

Oregon State Library
Library Services and Technology Act
Grant Activities Final Report – Reaching Out: A Community Assessment Model
Grant Project Number 12-08-6p

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Summary of LSTA Evaluation

According to usual protocols, I received the Memorandum of Understanding and grant materials on a regular schedule as this project progressed to completion. I was able to meet with Salem Public Library Director BJ Toewe and project coordinator Kelley Jacobs and hear all of the details about the project. I was very impressed with their commitment to the project and to ongoing follow-up and implementation of the recommendation. They explained that the purpose of the project was to perform statistically valid community assessment of the services and programs offered by Salem Public Library and to then make improvements based on the survey results. In addition, a toolkit would be created for other Oregon public libraries to complete similar Community Assessment projects.

The overall rationale behind this project was extremely easy to grasp: every public library in Oregon either desperately needs an updated community assessment or has just finished one and is exhausted by the time and effort required. So few of our libraries have the necessary staff expertise to design a top level survey instrument that will elicit the quality feedback needed to help a library evaluate its programs and services. And almost no libraries have the staff time to analyze and effectively quantify the results.

This project provides a solution to the first part of the equation: the website and survey instrument prepared by Orange Boy consultants provides a very high quality library programs/services survey in a beautiful web-based design. It is clear from my review of the website and survey documents that this project is a first class model of completeness in community assessment. Three different surveys were conducted and SPL resident cardholders, non-resident cardholders and key stakeholders were all surveyed. In addition library non-users were surveyed by telephone. This last survey (of non-users) is one that is frequently ignored and as a result many library surveys lack this perspective.

Even though the software application that analyzed and broke down the 4,700 survey responses into unique community “clusters” is proprietary to Orange Boy and therefore not part of the toolkit, I firmly believe think that the hardest part of a good community assessment is actually developing the instrument. The overwhelming barrier this presents (combined with limited staff time and general inertia) to the typical small to medium sized library is nearly insurmountable.

So, for a very reasonable investment of \$50,000 in LSTA grant funding, a superior survey and a detailed step-by-step implementation plan has been created which should prove invaluable to other libraries in Oregon.

In the opinion of this evaluator, this project must be counted a major success and the staff at Salem P.L. now will have an outstanding baseline of community information with which to design and mould future programs. They have already started to use this information very effectively to advocate for their library to city administration and other community stakeholders.

Overall, there were only two slightly disappointing project problems. The first is the general delay in the project timeline, which, in my experience, is characteristic of many LSTA grant projects and therefore not particularly noteworthy. The delay was due to staffing constraints at the library and not to any failure on the part of Orange Boy consultants.

The second disappointment was the unexpected rejection of the Salem Public Library program proposal to present the results of the Community Assessment project at the OLA conference of 2013. I suspect that the fact that 2013 was an OLA/WLA joint conference may have had more to do with the rejection than any intrinsic lack of interest in the proposal or project. The joint conference is rather a different animal from the typical OLA. In any case, BJ Toewe pursued other avenues to get the word out about the project and to send the links and password to the assessment website to all Oregon libraries, specifically via an Email sent to “Libs-or” March 21 2013.

Other than these minor instances, I was very impressed by the quality of the surveys, the expert analysis of the results and the impressive commitment of the SPL staff to make immediate and ongoing use of the results. Sadly, it is an all too frequent fate of library community assessments and long range plans to find their way all too quickly to the top shelf in the Directors office. I am very confident this will not be the case here!

Project objectives

1. First Objective- to complete a statistically valid survey that will reveal patterns of library use and attitudes toward established and potential library programs and services

Project method for the First objective: to design and implement a number of surveys, both on-line and telephone that would accomplish the goals. SPL management and staff worked closely with Orange Boy consultants to design a survey that would list the current programs and service of Salem Public Library in order for patrons to evaluate them and to provide opportunities for the community to suggest other desired library programs. Besides the general survey instruments, Orange Boy provided specialized “mapping” of the results into identifiable clusters so that SPL staff could more easily grasp which parts of their community preferred which services. This clustering of the results is Orange Boy proprietary software and thus won’t be part of the “tool-kit” provided to other Oregon libraries, but the overall good design of the surveys and the clear instructions will make the surveys very usable in any case.

Project results for the First objective: Three surveys were designed and implemented with results obtained from 4,749 resident and non-resident users. In addition, a telephone survey of 301 randomly-selected non-library users was completed. Results of the survey analysis was thoroughly reviewed and studied by SPL's management team and after discussion, Orange Boy presented its final report in December 2012.

Project impact for the First Objective: The impacts on Salem P.L. are as follows:

First, key recommendations of the report were accepted,

- promoting the library's strengths to non-users
- continuing the integration of technology and digital formats into the collection
- increase efforts to personalize and target communications to library patrons
- attempt to reallocate library resources to support the above desired outcomes

Second, SPL initiated changes to its strategic plan supported by the results of the community assessment and the Orange Boy report. It is too soon to measure impacts on library usage, but the fact that the project recommendations were integrated into the strategic plan will likely guarantee ongoing valuation of the longer-term results.

Anecdotal results/impact: when I asked BJ if there had been any surprises in the results, she said one of the best insights was that according to the survey, patrons do enjoy library automation and its efficiencies, but they really wanted was more "face time" with library staff! This insight has convinced BJ to dedicate a new staff position to Reader's Advisory services and this new service is already a great favorite with Library users.

The second insight that SPL staff were delighted to learn is that there was very widespread general support for public library services even from the "non-users" surveyed by telephone. Many stated that while the library was not something that they themselves currently used, they believed strongly that it was needed, especially to provide services for children and job-seekers. This is exactly what city administration and budget/funding managers need to hear and will likely prove to be quite valuable in that area in the future.

2. Second Objective – to create a community assessment "toolkit" for use by Oregon public libraries that will include the questions and methodology of the assessment, implementation plan details and analytical tools and step-by-step instructions for other libraries.

Project method for the Second objective- in cooperation with Orange Boy, the community assessment tutorial website, (which included a series of seven step-by-step audio/visual presentations) was completed, tested and released to the public on March 15th 2013. The site included many additional resources, sample on-line and telephone survey instruments and even a sample final outcomes presentation.

Project results for the Second objective- in the opinion of this evaluator, every element of the website was well-designed, elegantly presented and effective. The on-line

survey was, in my opinion, teetering on the edge of being overly long, but most effective surveys suffer from this flaw.

Project impact for the Second objective: it is too soon to estimate how many libraries may choose to take advantage of this excellent survey toolkit, but I am confident that those who do use it will be more than satisfied with the results.

Suggestions for improvement

In discussions with BJ Toewe, several suggestions for overall project improvement emerged.

1. The amount of work required to develop monitor and successfully implement this project was significantly more than anticipated. The major result of this was a series of delays in meeting project deadlines, BJ made it clear that she would assign the project to a dedicated staff member if she had it to do over again. She also clarified that none of the delay was attributable to the Orange Boy consultants, but was due to her own staff resources being stretched too thin (especially when her Project Coordinator was seconded to the city temporarily and had far fewer hours available.) The delays did not impact the overall satisfactory result of the project however.
2. While Salem public Library staff were generally pleased with the community response (over 4,700 resident and non resident card holders) they agree that two constituencies may have been left out: those library card-holders without e-mail addresses and those who were primarily Spanish speaking. SPL intends to remedy this with printed survey instruments during future updates, including Spanish language versions.

In general this project was very well designed and very carefully executed. This evaluator has no further suggestions for improvement. This grant project was an unqualified success!