



Library Advocacy: the NLB Singapore's experience

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Meeting: 149. Metropolitan Libraries with Public Libraries
Simultaneous Interpretation: Not available

WORLD LIBRARY AND INFORMATION CONGRESS: 74TH IFLA GENERAL CONFERENCE AND COUNCIL
10-14 August 2008, Québec, Canada
<http://www.ifla.org/iv/ifla74/index.htm>

Abstract

The National Library Board (NLB) of Singapore is a system of some 40 libraries. It comprises one national library, 23 public libraries, and government department libraries including the Parliament Library, Supreme Court Library amongst others.

As a library system, the NLB had in the past 12 years successfully sought funding from government twice. The first was for \$1 billion to build new and upgrade older public libraries from the period 1996 to 2005, and the second was for a further \$100 mil to design, build and provide digital library collections and services. This includes setting up knowledge platforms for sharing and collaborations.

The paper will share some of the learning points in the process of seeking for funding and support from the NLB's stakeholders to enable the NLB to progress and realise its plans to serve the people of Singapore well in this knowledge age where users are so mobile and so connected using their handheld devices, and always ready to communicate and collaborate with each other.

Background

Back in the early 1990s, the National Library was a government department library system, under the Ministry of Information and the Arts. It then comprised one national library and 9 public libraries. Services had become rather stagnant, with one new library opening every 3 years to meet the needs of Singaporeans.

Feedback from library users was usually not very positive. Complaints were frequently received on the aging books in the library, the cold and unfriendly library ambience and library staff, and

the long queues that were a regular feature at almost all the libraries on weekends and during school holidays.

It was against this backdrop that in 1992, the Minister of Information and the Arts decided to set up a Library 2000 Review Committee (L2RC) to review all publicly-funded libraries with the aim of revamping the library system to serve users more efficiently and more effectively. The Committee comprised 22 members who were eminent representatives of various government ministries, the private and public sector, the press and academia.

The L2RC began by asking a very basic question : What are the roles of libraries in the next lap?

Two years later, the Committee completed its report called the L2000 Report. The report stated that libraries should be positioned as an integral part of the national system actively supporting Singapore as a learning nation.

The Library 2000 Report recommended 6 strategic thrusts :

- An adaptive public library system
- A network of borderless libraries
- A coordinated national collection strategy
- Quality service through market orientation
- Symbiotic linkages with the business and other communities
- Global knowledge arbitrage

The Report indicated that three key enablers of the transformation would be human resources, technology and organizational leadership. Learning and adapting through fast prototyping were advocated as tactical strategies to implement L2000 to create greater value for the population.

The government accepted the report, and a new CEO was recruited to lead the library in its transformation journey. Dr Christopher Chia was brought in to take on this role. The new statutory board was called the National Library Board (NLB). It was set up on 1 Sep 1995.

The first thing that Chris did was to assemble the management team to translate the master plan into an action plan. This he did with both senior library staff and a few new senior management staff he recruited from outside NLB. The ten senior management team took about 8 months huddling together to understand the plan, and translated the vision in the report into projects that were implementable.

The first few months were very uncomfortable months for both the new and the old teams. The existing library management team within the NLB did not know Chris and the other new team members, and there was a lot of education to do on both sides. Library staff had to explain why certain things were done in a certain way, and Chris would ask why they could not be done in a different way. It was a very memorable, productive, yet painful time for most. The team worked very hard and long for a few months, to get all the costings and did what we could to ensure that we had a plan that would work for Singapore and for the NLB.

After months of hard work, and lobbying with the Ministry of Finance (MOF), the NLB finally received the approval for \$1 billion for eight years, for it to implement the plans as proposed to the Ministry. The major part of the funding was for the revamp of the collections, the IT systems to automate services, new services, and new libraries, including a new National Library to replace the existing one that was not able to serve the functions of the national library effectively.

Before 1995, the National Library system was enjoying 10 mil loans and 6 mil visitors a year. Today, after the transformation of the public library system, loans averaged 28-30 mil a year. Visitorship was 37 mil for 2006/7, and is still growing.

Physical loans seem to be fairly stable for the past 2-3 years, while visitorship to libraries is still growing from year to year. This shows that users are coming to libraries not only to borrow books, but to do a wide variety of other activities, such as to use the multimedia services, to attend programmes or to view an exhibition.

Transformation Journey

The transformation process was itself a journey of learning and discovery for those of us who had a chance to be part of it. With the funds allocated to the NLB, the team gets on to work on the various projects proposed.

