

Bringing the Outside In ... and the Inside Out will be the ILA Reporter lead articles for 2010.

As society experiences changes in technology, communication and community, and the economy, librarians are re-examining how, when, where, and to whom they offer services. From education to advocacy, marketing to materials, topics will cover a range of issues important to libraries today.

"How are libraries defining and redefining their role and mission in their communities?" The June lead article by Valerie Stern explores using retail strategies in public libraries; and the My Turn column by Gretel Stock-Kupperman discusses the Customer-Focused Library.

This series of articles in the 2010 ILA Reporter aims to highlight efforts of the bricks-and-mortar libraries in our communities, businesses, and schools, to adapt to the ever-increasing virtual demands of our society and the evolving ways in which we are learning, communicating, and seeking information.

| Valerie Stern, Elia Area Public Library District |

Why We Borrow?

Using Retail Strategies in Public Libraries

As the Internet and more retail outlets offer resources that libraries previously monopolized, libraries are taking notice and some are even adjusting their missions. The traditional concept of libraries may become extinct. Rather than being a storehouse of books and a quiet place to read, today's library aims to focus on the needs of a wide range of customers. Believe it or not, there's a science behind how library users are using your library and what they are borrowing.

IT'S SCIENCE

The nationally recognized retail space consulting company Envirosell, Inc., uses the basic idea of environmental psychology, that our surroundings influence our behavior. Today's library users are being shaped by their retail interactions and experience. Our user expectations are changing, yet libraries have been slow to evaluate their spaces and service based on retail experiences and standards. We all know that library usage has risen, but do you really know how your customers are using your library? And, if retailers are using more rigorous scientific techniques to improve their bottom line, why can't libraries?

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TRACKING LIBRARY USERS

In 2008, the Metropolitan Library System (MLS), in partnership with four Chicago area member libraries, received a federal Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) grant provided by the Institute of Museum and Library Services to hire Envirosell, Inc., to help understand the changing needs of library users. Titled Customer-Focused Library, the grant studied four libraries, three public, and one academic, using a combination of observation, interviews, and video. Mapping programs tracked and timed visitors' movements and interactions within the library, exit surveys documented users' experience in the library and recorded services used, and small video cameras installed in key areas of the libraries captured behavioral patterns, traffic flow, and wait and transaction times.

The research objectives of the grant were fairly simple — to not only understand visitor behavior, but also to measure visitor interactions and to learn how public libraries can better service and educate their visitors.

