. It's their passion and I see similarities between their approach and offering and the public library service. For example they run storytimes, author visits and creative writing sessions for children. This is at a time when the public library has reduced some of its services to children in light of funding cuts.²

Another friend, disappointed that the public library is no longer open on Sundays has taken out a subscription to new online 'library' called Magic Town.³ This virtual world is available 24/7 and is based on picture book characters and stories. Its mission 'is to use storytelling to help children develop a lifelong passion for reading and learning.'

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It seems that there is growing demand for such services. Innovative new business ventures are tapping into that demand and appealing to children and their parents through new channels. Of course we don't know if these new businesses will succeed long term and is easy to sympathise with librarians who see no alternative making cuts in the face of slashed budgets. However hard times are perhaps the very time when we most need to explore innovative approaches.

In his book 'The innovators guide to growth', Scott D Anthony suggests that 'except in rare situations..... [organisations] should set aside at least some portion of their resources for new business initiatives.'⁴ He goes on to say that ring fencing the resource is important, especially where organisations face trouble in their core business. I think many libraries would agree that they face 'trouble in their core business.' Anthony goes on to explain that in these circumstances there will be an almost overwhelming temptation to divert innovation resources to prop up the conventional side of business. It seems to me that many libraries are succumbing to this temptation. However, in the long run, he says, 'such measures can be disastrous.'

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So if there is a case for innovation in these hard times what might we look for? Writing in Information Today in 2011, Val Skelton suggested that: 'The innovative libraries were delivering digital content, and were creating as well as stewarding content and

managing licensing and copyright for their organisations.’⁵ According to The Reading Agency: ‘Reading in the UK is changing dramatically. New digital platforms are transforming the ways in which people discover their reading and connect with other readers.’ One illustration of this trend, a ‘digital novel’ called ‘Inanimate Alice,’ was demonstrated to librarians at a recent ebook conference in Edinburgh. Designed originally as entertainment, ‘Inanimate Alice’⁶ has been adopted by teachers ‘eager to connect with students through media they inherently understand’. Students are encouraged to ‘co-create developing episodes of their own, either filling in the gaps or developing new strands.’ In 2012 it won the ‘best website for teaching and learning’ award from the American Association of School Librarians.

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Technology can be a great enabler. Skype can connect an author from, for example, the United States with an audience in the UK. Not only is the technology itself inexpensive but it saves on travel time and costs. Digital content from publishers can be used to spark off creative writing sessions. The Reading Agency’s digital marketing research showed that ‘publishers produce a wealth of digital marketing assets (author videos, podcasts, images, reading group guides, trailers, widgets, Skype events) which they want to disperse more effectively’. This is a potential goldmine and The Reading Agency is working with librarians and publishers to further explore its potential.⁷

Technology can not only help users better engage with authors and content but also make it easier to publish content as a professional looking ebook. Writing recently in the School Library Journal, Jeff Hastings reported that he ‘was able to create a basic ebook and export it in a couple of different file formats within

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an hour.’⁸ He goes on to say: ‘More sophisticated students can add depth, motion, and interactivity to their ebooks by adding “behaviors”—actions that happen when readers click on them’. Behaviors include internal links for jumping to another page within the book or external links for opening Web pages; playing an audio or video file; or revealing or hiding a page layer. Once a version of an ebook is deemed complete, it can be exported as a downloadable file that can be made available for free or for sale on a private website, or submitted to Amazon or Apple.

Innovative libraries are grasping the potential to be proactive in this new ebook ecosystem. For example Harris County Public Library (HCPL) in Houston Texas is supplementing its Overdrive ebook platform with ebooks direct from publishers and authors. J. A. Konrath was the first author contacted and he plans to offer his ebooks to any library for \$3.99. Furthermore there will be no digital rights management (DRM) constraints so libraries can lend these titles to as many simultaneous users as they want, and are free to convert the title into any format—current or future—that they need for their users.

Of course it’s not easy to invest in innovation in the current climate. However Linda Stevens from HCPL comments: ‘It’s a time that’s really ripe for experimentation, because everybody is trying to figure out what to do and what path should we follow.’

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³ See Magic Town: <http://www.magictown.com/about-us/>

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⁶ Inanimate Alice: <http://www.inanimatealice.com/>

⁷ Reading Agency Digital Skills Sharing Project: <http://readingagency.org.uk/digitalskills/>

⁸ 'Make-your-own-ebooks platform: Aerbook Maker.' By Jeff Hastings. The Digital Shift [Library Journal School Library Journal] 19 August 2012. <http://www.thedigitalshift.com/2012/08/ebooks/make-your-own-ebooks-platform/>

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