Reality hit hard when the teams set down to plan, as never before did the library have so much money to spend, with so little time and expertise. From the pre-1995 days when one library was set up every three years, to setting up three libraries every year, there was a big jump in the speed of setting up new libraries.

Added to this pace was the fact that we were not setting up libraries in the same old ways that we used to do it. We were clear that we wanted to innovate in everything that we were going to do, though we did not know exactly how to make a start.

Chris decided that to help us all, we would set up new working methods and models. He decided that we would adopt the project management (PM) methodology as our working model, in order to enable prototyping and development of new ideas and services, while keeping to the timeline of delivering three new libraries every year.

Once the decision is made, we and the other 200-odd professional and executive staff went through proper training in PM methodology, and we started practising it. This helped us tremendously as we had a common language to use, and we did not have to explain many things to new people who joined the team at any time when needed. This methodology served us so well that even today, we continue to use the process to help us in prototyping, innovating and implementation of prototypes.

From 1996-2004, we set up a total of 13 new public libraries, 36 new children's libraries, renovated completely 10 existing public libraries and upgraded their services to be on par with the new libraries set up, and completed planning and opening of the new National Library of

58,000 sq m in early 2005. It was indeed amazing to see that we managed to do so much within the 8 short years.

What was also interesting was that each of these libraries, whether new or existing, had a chance to experience new service innovations that were taking place at each point in time.

When we started, as pointed out above, we had a very manual and traditional system of serving customers. At that time, barcodes were used in most libraries to identify library items, and most libraries used a library management system that relied on scanning the barcodes to identify the item before attaching it to the record of the borrower. This service model meant that on busy days when each library was managing the transactions of 3-5,000 borrowings and another 3-5,000 returns, we needed a large number of staff to be on duty to serve the users, in order not to let them wait too long. Despite increasing the number of stations to facilitate the borrowing and returning of books, almost every library had a long queue on weekends and during school holidays in Mar, Jun, Sep and Dec. These were considered nightmare days for staff who found that they were always at the counter, serving the unending long queue of users.

Having identified eliminating long queues as one way of improving service levels, the library staff got together to crack their heads at the best way of doing this.

We realized that we had to do a lot of thinking, data collection, analysis and interpretation of what we gathered. All along in the old set-up, we were doing more of the same. We learnt quickly that the way we were working did not support the new needs of service prototyping and innovations.

We decided that we had to set up dedicated teams to look into the setting up of new libraries and service prototyping and innovations. Once these teams are set up, we were able to move forward more strategically to bring about the desired results.

When we started in 1995, almost all the library transactions were manual and library users required staff to assist. This included borrowing and returning, payment of fines, reservations and renewals, checking of loans, registration as a new members and renewal of membership.

Over the same eight years when we were setting up new libraries, we took the strategy that each library that we were planning to open or renovate offered us a chance to innovate the services in the library.

This gave us a large number of opportunities to try out new services while we planned and opened new libraries. Not all new services were prototyped in the new libraries as we quickly learnt that it was too stressful for the manager of the new library and the team running the library to handle both the prototyped new service and the operations of a new library. The project team managing the planning of each library would coordinate very closely with the project team managing the new services being prototyped to see which of the new services were ready to be implemented in the new library when it was ready for opening. This in itself was a challenging task.

During the period, the NLB team managed to automate almost all the library transactions in the public libraries. This included self-service borrowing and returning, checking of loan records, overdue fines and other payments, all payments, reservations, renewals and registration of new members and renewals. This did not include other successful experiment such as the Quiet Reading Room, Teen's Space and Senior Citizen's Corner that were designed to meet the needs of target audiences.

By the time we were planning for one of the last new shopping mall libraries in a new town called Sengkang, we found that we had automated every single library transaction in the library, and there was really no need for any library staff to be around to assist the user in any library transaction. The remaining last service that we wanted to offer an alternative service was what we called the cybrarian service, ie have a telephone and PC to allow the user to speak with a librarian if he or she needs to speak with someone.

We prototyped this service and found that it was useful, though it could not really replace someone onsite to help the user when personal assistance is needed. The personal service came in the form of a concierge service that we outsourced to a company who supplied manpower for us to train to provide a basic enquiry service onsite.

The learning we took away from Sengkang Community Library was that we could open a library round the clock if there was a need to, as we could open a library to provide all the necessary services that a standard public library provides, except for in-depth enquiry service where a professional librarian is needed. We were operationally ready for a 24-hour service if we wish to offer it.

