



Emerging trends impacting on public libraries

Last week, my sister Jo sent me a copy of a full page article from the *Illawarra Mercury*, "Libraries are Now Cool", which highlights the diverse, customer focused range of services and collections offered by public libraries in the Illawarra (Wollongong, Shellharbour and Kiama). Its arrival was serendipitous as I was attempting to (unsuccessfully) shift my thought processes out of holiday mode (which of my Christmas chocolates would I eat next?) in order to write this column on the emerging trends impacting on public libraries.

By way of explanation my gorgeous little sister doesn't spend her days 'media monitoring' for me, but as I'm a member of what is loosely termed the 'Wollongong Mafia', i.e. former staff of Wollongong City Library, she regularly pops items of interest in the mail, especially if one of my former colleagues is quoted or photographed. Nice photo, Neroli!

But I digress. The *Mercury* story succinctly reflects on the changes occurring in this sector, summarised as "public libraries have taken on 3 main roles: you can get your information in whatever format you need; you can find something to read that enriches your life; and then there is the social side" – or in the terminology of the @ your library® campaign, just ask, read and connect. Let's start with the last first.

Connect at your library

Public libraries are widely acknowledged as being important places that serve the educational, economic and social needs of the local community. 48% of the Australian population are registered members of our country's 1,522 public libraries, and many more are regular library users. Whether they are library members or not, 91% of people believe that libraries are important to their community. To indulge in marketing terminology, that's a huge market share, especially when you consider the diverse demographic range of our client base – to use an oft quoted adage: we're a cradle to grave service.

It is the challenge of meeting the specific needs of target groups within this diverse client base that is the focus of much of our strategic planning. For example:

- Research shows that in the coming decade, growth in usage will be largely concentrated among the age groups above 45 years and in particular those above 55 years. The financial limitations for many of the soon-to-retire 4.3 million baby boomers will drive demand up even further. This is an engaged target group who require a higher level of service than that of their predecessors including access to state of the art technology and value added programs.
- Almost 15% of the Australian population were born in countries where English is not the first language. In some metropolitan communities, more than half of the residents were born in non English speaking countries. Libraries have responded to the increasing demand from diverse and emerging communities through the introduction of LOTE collections and literacy classes.
- In many communities, public libraries play an important role in the promotion of Aboriginal culture, with many holding special collections of books, audiovisual

materials and periodicals about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Increasingly public libraries are working with Indigenous communities to ensure that they are attractive, welcoming and relevant to all members of their community.

Public libraries facilitate social cohesion. They are one of the few public services available to the entire community without exception. They provide public meeting places and shared spaces that are welcoming, accepting and safe. In many rural, regional and remote communities the public library is one of the last, if not the last, community service and meeting place that is available to everyone. They are well established and recognised community hubs that offer insurance against the information and digital divides.

Building on the community's trust, public libraries are creating exciting, environmentally sensitive environments which incorporate many of the features found in commercial ventures such as bookshops and internet cafes. However the ability to pursue this and the value the community places in the public library is continually put at risk by the decreasing levels of funding which impacts on the infrastructure necessary to provide public library services including staffing, buildings, opening hours and collections. The young, old, culturally diverse and disadvantaged have the most to lose.

Just ask at your library

Across the country public libraries provide access and training to new information technologies, helping to build strong communities and assist economic growth. This requires a vision and a commitment to providing dedicated infrastructure that will provide the technological services needed by the community, as they become available. It also requires an eye to the future to see how best these can be used to engage with our client groups. Many public library staff are Library 2.0 graduates, and are actively using their skills to enhance the information experience.

Australian government agencies are making increasing use of the internet for service delivery. With their free internet access, multiple locations and extended opening hours public libraries are at the forefront of delivering these services. However the resourcing implications of e-government for public libraries have been considerable and it is anticipated that the trend will continue. When this is combined with the variable and sometimes very expensive connectivity that still exists across the country there is much to be addressed in this area.

All public libraries have high levels of use for education and training, to the extent of functioning as an additional arm of the compulsory and post-compulsory educational infrastructure. This is an unfunded mandate. As well as playing a part in the formal education process, public libraries are increasingly finding themselves caught up in the growth of lifelong learning. This philosophy recognises that people continue to learn and want to learn throughout their lives.

Read at your library

While some believed that the introduction of information technologies would lead to a reduction in the size of libraries, the number of people using them and the death of the book, the reverse is true. Library visitation continues to grow as does the use of computers and the delight in reading.



