CUTTING EDGE READERS’ ADVISORY

Exploration of New Service Models with Patrons

July 2013

Presentation by Discovery Collaborative for:

MULTNOMAH COUNTY LIBRARY

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Research Objectives

• Overall goal is to test pleasure reading patrons’ reactions to a readers’ advisory concept aimed at engaging readers in a more meaningful relationship with librarians.

• Specific objectives:
  – Gain a clear understanding of how pleasure reading patrons discover books;
  – Explore current perceptions about the library and librarians’ role in book discovery;
  – Gauge reactions to the readers’ advisory concept to uncover perceived benefits and opportunities for enhancements;
  – Identify the program name that best communicates the values of this program; and
  – Explore ways to communicate this service with patrons.
Methodology

• In June 2013, six focus groups were conducted with library patrons:
  – Two groups with pleasure readers who depend on the library for book discovery
  – Two groups with pleasure readers who depend on alternative resources for book discovery
  – Two groups with pleasure readers who use mobile devices for book discovery
• Each group included a mix of patrons by primary branch, age and gender.

Who Participated in the Groups?

MCL enews subscribers from the following OrangeBoy segments:

Page Turners.
The library’s most voracious pleasure readers.

Libravores.
Voracious readers who also check out AV materials.

Upward Targets.
Largest segment of library users who make 1-2 visits per month to the library.

Bright Horizons.
Similar to Upward Targets and also check out AV materials.
Methodology

• Respondents were recruited through an email invitation from the library director.
• Groups lasted about two hours.
• Participants were paid $50.
• Groups were video-recorded and observed by Multnomah County Library and The Library Foundation.
Key Findings
Current Discovery Process
Concept Evaluation
Naming and Communication
Pleasure readers treasure their access to great reads and view the role of the library and librarians as critical to ensuring a thriving community.

- Almost all say librarians are great problem solvers who are helpful and friendly.
- From programming like Everybody Reads to the promotion of Lucky Day, Staff Picks or Book Club selections, patrons value the work behind the scenes that librarians do to bring great books to them.
- In addition, they say librarians play a vital role in the community by helping children, seniors, immigrants and low-income families achieve literacy, learn new technologies and find information and resources.
Access to books is at the heart of these patrons’ connection to the library, but they are not eager to ask librarians for book recommendations.

- Pleasure readers are satisfied with their current book discovery resources.
- They used to enjoy the casual exchanges with librarians that would sometimes lead to book recommendations, but today they have fewer informal interactions with branch librarians due to the self-service nature of online catalog and self-checkout.
- They question the quality of a personal recommendation from a librarian who doesn’t know them (or the time required to get the quality desired).
- There is a general feeling that book recommendations from librarians are an “added bonus” but not a part of their job description.
Key Findings

Interest in the readers advisory concept is lackluster. While patrons say they will “try it out,” whether most pleasure readers will actually request a personalized book recommendation from a librarian is unclear.

- Most appealing aspects of the service are the booklists and reviews—pleasure readers like the idea that the library’s website could some day become the “one stop place for both discovering and reserving books.”
  - Most pleasure readers don’t know these resources exist on the library’s site.
  - The few who are aware say there are not enough user reviews and that the librarians’ reviews are not consistent in quality or pervasive enough throughout the catalog.
- There are only a few commonly mentioned unmet needs that would lead participants to search for a book recommendation.
- Some pleasure readers question whether enough librarians would be profiled for them to find one who they would want to contact.
- They send mixed messages about their willingness to take the time to achieve a successful result.
Cutting Edge Readers Advisory Study

Key Findings

**Current Discovery Process**

Concept Evaluation

Naming and Communication
Pleasure readers discover books in three ways—they search for or stumble upon good books, but typically turn to others only when they are stumped.

- Pleasure readers have an established independent process for searching, collecting and winnowing titles from Amazon, GoodReads, LibraryThing, New York Times Book Review and genre-specific blogs or sites.
  - Algorithm based recommendations are hit or miss, so time is spent reviewing user ratings, user and expert reviews and excerpts to single out books they want to read.

- While satisfied with the resources they use to find books, they also appreciate when they stumble upon their next read unexpectedly.
  - In libraries, pleasure readers enjoy perusing Lucky Day and Staff Picks selections.
  - Outside the library, bookstore shelves, Powell’s Daily Dose, stories in the paper or on NPR are most frequent sources for unexpected recommendations.