Outcomes as a Result of the Transformation

The most visible outcome was the increase in usage. Both loans and visitorship increased by 20-25% every single year, until only recently, when the growth of loans slowed down. Visitorship numbers are still growing.

From a very old-fashioned, cold and unfriendly library service, we became known for great customer service and being cool and hip to be seen in!

Our users liked the way we serve them, and they were bringing their friends to use us and our services. We were becoming successful, even as far back as 1998 when our compliments to complaints ratio started turning around. From a poorly performing organization where we were receiving one complaint for every 0.6 compliments then to the new target of around 25 compliments to one complaint today, we have improved our customer satisfaction over 40 times!

Support from Government

Support from government and other stakeholders came along with this very positive feedback from our users. Almost every active Singaporean is a library user, including the families of our Cabinet members, Members of Parliament, businessmen, professionals, and the man in the street. We were and still are loved by our users.

By 2003, we had completed implementing most of what was laid out in the L2000 plan, and had achieved more than what we had promised to the Ministry of Finance. Then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong highlighted NLB as an innovative organisation in his National Day Rally Speech which was telecasted live to all Singaporeans for the innovative implementation of the radio-frequency identification tags (RFID) in library items in libraries. The NLB was awarded the Inaugural Innovation Award by the PM in the same year for this.

Library 2010 Plan

In 2004, Chris left the NLB and Dr N Varaprasad joined the NLB as its Chief Executive. Before Chris left, he initiated some work on the plan for the next phase. The focus for this second plan was to extend the work of L2000 from the physical spaces to the digital space, as we expected that more and more Singaporeans would be frequenting these digital spaces in years to come. As done with the first blue-print, a large number of external stakeholders were invited to provide their inputs to the plan.

Dr Prasad and his team completed the plan in 2005, and submitted it as the Library 2010 plan to the MOF for their approval. Although the MOF was not exactly clear of the projects and concrete outcomes for this new plan, they were supportive of it. The question that they asked at the beginning of the discussion was : What is the difference between what the library plans to do, and what internet is already doing?

Dr Prasad spent considerable time with the MOF to help them understand why the NLB needed to do what is in the plan, and shared with them that new services and infrastructures had been included to meet the changing needs of users, given the fast-changing environment in the internet world, and the way people use the internet for the purposes that they use it today and in the future.

The MOF approved almost every project that was proposed in the L2010 plan, and altogether, \$100 mil was approved by MOF for the new plan. This took effect from Mar 2007.

The L2010 plan comprises four key projects, focusing on building the digital infrastructure to support new digital library services, revamp of the physical and digital library materials logistics infrastructure to support the large system of public, special and national libraries served by the NLB, and a new digital knowledge infrastructure to support new knowledge creation through collaboration and knowledge sharing.

The strategic outcomes of L2010 are :

- NLB being recognised as a first stop for Asian content and collections
- Provide information services that power a competitive economy
- Develop self-sustaining and self-renewing learning communities
- Develop public libraries as social learning spaces
- Provide a supportive environment for library, information and knowledge workers

L2010 Implementation

Project teams for the L2010 implementation have been formed and work had started. The digital library infrastructure is being built, and an integrated information discovery service is being developed. When completed, this will allow users to search across all of NLB's resources, whether they are in the format of books, periodicals, databases or NLB's created digital content. New services to reach the users in their preferred digital spaces are being prototyped to find out if we are able to serve our users in the spaces they frequent more effectively.

The early experimentation shows reasonably good results that gave the team the confidence to push the boundary further. With increasing use of the internet and the pervasive use of mobile devices, the NLB aims to become the user's library in the pocket. If we can find a way to let the users reach us from anywhere using their mobile devices and through the internet, and for us to deliver content that they need also via the same channels, we would be used more frequently than if we were only accessible to them through the library's digital library.

With this mind, the team started looking at how they can reach the user when he or she is doing an internet search, say on Google. They took lessons from private companies who were teaching companies on how they could make their company more visible on Google, as most information seekers were turning to Google to search for information. This phenomenon was confirmed by OCLC's 2005 survey on search habits of users where the results showed that 84% of all information seekers were going to internet to search for information that they needed, and only 1% of these same people used any library's websites.

After the team repackaged the library's own created digital content on Singapore as a microsite, and put the content out to Google for it to crawl and index, they found to their pleasant surprise that usage increased almost immediately. From a small number of 400 accesses a month in Nov 2006 when the content was only accessible through the NLB's digital library, we now get 150,000 accesses a month in Mar 2008. This is a 375-fold increase in usage! This content comprises over 2,000 articles and pathfinders on Singapore topics.