Increasingly public libraries are adding value to the reading experience through book discussion groups, targeted reader development programs, visiting writers, seminars, workshops and competitions in recognition of the role literacy has in education and community engagement. 'Books' are available in all possible formats building on the philosophy of read, listen, watch.

The public library has long provided the initial pre-school building block of introduction to reading and books. In addition to the traditional story time sessions there is now a growing focus on early childhood reading programs for 0–5 year olds. These give new parents the skills to read and learn with their children and kick start their learning.

Conclusion

Those of you who work in other sectors will be able to identify with some or all of this, far from exhaustive, discussion of trends. In considering them from a public library perspective the planning dilemma comes not only from the multiplicity of client groups served but the current governance structure where the public library network in each Australian state and territory is significantly different. This can make cooperative ventures incredibly challenging and that they exist is testament to the determination of our colleagues.

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“I would find it very difficult to live in this town without the library”

The mission of the Alice Springs Public Library (ASPL) is to be a progressive, responsive, welcoming and friendly hub of information, lifelong learning and recreation, providing library and information services that contribute to the enhancement of the whole community.



Alice Springs Public Library

Alice Springs is a town characterised by multicultural diversity and a strong Indigenous presence. People from at least nineteen countries form roughly 29% of our population; nearly 19% of us are Indigenous.

Arrernte, the language of the traditional owners, is, after Italian and Tamil, the language other than English most spoken at home. In many ways 'Alice' is a town like any other – a place exhibiting prejudice, ignorance, knowledge, disinterest, good will and friendship in varying proportions. In other ways it's a town where cross cultural challenges are in clear relief.

Alice Springs is the resource centre for Central Australia – a region of 550,980 square kilometres. People come to Alice Springs for shopping, banking, primary, secondary, tertiary, vocational and further education, health care, holidays and entertainment – and library services.

There has been a library here for 55 years. Joy Brucek, the first librarian, is a legend, quite a woman by all accounts. She is credited with establishing the town's first public library by commandeering a fire truck in Darwin and bringing a load of books down the Stuart Highway in 1953. We have a photo of her supervising the unloading of said books from the commandeered truck.

Joyce ran the public library twice – from 1953 until 1956 and again from 1984 till 1994. Staff remember that while her vast character could be challenging, she was “the sort of person who would always assist you in any way she could”: phones would be taken off the hook if staff were run off their feet; she 'badgered' Adelaide TAFE into establishing a technicians' course in Alice Springs.

Supported by Alice Springs Town Council, ASPL is a place where staff stay for a long time; where many begin working and are supported to make librarianship their career; and where contribution to the industry and innovation has been consistent. Two staff have worked here for a total of fifty-five years. Three others are studying, undertaking courses from vocational certificates to Masters. Jo McGill, currently the Northern Territory Librarian, has worked at ASPL. Roslyn Cousins, Manager from 1989–1996, was awarded ALIA's Library Manager of the Year in 1995 and participated on national committees. Our current Manager, Denise Senior, co-convened ALIA *dreaming08*. The Akalye Antheme ('Giving Knowledge') Collection won the 2006 Library Stars Best of the Best award; the Local Languages Collection, a repository of Central Australian Indigenous languages material, is our latest, unique innovation.

Inclusion is one of our key achievements: Indigenous people have always used the library and can be up to 30% of our patronage. Sylvia Neale, our Indigenous Service Officer, has described how Joyce cajoled her, an easily scared Aboriginal nine-year-old, into the library, to discover the world of books she actually desperately wanted to explore. Our inclusiveness extends to employment: Indigenous staff are over 15% of the team, a proportion nearly equivalent to that of Indigenous people in the town's population.

We open seven days a week; provide a reference service, Inter-Library Loans and Document Delivery, and a Country Borrower service to people living more than 100 kms out of town; serve as an informal meeting place, particularly for Indigenous people; and participate in Alice Springs' cultural life, providing a venue for external events as well as organising our own.

This unalloyed good news story may be raising some scepticism. There are aspects of our customer service that generate much discussion while we work out how to ensure access, an enjoyable experience for all our patrons and a safe working environment. Our solutions aren't always satisfactory and can require revisiting. The truth is that we are buoyed by our relationship with our patrons: the title for this article is a quote from a patron. Such good feedback tells us how effective we are – and encourages us to keep at it.

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