- Most do not solicit personal recommendations unless they are stumped. Then, they most commonly ask people who they know have similar tastes in books.
Most do not turn to the library’s website to discover books due to lack of awareness or frustration with the library’s online book discovery resources.

- The book discovery resources readers count on from Amazon and other sites do not readily pop out to most patrons on the library’s website.
- The few familiar with librarians’ blogs, book lists and reviews say the availability and inconsistent quality of these resources does not merit a shift from current resources.
- A few also mention how not all books have excerpts.
- Across groups, interest is expressed in seeing the library’s top book discovery resources, Staff Picks and Lucky Day books become available online.
Current Discovery Process

The children’s librarian is called out as a great resource for discovering children’s book recommendations.

- Parents view the children’s librarian as an important collaborative partner in literacy development.
- And while they can easily peruse reviews for adult books online, they say that the available booklists and book reviews are insufficient for children’s books.
- While other librarians’ book tastes are often an unknown, the children’s librarian is known for his or her expertise in children’s books.
- At the library, the children’s librarian is also most accessible.

The children’s librarian is sitting in her section. She’s much more approachable than the librarians standing behind the reference desk.
Cutting Edge Readers Advisory Study

Key Findings
Current Discovery Process
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Participants reviewed the following descriptions and watched a short demonstration of readers advisory before being asked their interest in the program.

Librarians are all about helping people find their next great read. They are skilled at working with people to determine what they enjoy about reading and then providing book titles and descriptions that might pique their interest. With the tremendous array of books available today, librarians can help readers make informed choices.

A new library service would make personalized reading recommendations available to any library cardholder. Readers could call, write or meet with a librarian to obtain personal help in choosing their next reads.

To connect with just the right librarian, readers would have the option of perusing librarians’ profiles online. They would have the ability to contact them in a variety of ways, in person and electronically.

Once a reader has found a librarian whose advice has been valuable, their interactions and tailor-made booklists would remain available to the library cardholder in their library account.

To make it easy to find the right librarian, the library website would include:
• Profiles of librarians with their pictures, favorite genres and books, and what they are reading now
• Librarians’ blogs or book reviews
• Book lists created by librarians
• Videos of librarians talking about books
• RSS feed or email sign-up for book recommendations from a specific librarian

Cardholders would be able to request and receive their recommendations:
• In person
• By email
• By phone
• By text chat
• Through a request form on the website
• Through video chat or skype
• Through social media
Reactions to the concept are not clear cut. While pleasure readers are willing to invest time to enhance their independent book discovery process, they are hesitant about engaging directly with librarians.

- While nearly all say they would try the concept, what they describe liking most is the ability to search for librarians who share their interests and explore their booklists and reviews.
- Many say they would make a request, but since they don’t know whether librarians will give them good recommendations, they are more “willing” than “eager” to try.
- The overwhelming preference for asynchronous email communication confirms that they are unsure how much time this dialogue would require of them.

Not many people read sci-fi or horror, knowing someone who likes these would make me trust their recommendations.

In the video it didn’t look like an efficient use of time…who has time to do that?
To engage and immerse themselves in a book discovery process with librarians, pleasure readers first want the library’s website to enhance their search through more consistent and easier access to quality information.

- Almost all want their reading history incorporated into the algorithm for better quality book search and librarian match recommendations.
- Almost all say rather than having to input favorite book titles into an intake form, they would want librarians who they ask for a recommendation to review a richer account profile that:
  - Allows patrons to flag books in their reading history that they liked and disliked.
  - Add non-library books to these lists as well as detailed explanations of their preferences.
  - Enable multiple user profiles per account to help distinguish their preferences from those of family members that may share their account.
- So patrons find these resources and don’t hit dead ends, some also recommend better integration of librarians’ booklists and reviews with the catalog.

When I find a book with a long hold list, it would be great to see a librarian who has that book on one of their lists pop up.
Once books are discovered on the library’s website, pleasure readers want it to be easier to track and manage what they find.

- Many would like to be able to add books they find through booklists and reviews easily to a book queue (like the one on Netflix).
- Those who use MCL’s My Shelves say the tool is a little awkward and agree that the tool should function more akin to Netflix queue management capabilities.
The ability to find a librarian whose recommendations they could trust holds appeal, but pleasure readers question whether they will find a match.

