

TRENDS AFFECTING AMERICAN LIBRARY SERVICE

LESLIE BURGER

President of American Library Association - ALA

As president of the American Library Association I have a unique opportunity to travel throughout the US to observe and talk to my library colleagues about trends and issues affecting U.S. libraries.

Much of what I know about current trends is also based on first-hand knowledge obtained through many years in the role of consultant to hundreds of libraries in the U.S. and from my unique perspective as a library director in one the leading public libraries in our country.

Today I want to share some of the exciting things US librarians are doing to transform their institutions and offer several tips about how you can transform your own libraries in ways that respond to your customers needs and make sense for your communities.

I want to explore how we, as a global society, can work together to create a world wide epidemic of enthusiasm and support for libraries!

In my year as ALA president I hope to talk to hundreds of librarians, trustees and library advocates around the world about the ways that they can help transform their libraries. We know that when communities, schools, or organizations invest in transforming their libraries that in turn their communities are transformed. Their libraries become vital and integral to the communities they serve, they bring people together to share ideas and explore new topics, they change people's lives, and offer opportunities that would not otherwise be possible.

First let me spend a few moments describing some of the issues librarians frequently are asked to address. See if any of these are familiar to you?

- Why do we need libraries anymore when we can find all the information we need on the Web?
- Libraries are old-fashioned, too institutional, who needs libraries in the Internet age?
- Libraries never have the books I want to read or the information I need . . . I have to wait too long to find what I want and I get everything I need on the Internet
- Librarians are unfriendly

- I prefer to buy my books from Amazon.com or another online book seller

Librarians across the US are working hard to dispel these myths by becoming creative problems solvers who are attuned to current societal trends. They are thinking about how libraries should respond, are more willing than ever to take some risks with new services and are proving everyday that libraries are not more relevant than ever before but a vital part of the communities they serve.

Before I share some examples of the transformation movement in US libraries let me share some good news about the use of libraries in the US.

A recent ALA survey uncovered the following facts about public library use in the US:

- 92% believe that libraries will be needed in the future even with the information available on the Internet
- Nearly all agreed that even if they are not regular library users that libraries play an important role in giving everyone a chance to succeed because libraries support public education and lifelong learning
- 62% of all adults in the US have library cards, in my community that number is closer to 90%
- 16% of all Americans visit their libraries more frequently than they go to the movies
- Librarians in academic and public libraries answer more than 800,000 reference questions each week
- 98.9% of public libraries in the US provide access to the Internet

So the big question is what is it that is attracting people in greater numbers than ever before and what do these transformed libraries look like?

The key to providing responsive library service is to be aware of and one-step ahead of societal trends. Librarians need to listen to what their customers have to say and be willing to respond quickly with new services to meet people's needs.

Here are some key societal trends in the US right now all of which have a direct impact on the way in which we deliver library service:

The Economy:

- People are working longer and harder than ever before
- Many people are working away from traditional workplaces, choosing instead to run home-based businesses

- Our country is experiencing slow economic growth forcing service reductions in many places, there is a “taxpayer revolt” in many areas of the country
- There is an increased emphasis on private support for public services and recognition that government cannot or will not address all of our needs
- We are moving to a service economy based on self-service and self-sufficiency

Our Society

- People are living longer than ever before, we are now serving four generations in many of our public libraries
- We have a digital divide – young people who have grown up in a world of instant messaging, email, cell phones, text messaging, friendster, my space and flickr and others like myself who are running to catch up with the train. Young people seamlessly fuse work, play, and information all in one transaction.
- People want to be entertained. Much of what we do in the US has some entertainment factor attached to it.
- People are much more mobile than before, easily moving from job to job and place to place.
- There is more of a shared approach to providing service through collaboration with other agencies.

Technology

- The Internet is pervasive, with content growing at unimaginable rates, some of it good and some of it bad. But people think that they can get all the information they need on the web.
- People are looking for easy to use, affordable technology that provides them with the ability to be part of our connected world.
- People are seeking some structure when it comes to digital content: easy to use and forgiving search engines, more organization of content.
- Content providers and creators are looking for ways to protect their intellectual work product through digital rights managements, copyright, and authentication.

There are of course many more trends but let’s focus on these for the moment so we can learn more about how U.S. librarians are responding.

We’re creating great library spaces that become destinations for the communities we serve

To respond to people who say that libraries should offer comfortable, welcoming inviting spaces, we are transforming our buildings from the old fashioned Carnegie Libraries built in the early 20th century and the concrete boxes of the mid- century to transparent, open buildings with lots of natural light. American library design is now focused on making people more important than materials with lots of space for seating, meeting, programs, quiet study, cafes, library stores, fireplaces.

New libraries are far less institutional than the past I routinely see people sitting in one of our leather easy chairs, his feet propped up on an ottoman, with a cup of coffee at his side. We have become the community's living room.

We are adopting new, more expansive roles to cement the important and vital roles we play in our communities

Many public libraries have become the community and civic center, academic libraries are offering 24-hour access for students and creating information commons. School librarians are working side-by-side with teachers to plan curriculum and become integral to the instructional program. We are becoming aggregators of community information, creating web content, and using our web sites to create virtual libraries with 24/7 access.

