

PLAYS WELL WITH OTHERS: STRENGTHENING YOUR LIBRARY THROUGH PARTNERSHIPS

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Partnership and collaboration are a fact of life for most of us in the library profession. In a fiscal world of rising expenditures and stationary or even shrinking resources, it makes sense to find friends in the community who can help your library fulfill its mission. Collaboration can produce a mutually beneficial relationship in which the whole is truly greater than the sum of the parts. At best, a community "marriage" can be the source of great professional and even personal satisfaction. However, those of us who have tried to "play well with others" also know that worst case scenario, in which the partnership becomes a territorial contest of wills, draining valuable resources for both entities and potentially even jeopardizing future library partnerships and cooperative ventures. If you have been considering finding new partners in your community, how will you go about looking for Mr. (or Ms.) Right? What are some points to remember the next time you get an enthusiastic phone call from an organization rep who thinks your library just might be able to help out his or her group with a new project? What are some warning signs that you may be "staying together for the sake of the children" when a partnership has outlived its usefulness? How and when should you terminate a collaborative venture and can you do so while maintaining an amicable relationship with the partner?

The following article is a summary of a KLA/KSMA fall session I presented with Lisa Rice, Assistant Director at the Bowling Green Public Library. Though our library has traditionally provided many joint services with the help of community partners, during the past few years we have seen a rapidly increasing number of opportunities for partnerships. Nonprofits around us have felt the financial pinch we all share and have seen cooperation as a means of tapping into additional funding dollars. Our own Board of Trustees has

encouraged library staff to find creative ways to expand and fund new services. Our "top ten list" of current library partnerships includes:

- The Smiths Grove Women's Club who aggressively worked to establish a library branch in their community some twenty years ago, helped with a complete renovation two years ago, and continue to contribute financial support annually.
- Local businessman David Garvin who provided rent-free space for a shopping center library branch for a five year start-up period, provided support in outfitting the branch initially as well as helping to refurbish the branch at the end of the first five years.
- The Depot Development Authority who has provided rent-free space for the BGPL's new Technology Center and Early Childhood Center in a historic train depot.
- Western Kentucky University Career Services Center which coordinates Kentucky and federal work-study programs, subsidizing 19 part-time college workers in our system.
- Western Kentucky University Libraries who partner with BGPL and Barnes & Noble to produce the annual Southern Kentucky Festival of Books
- Barnes & Noble Booksellers who, in addition to being actively involved with the Book Festival, is always a willing participant in book sale displays for author visits at the library.
- Friends of the Library who coordinate the Library Used Book Sale and host FOL membership activities at the library.
- Local school systems (city, county, and private) who partner with the library for delivery of educational materials and deposit book collections. Library staff members have presented book clubs in the schools, served as Junior Achievement volunteers, and worked closely with school librarians and teachers on a variety of projects.

- **Hispanic Resource Center** which maintains a deposit collection of library books at their site. A library staff member serves on the Resource Center Board; Resource Center staff members are working toward reciprocal programming to promote primary language literacy for Spanish-speaking residents.
- **Christ Episcopal Church**, our main library branch's neighbor, has served as a reserve overflow facility for larger library programs. Though the church has always shared the limited downtown parking available to this branch, the church and library will work closely during the next few months as the library builds a new parking lot on land adjacent to the church's new building construction site.

This sample list alone represents a wide range of partnering experiences, from "marriages made in heaven" to "shotgun weddings." The common denominator is that all these experiences started with some initial contact, either prompted by the library or by the collaborating agency. What are some ways to find new partners in your community?

STAR SEARCH: LOOKING FOR MR./MS. RIGHT

The best way to meet and greet potential partners is to increase your accessibility and visibility within your community. For public librarians, this means attending as many community organization meetings and events as possible. If you are fortunate enough to have an active Chamber of Commerce in your community, that is the obvious starting point. Attending Chamber events and participating in Chamber-sponsored programs such as leadership training courses not only allows library staff to meet the other "movers and shakers" in the community, but also gives people in the community, who just might not be library users, the opportunity to learn about the great things happening at their local library. Other ways to get out of your building and tell your library's story include:

- Participating on other nonprofit boards and councils. Our library is represented on the local Enterprise Community Service Provider Council, which has been an excellent way to network with other service agencies in our area.
- Volunteering with the work of organizations such as Junior Achievement. We all know how much we appreciate our own volunteers; sometimes it's nice to experience that from the other side.
- Offering library staff as guest speakers for

community organizations such as Lions Club, Rotary, Kiwanis, and local literary clubs. The program organizers will be eternally grateful to have a guest slot filled and you will have a captive audience to hear about your library's latest good news.