Other services that were prototyped included the Network of Specialists (NOS), that allows librarians and experts from anywhere to collaborate on a challenging enquiry via either threaded emails, or a wiki-like platform. Another prototype is called the Research Collaboratory where researchers from within NLB can collaborate with researchers outside NLB, anywhere in the world to conduct joint research by using NLB's rich collections and resources.

NLB will continue to explore new ways of reaching out to its users, and we will explore new ways to engage not only librarians but user and other communities such as researchers and laypersons.

Learning Points

From our experience, we learnt that it is important to focus on getting results, to build a strong track record for delivering, and to foster and build a strong network of partners, including stakeholders who can help promote us and what we do, and help us secure the funds that we need

to further our cause. Library 2000 was our first significant journey of transformation. However, even if we had secured the funds, if we were not able to deliver what we promised and more, and if we did not create such a positive impact on Singapore and Singaporeans, we would not have gained the confidence of the MOF for them to support us in our second plan.

Keeping a visible and positive profile is also an important aspect of advocacy work, as our stakeholders and users are like any other in the rest of the world. Out of sight can mean out of mind very quickly.

We have to continually do and showcase new, interesting and impactful experiments that make a real and positive difference to people's lives, that will keep the media interested in what we do, and help us publicise without huge marketing budgets. One of the latest services that was showcased to the media recently was the SmartShelf, another RFID service that enables the library user to track the exact location of any library item that is tracked as part of the SmartShelf project. This prototype covers 44,000 reference library items in the National Library and will last for a period of 6 months from Mar to Sep 2008. During the prototype, users will be guided on the use of the SmartShelf service, where they can locate on a digital map the physical location of any item found on the online catalogue, down to the last bay and shelf, and if the item is misplaced, the SmartShelf exception report will generate a list of items wrongly shelved. This we hope will reduce the time users take to locate library items that they want to consult, and also enable librarians to analyse the use of reference materials in the library.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to say that library advocacy work is not just about telling people who we are, what we do, and why we need to be supported. It is about this, and more. It is about making the right friends, lobbying for support, delivering the results, and garnering the support of library users and stakeholders continually, everyday.

Library advocacy is not a task. It is an ongoing job that all librarians need to do, whether senior or junior in the organisation. Every staff and user of the library can be a library advocate, as every opportunity to showcase how the library makes a difference in people's lives is a chance for the library to show its importance to whoever is important at that point in time. Every life we touch each day is a potential friend of the library, and these are the people who can make or break the library.

Focusing on customer service is a key focus and we make it the reason for our mission in life. If the customer is not happy with what the library delivers, and the library is not able to support the customer in his information needs to meet his mission in life, the library's impact will be that much less.

With internet and the increasing mobility of the user, we expect that demands on library and patterns of library use will change. Apart from providing the traditional and still needed physical library services, librarians have to learn to be comfortable with the new media, and the use of the mobile gadgets so as to understand better the needs of the users, and how he or she wants to be served.

As my 18 year-old daughter, who is a frequent user of the NLB's physical library, tells me, "Mummy, if I cannot find your library on the internet space that I frequent everyday, your library is not in my life." This is the reality for her. I do not know if this is the same feeling for others like her who spends most of their time at home roaming the internet and chatting with their friends while in that space.

I know for sure that somehow we have to find a way to serve them in the digital space. If we do not, we will find ourselves used less and less by this new generation of Google/Yahoo/MSN or GYM users, for whom the meaning of library is the same as Google or Facebook.

And what does library advocacy mean, if our current and future users stop using us, not because we are not doing what we do well, but because we are no longer as convenient and accessible to them as we thought we were five years ago due to changes in their needs and lifestyles?

Thank you.

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Biodata

Ngian is the Director of the National Library, and the Deputy Chief Executive of the National Library Board. She is also the President of the Library Association of Singapore.

In her career with the NLB, she played an active role in transforming the public library system where library operations were generally manual to one where most library services are automated and library users help themselves to the services. This has helped to free librarians from the more routine tasks to take on higher value-add work.

Ngian believes strongly that libraries must serve users in the way they wish to be served, and especially in this time and age when almost every librarian and user have handheld devices that are internet-enabled, libraries must leverage on these new opportunities opened to librarians to reach the users more effectively, and to serve them well.