

e-book lending platforms : ready, set, engage!

The face of libraries is certainly changing, or perhaps, more correctly, the inter-face. Today's library is a dynamic hub of many offerings: story time, community gatherings, author's talks, and internet connections.

Libraries are innovatively engaging more people with the many activities and events available at libraries. They are also seeing a greater online community, made up of people who may not have set foot inside a physical library for some time. Forming connections between the vibrant community hub and the buzzing virtual one is the challenge to libraries going forward.

With the advent of e-book lending platforms, the way libraries connect with their users will inevitably change. Or will it?

E-book lending platforms offer a myriad of ways to engage patrons. They reach out to improve accessibility for those physically or emotionally challenged, for instance e-books (with font resizing /text to speech capabilities) can give the visually impaired greater access to information and ideas. They also help connect with the younger generation as, in many cases, the online world is where they exist. Music is downloaded, ideas and trends are found through YouTube and other sites, Facebook keeps them in touch with their friends. E-books easily fit into this world. As one librarian pointed out, "They give books 'street cred' because a device is involved".

An e-book lending platform can also be more than just a lending facility. They can allow libraries the flexibility to add a local flavour, with local authors and histories etc. It can become part of the digital 'hub' of the community.

Publishers can provide add-ons, such as invitations to online author events, or information on upcoming releases. This is interesting to both the publishers (commercially) as well as patrons and librarians who want to be immersed in the content. A lot of publishers are looking at ways of leveraging

relationships with readers directly in the new book economy. This is slow to happen through the retail chains, but can easily happen through the huge network of libraries and librarians. Libraries want what the big publishers have (best-selling e-books), and the biggest publishers want what the libraries have – a personal relationship with 90% of the reading population.

With 12 million library users across ANZ and a high conversion rate from lenders to buyers, there surely is an opportunity for publishers and libraries to become new best friends.

Meanwhile, some e-book lending platforms are providing far greater exposure for smaller, local, and independent publishing houses, a boon for that small but significant corner of the market.

The variety of users means opportunities abound for connections by way of librarian recommendations, book clubs, shared reviews, and the like. As virtual as the e-book world may be, people still want to connect with people, be it via a library forum or at a library event.

With technology moving fast, developments in e-book lending platforms over just the last year have seen marked improvements. The accessibility of e-books has increased 10 fold now that users no longer exclusively require an e-reading device (just an app). Touch screen (and wi-fi) devices make borrowing easy for everyone and new features make them even more engaging for the more digitally literate.

Looking into the near future of platforms reveals connection points – features, tools, and forums – which will largely be defined by, and developed in consultation with, librarians and their patrons.

The tools are all there, it's up to libraries to create new and innovative ways to connect with patrons by enhancing digital literacy and encouraging lifelong enjoyment through books – because it's not the words that are changing, it's the delivery.

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