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White Paper:

Keeping Garland County Library Relevant

The Problem

Garland County Library faces the same threat that libraries - and so many other historical institutions - across the world face. How do you stay relevant in the digital age? How do you remain a valued place in your community? While the library, located in Hot Springs, Ark., is now well-used and boasts a loyal clientele, library director John Wells worries about what happens in the future, as his present patrons age and younger persons, who do research on cell phones and read on electronic tablets, fail to regard the library as a destination.

Background

Garland County Library has served the community since 1951. Nearly 20 years ago, the library moved into its current facility tucked behind the local Health Department office on Malvern Avenue in Hot Springs. While the library offers delivery points of materials around the county, the entire collection is housed in its single building.

The library is well-used, with more than 400,000 visitors each year. Though it remains a rich repository of books and periodicals, over recent years it has adapted to the digital age by expanding its collection to include books-on-tape and, more recently, digital books, movie and music CDs and now online software that allows patrons to download books, movies and music. What's more, the library allows patrons to check out other useful items such as fishing poles, art supplies, seeds and even Halloween costumes.

In addition to these resources, Garland County Library offers a wide variety of education and recreational program, including story times for young children, book clubs for all ages, gaming nights, movie showings, tax preparation assistance, yoga classes, musical entertainment and much more. Along these same lines, the library hopes to expand with a facility on its campus that offers a performing arts auditorium and perhaps a test kitchen for cooking classes.

This transition to an institution more resembling a community center is one pursued by more forward-looking libraries in the country, according to The Pew Research Center.¹

While Garland County Library seems to be moving in the right direction, director Wells felt strongly the need for an objective assessment that the actions the library was taking were indeed ones that would keep the library relevant in Garland County for years to come. If they were not, he was determined to find out what would.

The Approach

Wells engaged the services of First Class Communication to assess the situation for the library and, if needed, to devise a plan to strengthen its position as a vital and needed community institution.

After initial conversations with Wells and members of his staff, we performed a communications audit and then designed a series of focus groups to assess what Garland County residents knew about the library, liked about the library and hoped to get from the library in the future. The first focus group engaged frequent library users; the second, persons who seldom or never visited the library; and the third was with staff.

In addition to finding a severe lack of consistency in branding and messaging through the communications audit, several overriding themes surfaced in the focus groups, which were held over a two-week period in spring 2014:

- The library had a strong core of loyal users who loved the library and engaged with many of its resources and programs. These persons tended to be aged 50 or older or mothers and their young children.
- Infrequent users - who tended to be aged 40 and younger - had high regard for the library though they seldom used its services. However, they were surprised that the library offered so much more than books and movies and felt that they would be more interested in coming to the library if they were more aware of all it offered. In fact, the majority of ideas they had for the library's future had already been implemented by Wells and his staff.
- All felt the library needed to be more inviting throughout, with places to sit and read as well as gather in groups.
- People who didn't use the library said there needed to be better signage about where the library was located.
- Users and non-users alike found the library's website to be confusing. Many had no idea that the virtual collections were even there.

The Solution

The findings of the focus groups were presented to a group of library and community leaders to focus on a plan of action. The resulting suggestions fell into three main categories:

- Create better branding and increase awareness of all the library has to offer, particularly to young adults.
- Make external and internal improvements to the

facility to make it easier to locate, more inviting to be in and easier to use.

- Improve the website to be both more attractive and intuitive for patron and non-patron use.

The Product: “Your Connection Point”

Armed with these insights, First Class Communication worked closely with library staff to develop and implement a strategy to address all three areas of concern.

The result was a top-to-bottom redo of the library and its branding that included everything from a new mission statement to newly painted walls to outdoor billboards - all driven by the library’s new brand as the connection point for the community.

Branding and Awareness Improvements included:

- A new mission statement emphasizing the library’s role in connecting patrons to resources, programs and each other.
- The new tagline.
- A bright new logo.
- Happy colors and cool fonts.
- Three fun television commercials.
- A series of print ads introducing the new brand.
- Radio ads to introduce the new brand and to be used to advertise library programs and events.
- A billboard located near the library.
- Online ads (15 second spots) targeted to current and potential library users.
- Two new e-newsletters - one for adults and one for young children and their parents - specifically to reach out to younger adults.
- A more strategic use of social media to reinforce the library’s branding, share its news and build its online community.
- A news conference with resulting media coverage to introduce the new branding and explain the refined mission of the library to the public.
- An editorial in the statewide newspaper about the Garland County Library project in particular within the broader context of the changing role of libraries.

Facility and Location improvements included:

- New, more noticeable signage, indoors and out, with the new colors and logo
- The library secured a new van for deliveries and community outreach which was “wrapped” in its logo and other branding elements. No one will miss that the library is out and about!
- The library received a fresh coat of paint

throughout its interior, with bright, happy colors replacing a drab gray in the children’s area and richer, more soothing colors encompassing the adult areas.

- The library cleared out clutter and rearranged collections and displays to make it easier to find the most used resources.
- The library created new meeting space in rooms formerly housing genealogical resource materials.

Website improvements included:

- Redesign with a cleaner look incorporating the new logo, colors and messaging.
- Reorganization for more intuitive navigation.

The Future

Garland County Library, in fear of becoming obsolete, had already taken many of the steps required to remain relevant to the community for many years to come. Indeed, it served people as a place to connect to ideas, to materials both educational and recreational and to each other through a wide variety of programming. The problem was that too few people knew of all the vital connections that the library offered.

On Feb. 6, 2015, the library introduced its newly articulated mission of serving as connection point for the community with a “Big Reveal” for its patrons and the media. They showed off everything -from the paint colors and interior signs to the revamped website and colorful van. The resulting comments and media coverage were exceptionally positive!

No doubt, new life is throbbing at the Garland County Library. Director Wells and his staff are committed to building on this energy, so the chances for the library to continue well into the future as a vital county asset are great indeed.

Footnotes

1) “From Distant Admirers to Library Lovers -- and beyond: A typology of public library engagement in America,” Pew Research Center report by Kathryn Zickuhr, Kristen Purcell and Lee Rainie; March, 13, 2014.