- If at all possible, offer meeting space at your library for community groups. Once again, it will get some folks in who might never darken the door otherwise. This allows them the chance to see the great things you are doing; it also may highlight the real needs your library has. (A picture is sometimes worth a thousand words.)
- Have a library staff member man a table at every possible expo your community offers, from back-to-school bashes to health information fairs.

THE DATING GAME

You've gone out to meet and greet in your community and now you've met someone special. Your eyes meet across a crowded room and suddenly your paths just seem to cross on a regular basis. How can you tell if this is a viable relationship to pursue for your library's needs?

- Look for common interests. Are the missions of your organizations compatible? Do you have enough in common in terms of your service goals to make joint activities worthwhile?
- Develop a relationship with a contact person, who may or may not be the CEO of the organization. Communication is the most critical part of a partnership, and the best possible theoretical match will not survive if the participants can't communicate with some degree of consistency. Find someone in the organization who gets things done, and who can be reached easily by phone or e-mail.
- Aim for long-term compatibility. Is this a relationship that you really want to live with? The best project in the world will probably not work if you know from the outset that your potential partner is territorial, unreliable, controlling, or inflexible. And even if you are able to make the project work in the short-term, the emotional energy you sacrifice in this arena may ultimately impact your overall professional performance.

THE NEWLYWED GAME

Remember the Newlywed Game show, which derived a great deal of its humor from revealing how little two married people really knew about each other? Once you and your library have committed to a partnership, you enter a

phase in which you learn the reality of how your collaboration is going to function. (This may or may not be a honeymoon period.)

Some tips for survival are:

- Decide on a clear division of duties. Who will wash the dishes and who will take out the trash? When in doubt, ask.
- At the risk of stating the obvious, be sure that the partnership is mutually beneficial. Neither side should be doing all the work or contributing all the resources. Don't over commit your staff to a project whose benefits may be one-sided. Many of us are, by the nature of our profession, so service-oriented that our willingness to help may sometimes become a handicap.
- Be willing to compromise. Look for creative ways to solve obstacles. This may involve rethinking some time-honored library traditions.
- Validate your partner. Thank them privately and publicly. Like you, your partner probably relies on good publicity and needs community recognition to ensure that other projects will be successful. If the project involves a new library service, be sure to recognize and thank those "without whose help this would not have been possible."
- Communicate, communicate, communicate.

LEAVE IT TO BEAVER OR MARRIED WITH CHILDREN?

Tolstoy wrote: "All happy families resemble one another; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." In an ideal world, working together for a common public good would always be a worthy goal. In reality, most of us have had more than a few negative experiences mixed with the good in collaborative ventures. Perhaps the partnership was not of your choosing from the start, but you felt forced into it by the local political environment or an influential community member. Perhaps the partnership "seemed like a good idea at the time" but in reality is much more complicated than you had ever guessed it could be. Perhaps the collaboration is stalled by personality differences between the partici-

pants, personal agendas, and even differences in management and work styles. If your "family" functions are becoming increasingly dysfunctional, remember the following:

- It may help to refocus and examine the original intent of the partnership, especially if project objectives have been blurred by the individual agencies' goals.
- Communicate directly with all players involved. Get everyone around the table and avoid third party discussions of obstacles and problems.
- Find a safe outlet for venting. If airing your frustrations to a trusted colleague helps you cope with a difficult person, go for it. (If, on the other hand, this only increases your stress level, find another avenue for help.)
- If you feel the partnership is in serious trouble, you may need to step back, decide what's best for your organization, and define your bottom line in terms of what you can and can not do.
- Appeal to a higher authority. It has been a great help to me personally that any cooperative library venture must go before our Board for approval, and that our Board members tend to be very conservative about safeguarding library funding and resources. We have also been blessed with Board members who haven't minded stepping in to "play the heavy" and question the impact of proposed ventures on library operations.

OZZIE AND HARRIET: ALL IN THE FAMILY?

In conclusion, think for a moment about your library's very best experiences with collaboration. A project that involves two or more partners with compatible missions, is mutually beneficial, and is marked by a cooperative spirit, shared respect, and joint accomplishments, is the goal we all wish to achieve. Such a venture can produce extra funding for added services, community good will, great public relations, and new professional friendships. Like a good marriage, a good partnership will be well worth the effort and attention you and your staff give to it.