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Community engagement solutions for public libraries

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This briefing paper outlines the challenges public libraries face in reshaping their community profile. It highlights how emerging community engagement solutions may help target existing and potential users in repositioning public libraries and refreshing their services.

Introduction

Public libraries have always engaged with their users and the wider community. In recent years, however, community or patron engagement has risen from the ranks of routine activities to become a strategic priority requiring new kinds of solutions.

The Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated the shift from physical buildings and print resources to digital content and services. During the pandemic, as bookshops and libraries closed, there was a marked increase in the use of e-books. Surveying the US, UK and Australian

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markets, the 2021 Freckle report noted 'a remarkable shift of reading of print books to e-books after several years when the figures had been stable'.¹ In April

2020, the BBC reported public library 'loans of online e-books, e-magazines and audiobooks were up an average of 63% in March compared with last year'.²

Libraries are redefining success in terms of user and community outcomes.³ The strengthening of neighbourhood groupings and initiatives during the pandemic presents fresh opportunities to engage locally and re-energise elements of the library offer. To meet this need, new products and services are emerging from library technology vendors. Libraries are drawn to their engagement, personalisation and outreach capabilities. They offer marketing services and analytics that integrate with existing library systems and tap into the usage data those systems generate.

The decline in core library service usage

UK public libraries have seen a 70% decline in their core service of book loans since 2000. In the US, the fall is 22% in seven years; in Australia it is 21% over the same period.⁴ Cuts in spending over the last decade have exacerbated the situation. Since 2010-11, library net expenditure in the UK has declined by 40% in real terms,⁵ and between 2010 and 2019, almost 800 public libraries closed.⁶ In the US, OCLC, a global library cooperative and provider of shared technology services, notes the 'chilling effect of the financial crisis and other external factors on public services'.⁷

Awareness of library offerings and value continues to be a challenge. As PC Sweeney notes, the Pew Research Center has consistently found in its household surveys that many Americans, including library users, are unaware of the breadth of resources offered by the public library.⁸ Furthermore, libraries now compete for attention with a range of other offers. In this fragmented communications environment, the UK's Libraries Taskforce noted

that ‘public libraries will continue to compete with other sources of information and entertainment, physically and virtually’.⁹

However, this picture of decline is complicated and does not appear to be related to any decrease in the public’s enthusiasm for reading. The Guardian reported in 2020 that print book sales were booming.¹⁰ The critic Amanda Craig has suggested that this a golden age of writing for children.¹¹

Public libraries in local government

UK public libraries are protected by their status as a statutory (mandatory) service. The Local Government Association (LGA) explicitly holds councillors to account for promoting public libraries:

As a councillor, you are best placed to work with your colleagues to ensure that there is a strong local leadership of libraries at this time, focused on meeting community needs. You can make the case for libraries: positioning them as central to the council’s strategic thinking and investment plans.

It goes on to highlight that libraries are

uniquely placed to help local government and its partners deliver their strategic objectives, whether linked to community cohesion, health and wellbeing or economic growth. Making effective use of new technologies and broadening digital access are helping libraries to extend their reach out into communities.¹²

Nevertheless, existing council strategies available online at time of writing present a patchy picture when it comes to referencing the role of public libraries. Of England’s 10 largest metropolitan boroughs, six make

no mention of public libraries whatsoever, including Birmingham,¹³ which has by far the highest population and recently invested £189m in its landmark

If councils are not clear about the strategic value of a public library service, it should not be surprising that the investment they are prepared to make is low.

central library. Only Coventry City Council¹⁴ and Manchester City Council¹⁵ recognise anything like a strategic role for public libraries. If councils are not clear about the strategic value of a public library service, it should not be surprising that the investment they are prepared to make is low.¹⁶ In 2017, for example, Northamptonshire County Council set out proposals to axe up to 28 of its 36 libraries.¹⁷

The need for a strong digital presence

The LGA’s guidance points to the need for a stronger digital presence for public libraries:

Developing a compelling digital presence is increasingly important as more people communicate, use services and engage digitally. An improved digital presence can, in turn, stimulate and increase physical visits to libraries.¹⁸

However, Public Library News argues that libraries are held back by ‘dull, unnavigable websites’ run by local authority IT teams, which have no stake in library user engagement:

Most public library websites are entirely controlled by local authorities’ IT teams. They tend to prioritise practical things like clarity, utility and security to deliver services and protect data, which is fair enough. If I want to know the holiday bin collection rota or how to pay my council tax, I need no razzamatazz – just the facts, thank you. But libraries seeking to establish a digital footprint in a teeming market have a different set of requirements.¹⁹

The article warns that ‘if we can’t improve these dull, unnavigable websites, usage won’t go up, funding will go down and libraries will close’.²⁰