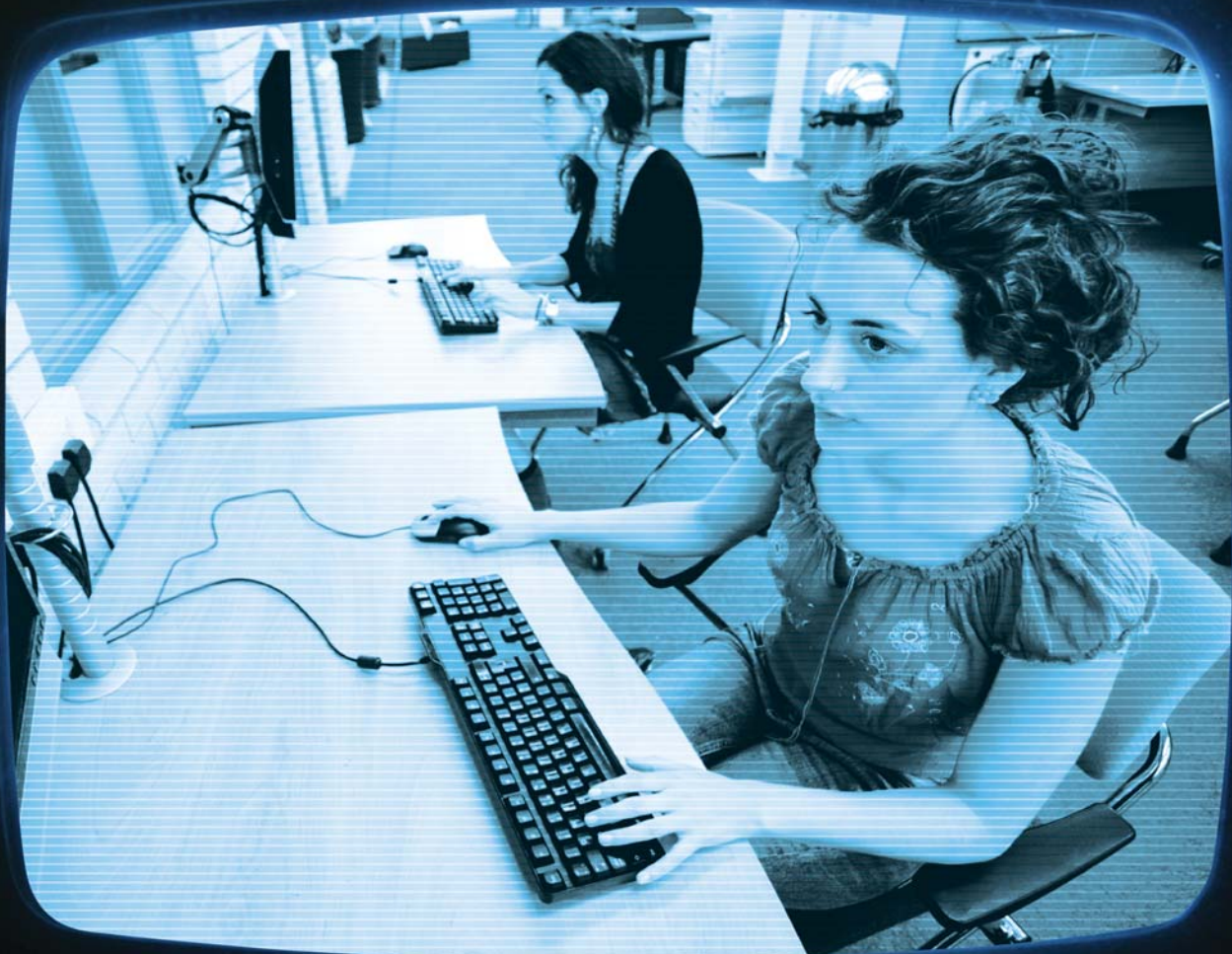
SURPRISING OUTCOMES

Detlav Pansch, former director of Frankfort Public Library District, one of the libraries who partnered with MLS for the grant, was eager to participate in the study. "This was a great opportunity to have our library looked at by a nationally-recognized consulting company," said Pansch. "It was a chance to not only learn but to confirm what we do."

Here are some surprising, and important, findings captured from the study:

Visitor Profile

- 95 percent of visitors used the library once per month, more than half visited once per week.
- The majority of library users visited alone.
- 56 percent spent less than ten minutes in the library, a surprising finding more typically associated with bookstores and grocery stores.
- Two-thirds did not know what they wanted before they arrived.



Visitor Behavior

- One-third of patrons visited a desk as their first destination.
- Age affected what patrons did during their visit. Younger patrons used the computers and seldom visited sections with circulating materials. Older patrons were less likely to use the computers and self-check.
- Services and resources used most were circulation (60 percent), Internet access (18 percent), online library catalog use (15 percent), and reference services (15 percent).
- Two-thirds of patrons used the library for reading or conversation, and 15 percent of weekly visitors did not borrow from the library.
- Half of patrons pulled an item off the shelf while browsing, with more items pulled in AV collections.
- 70 percent of visitors checked out books, 51 percent checked out AV materials.

Assistance

- Over half of patrons, excluding circulation transactions, were observed receiving assistance of some kind.
- Finding items on the shelf caused the greatest need for assistance, followed by finding the right section. Less than 15 percent of patrons needed help with guiding research, explaining services, and recommending items.

Signage

- Only 12 percent of patrons viewed library signage. Patrons aged 45-64 were most likely to view signs, with patrons 34 and under least likely.
- Stacks signage was viewed by 45 percent of people who viewed signs.

While some of these key findings might be obvious, such as younger patrons using the library more for computers and less for checking out materials, there were a few that were surprising. Gretel Stock-Kupperman, the staff member at Metropolitan Library System who wrote and coordinated the grant, agrees. “The most surprising finding about library visitors was that about half primarily visit alone, and are only in the library for less than ten minutes,” said Stock-Kupperman. “We also learned from EnviroSell staff that there is often confusing language used on signs, with a large amount of jargon or abbreviations that meant more to staff than to the patrons.” Detlav Pansch concurs. “Signage on desks is often overlooked and too small. The patron waiting can’t see them, and the person who is engaging with library staff doesn’t need them.”

GOING RETAIL

Evaluating Your Space

“The experience we create by scientifically understanding how customers interact with our library can make a big difference,” said Mary Beth Campe, executive director of the Ela Area Public Library District in Lake Zurich. In 2009, Campe spearheaded a reorganization of Ela Library’s Popular Materials Department based on retail models and research. The monthlong renovation gave a tremendous boost to circulation. Following the project, Campe was often asked if the library bought more materials. “The number of materials did not change, but the retail-like setup showcases the collections in a way more conducive to shopping, including more displays.” By implementing face-out shelving, and creating more spaces to gather and browse collections, the renovated space not only met more needs of their patrons but also significantly improved the overall atmosphere of service.