We are extending our reach through home delivery, offering public forums on issues of importance to our communities and helping entrepreneurs with their start up businesses.

We are focusing on customer service

We are offering more value added service to enhance the library experience. We send email reminder notices three days in advance of an items due date so our customers can avoid overdue fines. We send overdue notices via email saving postage for the library. We send an e-newsletter to our entire database on the first day of each month or as needed to announce upcoming events.

We are adapting our integrated library systems to include customer books reviews, features about what's new and recommended, book covers and previews and emulating some of what people can find when they use amazon.com.

We are adjusting our hours and services to ensure easy and convenient access to libraries. We offer hours that match with work schedules, weekend and evening hours, open on minor holidays, home delivery, reference via 24/7 live chat, instant messaging capabilities, research by appointment.

We are thinking like our customers not making our customers conform to the world as we see it. We are much more accommodating, offer more personal service, one on one training, and go the extra mile to make sure that people who use our libraries like the services they receive. We finally have recognized that we are in the service business.

We offer many ways to learn in our libraries

Traditionally libraries have been about books, reading and information. But not all people learn in the same way or want the same thing.

We are offering new formats like MP3 downloadable books and music, licensed content that can be pushed to your laptop or PDA. We are offering more programs with authors and experts who can explore a variety of topics in which people can learn and share experiences. Things like deliberative forums where people come together to discuss and debate an important issue like immigration or health care, community wide reading programs where everyone reads the same book and discusses the themes and common experiences, human rights film festival to engage people in discussion through film about some of the most critical human rights issues. We are using public art as a way to tell stories and stimulate creative thinking.

We are offering more programming than ever before for people of all ages. Books for babies, lap sits, readings over coffee. Whatever your age there is something for everyone at the library. You can take a knitting class, learn how to speak English, improve your literacy skills, debate an important community issue, check out a book in twenty different languages, get help in starting a small business, watch a movie, sleep at the library, receive tutoring assistance and eat three meals a day in our library cafes if that's what you want.

We are Investing in collections

We are offering current collections of materials (best sellers, current topics, how to books) in ample quantities to ensure that people don't have to wait forever to read what they want. We're working closely with our vendors so that popular titles are shipped automatically in advance of publication date,

outsourcing cataloging and processing so we can get the books on the shelves more quickly. In my library, if a book arrives by 11 am it's on the shelf by 3pm that same day.

We are displaying and merchandising our materials to get them in the hands of people not sitting on the bookshelves.

Balanced but unread collections are disappearing in favor of high turnover items that people want to read.

Our reference collections are shrinking as we licensing more digital content. And we are creating new content and organizing it differently, not strictly by Dewey Decimal arrangement but collections of resources in a variety of formats organized by topic and easily accessible.

We are using technology to extend our reach

We offer access to a wide range of technology and opportunities for public computing.

Libraries are offering free wireless access, ports for laptop plug ins, hi-speed access to the internet, technology training ranging from how to use a mouse to scanning and publishing digital content. Libraries are offering customers the opportunity to download audio books in MP3 formats, lending iPods and laptops, creating blogs and wikis and RSS feeds ease communication. Flat screen TV's announce events at the library or allow people scan the latest business news or watch a newscast.

We offer streamlined and fast access to information. People are finally realizing that Google is not the source of all information. People are looking to others who can help them navigate the web, want to increase their skills in searching (computer labs) and database access as long as its easy to search. We are promoting the great skills of librarians in helping to locate information in an increasingly complex world.

Libraries in the US are experiencing a renaissance as more and more people discover what we have to offer. We've learned we need to compete, we've learned that the traditional library is no longer fits with our community's lifestyle and cultures and we are busy transforming our institutions for the 21st century.

So let me leave you with these thoughts as you think about transforming libraries in your country.

1. **The first is to be passionate.** Believe 150% in what you do. Share your passion with others. Engage in shameless promotion. Be out there in the community.
2. **Create a vision to guide the future.** Focus every aspect of how you do business to reflect that vision. Engage your board, staff, Friends, faculty colleagues, students, etc. Don't just talk...listen.
3. **Walk on the wild side.** Try a different new practice each week or month. Do what businesses do. Hire for attitude as much as skills. Challenge the status quo. Give someone the title of "chief innovator."
4. **Build a culture that encourages and rewards change.** Encourage your staff to take some risks. Offer rewards for new/different ways of doing things. If they turn out be better, great! If not, recognize, appreciate and learn from the effort. Be relentless about promoting the changes you want to see. Good example: The library that encourages staff to keep track of how many times they say no and figures out how to turn no into yes.
5. **"Keep everlastingly at it."** That's what John Cotton Dana, our first and perhaps greatest library promoter would say. Never give up.

If you all think this sounds like a pep talk, it is . . . I am now the official library cheerleader for U.S. libraries. I love and believe in libraries. I can't think of any other work that provides the stimulation and excitement that I find each day. We in this room are fortunate to call ourselves libraries.

Change isn't easy, but it is the key to our future. The people who can crazy enough to think they can change the world are the ones who do. During my year as ALA president, I will work to lead change...to transform our profession, our libraries, and our communities.

Please join me.

Thank you.