UK national authorities are also developing digital strategies. For example, the respective devolved governments of Wales²¹ and Scotland²² have opened up public consultations on digital strategy. The UK’s *Single Digital Presence* project for public libraries project led by the

Trends suggest that many library services are under-used due to lack of effective marketing, as opposed to lack of community interest

British Library is ‘designing prototypes for both a new national presence and for improved local library web-pages, testing these prototypes with existing and

potential users, and also a continued and wide-ranging engagement with our close stakeholders throughout the library sector’.²³

The need for effective promotion

The increasing diversity of resources available to library customers exposes how far behind libraries are in terms of deep user engagement compared to commercial content services. Of course, libraries use social media and a number of libraries have recommender type services. Public libraries also support a wide variety of events and book groups. Essex libraries, for example, support more than 700 groups. However, to gain valuable insights about what users need, the Super Library Marketing blog advocates promoting the full range of library services through mechanisms such as surveys.²⁴ In 2019, Wilk, Garcia, Frenkel and Anderberg argued:

Trends suggest that many library services are under-used due to lack of effective marketing, as opposed to lack of community interest and that customized communication is at the root of successful library programming.²⁵

In 2007, Jeffrey Pomerantz and Gary Marchionini from the School of Information and Library Science, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, called for a redesign of online library interfaces to make them more socially focused.²⁶ A decade later, US library consultant Marshall Breeding noted:

Libraries are increasingly interested in products and services that emphasize engagement, personalization, and outreach. These products include marketing services and analytics that integrate with existing library systems and tap into the usage data those systems generate.²⁷

Community engagement solutions – An overview

Community engagement solutions that have emerged differ in detail but share a common objective. In simple terms, it's about delivering the right messages to the right people at the right time. To do this they take on the attributes of a software 'platform'²⁸ by combining marketing tools with data from the library management system (LMS) and associated systems such as e-book platforms, databases, library websites, and event and room booking tools. Bringing these elements together is seen as a key factor in strengthening libraries' promotional impact. Libraries can then more easily and efficiently segment their audience and automate their marketing communications.

A community engagement solution will help libraries organise and publish event programming and send targeted emails like newsletters based on specific demographics or interests. Libraries can book rooms and publish calendars of events with registration capabilities. Crucially, community engagement solutions bring all these activities into a coherent, integrated solution, with a consistent look and feel, aligned with library branding, across all communications.

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Several library community engagement solutions are now available.²⁹ These include add-on solutions such as Patron Point³⁰ as well as integrated modules of the library system itself. In 2020, SirsiDynix launched a community engagement platform (CEP)³¹ and Civica announced its latest Spydus library system upgrade with enhancements to 'focus on enhancing digital engagement for library staff and patrons'.³²

The OCLC Wise library system aims to provide an enhanced approach to customer engagement by combining 'the power of customer relationship management, marketing, and analytics with ILS [integrated library system] functions'.³³

Innovative Interfaces Inc. uses linked data technology to redesign its online catalogue (Vega Discover) and provide 'personalized experiences such as re-imagined lists, reading history, recommendations, and library outreach'.³⁴ In March 2021, the company announced the Vega Library Experience (LX), a suite of products with five additional modules: Vega Connect, Interact, Promote, Program and Analyze. Interact, Promote and Program are collectively described as the 'Vega Engagement Suite'.

This more user-focused approach is perhaps the key innovation in library systems for public libraries, which Marshal Breeding has characterised as being ‘mired in stagnation’.³⁵ So although community engagement in a variety of forms is not new, what *is* new is that library system vendors have woken up to the opportunity. And the benefits for public libraries are far-reaching.

Community engagement solutions – The benefits

Benefit 1 – Improved user services through greater use of data

Effective use of data, including personal data, is a key enabler for improving user engagement. Major online retailers mine big data, querying purchase and online behaviour to make further recommendations.³⁶

As focus shifts from the collection to the user, the value of user data held in library systems increases. Community engagement solution vendor Bangthetable recognises this:

If you’re looking to access more members of your community and drive involvement in your consultations, then look no further than your city library service. Sitting right under your nose is quite possibly one of the most active community databases you could hope to harness to help you with your online consultation activities.³⁷

In the UK, The Libraries Consortium is looking at how best to use data to drive engagement.