“When we implemented face-out shelving in Frankfort’s Children’s Department, books circulated 40 percent more than when shelved traditionally. This also alleviated space concerns by frequency of circulation,” said Pansch.

Whether your library has a high budget, low budget, or no budget at all, EnviroSell suggests these strategies for using space creatively:

- Group computer workstations, lounge seating, and periodicals to create an area for patrons who are waiting for a computer to become available.
- Consider how space is used. Allow for gathering and loud spaces as well as quiet spaces.
- Reevaluate the necessity of sections with little or no visitation.
- Face-out shelving makes retrieval of materials slightly more difficult, but dramatically increases circulation. Consider sacrificing quantity for quality in face-out arrangements.
- Investigate flexible signage and fixtures for future renovations or new libraries.
- Recognize the unutilized or underutilized spaces in the library and adjust the layout accordingly.

“Before the reorganization project, our 400+ collection of magazines was rarely circulated and difficult to browse,” said Campe. “We decided to take advantage of cover art and provide a way to pair users with the materials. Simply by relocating the collection and making it more visible and easier to use, magazine circulation has increased 40 percent.”

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WHY SOME BOOKS DON'T GET CHECKED OUT

Consider the case of a bookstore owner who is completely convinced of the value of his or her merchandise but cannot manage to sell any of it. An environmental psychologist could observe that, while the books are superb treasures, the store's mood deters spending. The aisles are cramped, the furnishings are old, and there aren't signs breaking up the stock of books into categories, making it hard for a shopper to go from genre to genre.

Environmental psychology is well applied when the bookstore engages in customer-focused practices. Make aisles navigable, easily identifiable, play music that encourages movement from aisle to aisle, and present books aesthetically instead of as a mere collection of books. There's no doubt about it, the longer a shopper spends in a store, the more they will buy.

The parallels between retail and libraries are not that far off. Whether you're browsing for books or shopping for clothing, how we shop will always be the same. EnviroSell founder Paco Underhill states that, "how we design stores, use signage, and visually merchandise products is becoming less of a pure art form and more of a hybrid of creativity and science. The challenge is identifying what stays the same and what changes." The more pleasant the customer finds the environment, the longer he/she will stay in the store, the more sections they will shop, the more items they will shop, and the more items they will purchase.

Here are some suggestions for getting your patrons to check out more and return for additional services:

- Bring images into the space to create a more visually stimulating environment.
- Change displays frequently, at least monthly or even weekly, to recapture patron's attention, based on frequency of library visits.
- Group all AV materials together and position the section close to circulation to encourage impulse borrowing.
- Offer more ways to partner patrons with materials. Best sellers, new releases and a designated area for staff recommendations are a good start.
- Find ways to extend service beyond the desk, and get to where your patrons are.
- Consider ways to work within the Dewey Decimal System in order to free up how books are displayed.

BREAKING UP WITH DEWEY

Even before they participated in the EnviroSell study, the Frankfort Public Library took the bold step of replacing the Dewey Decimal Classification with a new word-based classification in 2008. In a recent *Library Journal* article on Movers & Shakers, Frankfort Public Library's Melissa Rice stated, "The goal is to improve user experience. Our library has embraced 'deconstructing' our collections and getting down to answering the questions: How do people look for materials? What do you expect to find in a health collection? A language arts collection?" says Rice. "I encourage all of my staff to reevaluate our services, our collections, and, fundamentally, what we do. After all, we are here to serve the community."

More recently, the Rakow Branch of the Gail Borden Public Library decided to follow this theory and place less emphasis on the Dewey classification and more emphasis on empowering the customer.

"We knew when planning was under way for the branch, that we needed to focus on popular materials," stated director of branch services Margaret Peebles. "We use a bookstore merchandising model with face-out displays and browser friendly categories. Using this method, patrons can browse to their favorite category, and staff can still search particular items using the Dewey label."

Peebles agrees that lessons learned from retail have created satisfied patrons. "Overall, when I see a customer browsing the stacks and finding an interesting book on display — one they perhaps would not have noticed before — I feel like that is a great experience for that customer. To me, that is what merchandising the collection does — gives the user a successful library experience."

LOOKING AHEAD

Employing retail techniques may at first feel uncomfortable to libraries and librarians; however, they are not strange to our patrons. Consider visiting one of the libraries above — or visiting another library that is new to you — and evaluating your experience as a user, a customer. You might also consider inviting other librarians or visitors to your community to record their experience in your library. The idea of providing the most helpful service to our patrons is a long tradition in our libraries; the use of environmental psychology is another method of evaluating how to offer the most user-focused service possible.

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