- Many stress the importance of representing a diverse group of librarians (genre, interests, age, ethnicity, etc.) to satisfy their diverse interests, sensibilities and moods.
- In hopes of finding their match, many offer ideas to address their own concerns about the library’s ability to meet their needs:
  - Some participants ask if the reviews on the library site could include those made by non-librarian staff.
  - A few say even users should contribute reviews.
  - Others say they would prefer if the library website integrated better with their current preferred resources, e.g.: “Are the librarians on GoodReads?”

**LIBRARIAN INTERESTS TO HIGHLIGHT**

- Sci fi/fantasy
- Non-fiction
- Current affairs (U.S. and foreign politics)
- Historical fiction
- Beach reads
- Natural sciences
- Classics/“Good” literature
- Cookbooks
- Religious writing
- Poetry
- Movies
- Music
- Foreign language books (by language)
- Young adult
Concept Evaluation

Watching a demo of readers advisory reminds participants how dynamic, one-on-one exchange can clearly lead to great discoveries, but not all want that level of engagement or dialogue.

- Many say that seeing the rapport and shared interest of the patron and the librarian highlighted in the video (of Angela and Mary) makes them eager to try the service out.
- Most say the librarian’s probing and clarifying questions in the video, like, “How much gore can we get?” show how dialogue with a librarian can enhance the quality of the recommendation.
- Despite the video’s appeal, almost all say they prefer email for requesting and receiving recommendations. While a few are interested in in-person meetings, very few express interest in telephone, skype or online chat.
- A few hold strong views that “reading is solitary” and not an activity that would lead them to forge new relationships. They prefer to “read reviews and not have to interact.”
If patrons who are stumped take the time to have a one-on-one-one exchange that is successful, they say they will want to retain the contact for the next time they need assistance.

- Almost all say that if they have a successful one-on-one experience, they would want to be able to contact that librarian again.
- Most say an email from the librarian every few months would be fine.
  - Primary interest is in learning what the librarian is reading and access to new lists.
  - Some say they could envision opportunities to meet in person with the librarian and with others who love the same genre.
- A few say social media is better as their email inbox is “full of junk.”
  - The few who already “like” the Library on Facebook say they enjoy the questions posed by librarians on the Facebook page.
  - However, most Facebook users say they would not “like” a librarian on Facebook.
  - In contrast, Twitter users say they would follow the librarian given how quick it is to read tweets.
  - Social media preference for Twitter over Facebook is another indication that brevity reigns supreme with digital information.
Cutting Edge Readers Advisory Study

Key Findings
Current Discovery Process
Concept Evaluation

Naming & Communications
Naming and Communications

Participants evaluated potential names and made recommendations for how best to get the word out about this new offering.

- A good name should:
  - Make it easy to understand what is being offered and the value
  - Help patrons recall that readers’ advisory service is available
  - Pique curiosity and interest
  - Engage people emotionally
  - Differentiate service from alternative resources
  - Position the library at the center of a reading community

- Of the six names tested, two are strong, but exhibit different strengths.

- Personal Librarian
- My Next Reads
- Readlandia
- Shelf Help
- My Librarian
- Ask a Librarian
My Personal Librarian (MPL) does the best job of describing the one-on-one aspect of the concept.

- Those who prefer MPL like how adding the word “My” makes it fit with the nomenclature of the site.
- Some say it reminds them of a personal trainer, others say a Nordstrom’s personal shopper.
- A few who are not keen on the idea of a personal shopper say that is why they did not like the name.
- A few think this name is too long and prefer My Librarian. Most prefer the addition of the word “personal” to clarify the service specifically being offered by these librarians.
My Next Reads (MNR) does the best job of describing the benefit of engaging in book discovery with the library.

- Those who prefer MNR say they like that the focus is on what readers want – their next read.
- This name appeals more to those who are interested in discovering new titles online rather than those attracted to connecting with a librarian one-on-one.
- The one negative mention is that it “focuses on books,” but most do not seem bothered by this.
Participants recommend promoting the concept in the places and at the times they most enjoy connecting with the library.

- For the website, participants say a splash on the homepage and a pop-up when people are entering the catalog would grab their attention.
- Inside the library, participants suggest bookmarks, a banner or sign near the Staff Picks and Lucky Day selections.
- Also informational programs like a “speed dating” event or an event for people to “stump the librarian.”
- In every group, participants recommend Everybody Reads and/or Summer Reading program for a tie-in promotion of this service.
Participants encourage the library to launch this service through a variety of communication channels they trust and enjoy.