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Kelly Saini Badwal, Head of Cultural Services at London Borough of Sutton, explains the problem and the opportunity that she and The Libraries Consortium are addressing:

At the moment if a customer wants to use digital stock, if they want to borrow an e-book or magazine or audio book, they have to use a different App for each one. The aim is to bring all that together. It’s very exciting because it is very customer driven. Customers will be using it in the same way that they use other apps like Amazon and Netflix, and it’ll give them their top reads, recommendations and, for example, if they’ve read a book, they’ll be told if there’s an event from that author.³⁸

She adds: ‘At the moment public library leaders don’t use data as well as they could. They tend not to consider their own data or what value it has.’³⁹

Serving around three million users, The Libraries Consortium is one of the UK’s largest local authority technology shared services. It is actively exploring how best to use all the user-related data that its services will generate to reshape services in line with user needs and behaviours:

We’ve been looking at the data that The Libraries Consortium has now. I’ve got a colleague working on this looking at how customers use the LMS, what they are searching for, if they find it or if they don’t, and why or how that happens. This is going to give us a lot of insight

into what we need to purchase for our customers and where we lose our customers. We've always had data like this but now we are actually doing something with it.⁴⁰

The better use of data has huge potential. Notwithstanding privacy concerns, libraries have done little to make use of this rich resource to improve services. Community engagement solutions can open up a wide range of enhanced services even without exploiting a user's personal data. Libraries can simply enhance user profiles with non-personal information, such as demographics, to begin alignment with user preferences. With opt-in marketing, users can give permission for more data to be gathered and stored.⁴¹

Benefit 2 – Compliance with privacy and security regulations

The privacy and security regulations with which libraries need to comply to protect their users present a challenging landscape for public libraries. In 2015, NISO helpfully published its *Consensus principles on users' digital privacy in library, publisher, and software-provider systems*.⁴² This provides a series of succinct principles for libraries to follow in the design of services, but it falls short of solving the problem of privacy compliance.

Privacy legislation is complex and can be challenging for library authorities with limited resources. As Marshall Breeding points out, data privacy also calls for a very high level of security.⁴³

But the issue of privacy goes beyond the considerable challenges of compliance and infrastructure. Public libraries take pride in the trust that the public places in them. Where the use of personal data is concerned, this trust is crucial and differentiates public libraries in a positive way from commercial services. When planning data-driven services, libraries need to be mindful of that trust.⁴⁴

The privacy and security regulations with which libraries need to comply to protect their users present a challenging landscape for public libraries

Community engagement solutions can be thought of as platforms that reduce complexity in terms of technology compliance. In so doing, they help libraries remain compliant and strike the right balance between making full use of their valuable data and safeguarding privacy. They offer promotional and personalised services that open up opportunities for behaviour- and preference-based services and promotional messaging. They provide mechanisms for collecting personal data with the full consent of the individual.⁴⁵

Benefit 3 – New skills and approaches

For a number of years now, public librarians and industry commentators have pointed to the need for a skills update in the sector. In 2015, for example, an Australian report noted:

The changing demands upon library services also necessitate the development of a new skills base for staff. Libraries increasingly need staff with both a technical knowledge of media, software and new technology, and social knowledge of how to maximise diverse

users' engagement with this technology in relation to the library's other facilities. We emphasize that such skills are not only those that can be appropriated in short-term training. Not every library is in a position to fund, attract, and retain such staff.⁴⁶

The lack of diversity in the public library workforce may also be a barrier to wider community engagement. In the UK, *Leading Libraries*, a 30-month leadership development programme, is making a start at addressing the issue by supporting female and minority ethnic library staff with leadership potential.⁴⁷

Some skills are evolving from existing requirements. Kelly Saini Badwal pinpointed one such requirement, a data analysis skillset:

It's a post that we've always had. It was there to support our stock purchasing but now so many processes have become automated that she has the capacity to grow the role. We're very lucky that data is something that she's interested in, so we've progressed it to become a data analyst's role.⁴⁸

Community engagement platforms lighten the skills load for libraries by carrying out much of the heavy technical lifting within the solution itself. Ultimately though, public engagement depends more on people than it does on any technology. Libraries may need a shift in attitude just as much as new toolsets. Only with a willingness to explore what these platforms can do in compelling campaigns and initiatives can public libraries raise their profile and increase their value to individuals and communities.

Benefit 4 – Stronger strategic positioning

In a post-Covid world, will recovery strategies offer opportunities for public libraries?

Ultimately though, public engagement depends more on people than it does on any technology. Libraries may need a shift in attitude just as much as new toolsets

According to CILIP, the UK's library and information association, 'the pandemic has demonstrated the vital role of local libraries in connecting and supporting their communities' and encourages 'central and local government to take the opportunity to

invest in libraries'.⁴⁹ Public Libraries News asserts:

Whatever the goals – supporting reading and literacy, business, education, training, children and parents, inclusion, diversity, mental health, Covid – they all require the capacity to make us aware that these library treasures exist and engage us to the extent that we use them.⁵⁰

Local authorities are busy amending or creating digital strategies, and libraries need to be a key element of those strategies. Achieving this will be easier if public libraries can clearly demonstrate value in their engagement with the public, especially at a time when wellbeing is high on political agendas.

Benefit 5 – A user experience that meets expectations

Libraries face fierce competition for attention, and are behind the curve in user engagement compared to the global platforms that deliver content and information. For example, Amazon created a chargeable service, Prime Reading,⁵¹ for a book-lending service that libraries provide free of charge. Epic, another digital subscription service, claims to be ‘the leading digital reading platform – built on a collection of 40,000+ popular, high-quality books from 250+ of the world’s best publishers’.⁵² In the US it cleverly integrates with schools and educators to provide grade appropriate materials.

With community engagement solutions, libraries can start to build the combination of deep user engagement and marketing needed to assert the value they deliver in their services.

The advantages of scaling up

Libraries can scale up and cooperate to better leverage their collections and staff resources. The Library Consortium, encompassing around 43 councils and 380 libraries, is using its collective clout to drive digital services to form an attractive and multi-channel community engagement solution.

Anthony Hopkins, Head of Library, Heritage and Adult Education Services for the London Borough of Merton, believes that collaboration is key to the success of this project:

Libraries face fierce competition for attention and are behind the curve in user engagement, compared to the global platforms that deliver content and information

When you take into account all the authorities it is a multi-million-pound contract, giving us strength in numbers in terms of procurement. When we went through the procurement process we really pushed the market in a way that I don’t think the sector has ever done in the UK. This was because we were not just thinking about purchasing an LMS [library management solution], we were looking at the next generation of technology and a platform and having far better services and systems for our customers to access.⁵³

Conclusion

On their own, community engagement solutions cannot magic away the deep-rooted and longstanding challenges public libraries face. That said, their engagement, promotional and personalisation capabilities represent an exciting new development for public libraries.

These solutions, offered by leading library vendors, integrate marketing tools with library systems to deliver appropriately tailored marketing and engagement messages. Only by doing this can public libraries start to assert their value and deepen their relationships with communities.

As yet these solutions are only in their infancy, but it will be fascinating to see how they develop and how public libraries use them to improve their community offer and attract new users.

In summary, community engagement solutions offer a number of benefits:

1. Improved user services through greater use of data – Public libraries need more data-driven ways to communicate with users and communities.
2. Compliance with privacy and security regulations – The prospect of navigating this complex landscape can paralyse public libraries. These solutions help lift away the compliance burden so public libraries can deliver innovative community initiatives without falling foul of risk assessments or punitive fines.
3. New skills and approaches – Community engagement platforms make public libraries less dependent on expensive technology skillsets. Libraries can focus on how best to use technology to meet their community engagement objectives.
4. Stronger strategic positioning – If public libraries can show that they are an integral part of community life, local authorities are more likely to see them as a strategic partner.
5. A user experience that meets expectations – Ultimately, libraries are all about the user. Viewed through the eyes of users, public library online services compare poorly with giants such as Amazon. Public libraries desperately need the data-driven communications and experiences that community engagement solutions can help deliver.

Community engagement platforms and solutions for libraries are available now. They have the potential to reshape the library's profile in the community.

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Ken gained his Master's degree from the Information Science Department at City University in London. He is also an alumnus of the Warwick University Business Innovation and Growth Programme. He worked as a librarian before spending over 20 years in the software business. Ken worked in customer support, project management, implementation, sales and marketing and as executive director and board member. He set up his consulting business in 2007 to help make libraries and archives more effective. His consulting activities include help with strategy, innovation, improving the user experience, reviewing/auditing library and archive IT infrastructure, service reviews and the procurement of new and replacement systems. His work also encompasses e-books, resource management, discovery, open access, linked data, repositories, research management and teaching and learning solutions. In addition, he provides market intelligence and horizon scanning services for and about the information and library technology sector.

Ken is a member (MCLIP) of CILIP and ALA. He is an Advisory Board member for the open access journal *Studies in Arts and Humanities*. He set up and manages a number of free, open community resources including Higher Education Library Technology (HELibTech) and Local Government Library Technology (LGLibTech)

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Sarah's career started in IT, before she made a career change into librarianship. She gained a postgraduate diploma in library and information studies at the University of Central England (now Birmingham City University).

In the five years that followed, Sarah spent the happiest years of her working life, in special library management roles in the metals industry. She managed libraries that provided vital support for iron and steel businesses battling for survival. She moved to Talis, then a library system vendor, to combine her library and IT skills. While there, she completed her Master's degree, a study of citation analysis applied to the humanities using the 1840s industrial novels as a case study. She continued to explore her interest in the intersection of technology and the humanities with ground-breaking research into the application of linked data to intertextual references in *Jane Eyre*.

At Talis, Sarah quickly moved into marketing, in product management, research and marketing communication roles. She was a member of the CILIP editorial board and several library committees in the West Midlands. In 2011 she left Talis to set up a freelance business which she continues to run successfully today. Her clients include prominent library and educational technology suppliers, but she also works for businesses in a range of sectors.

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