- Patrons say postcards and e-newsletters are effective.
- They also recommend postings on Facebook and GoodReads and interviews with Think Out Loud, The Oregonian, Willamette Week, Portland Monthly, etc.
- In addition, a few mention promoting this event to the broader public at events like Wordstock or booths at farmers’ markets or Pioneer Courthouse Square.
Conclusions and Recommendations

Cutting Edge Readers Advisory Study
Conclusions and Recommendations

To become the place where people with a common passion come together, develop offerings to engage readers in each of the three phases of book discovery – searching, stumbling upon and being stumped.

- The first step is in understanding the book discovery process:
  - Pleasure readers start with an independent search of reliable sources.
  - They are delighted when they stumble upon great reads.
  - When they are stumped, they reach out and ask for recommendations.

- At each stage in the book discovery process, there are distinct opportunities for the library to further its engagement with pleasure readers.
Conclusions and Recommendations

This research reveals five core qualities present in highly effective book discovery resources.

1. **Trustworthy, well read.**
   Participants trust a source when it delivers consistently good book recommendations and will consider new sources that have similar tastes or sensibilities to their own.

2. **Wealth of contextual knowledge.**
   Having contextual knowledge beyond a description validates the likelihood that the book being recommended will resonate with the reader.

3. **Relevant and authentic.**
   The best recommendations always come from real people who love reading similar books. When not a real person, targeted algorithms are considered helpful for initiating a search.

4. **Nuanced.**
   Quality sources provide meaningful elements to help readers decipher nuances.

5. **Easy to access.**
   Quick, easy and effective access are hallmarks of all great book discovery resources.
Conclusions and Recommendations

SEARCH. The library is not a key player in search today, but this research shows the potential for a strong position for the library, if done right.

- Patrons trust the library and would like to see the library become the one-stop place for books and recommendations.
- Given the lack of familiarity with key book discovery resources on the site, investigate ways to increase awareness and utilization of these features located under “Explore,” in the Details section and in the catalog’s right sidebar (under “Browse the Shelf”).
- Unlike other online sources, the library is the only source with access to patron’s reading history. Consider further research to explore the best way to implement an opt-in reading history and preferences enhancement to the library’s search/recommendation algorithms.
Conclusions and Recommendations

SEARCH. Current search results devote the most important part of an initial page view to management tools rather than discovery resources.

- Explore opportunities to bring “Details” or contextual information up into the initial page view.
- Consider adding either the number of users who have rated the book or the number of times the book has been checked below the rating.
- Consistently include excerpts.
Conclusions and Recommendations

**STUMBLE.** As people are spending more time online than in the library, bring patrons more opportunities to stumble upon a great read online.

- Pleasure readers love Lucky Day selections. Develop an online experience to extend this successful “no holds queue” offering.
- Explore ways to incorporate Staff Picks, While You Wait For... and/or Lucky Day recommendations more prominently within the catalog search display so pleasure readers can truly stumble onto a great book rather than needing to click through to search for these unexpected finds.
- Consider development of genre specific Lucky Day and Staff Pick selections that allow pleasure readers to see selections that match their reading history and preferences.
Conclusions and Recommendations

STUMPED. The more patrons believe that the one-on-one exchange will be easy and effective, the more likely they are to make time to try it.

• Consider piloting with a group of beta testers to work out any kinks before broad scale launch.
• Booklists are the magic to piquing interest and building trust in a librarian’s reader advisory capacity.
  – Clearly distinguish librarians’ booklists from other list sources.
  – Use descriptive titles to help readers identify the list is from a genre expert.
  – Create a more direct path from list to list to help keep the discovery process going.
• Consider Twitter length (or close to it) book summaries to distinguish librarian lists from others on the site.
• Develop a few demo videos to post on the website that highlight successful Readers’ Advisory through real people connecting through quick, friendly and even spontaneous interactions (asynchronous and in-person).
Conclusions and Recommendations

**STUMPED.** The easier and more effective the one-on-one exchange is, the more likely patrons will love it and do it again.

- Enable pleasure readers to meet librarians and satisfy their reading preferences quickly.
  - Ensure effective display of desired content—photos, booklists, short reviews with titles.
  - Consider a genre-matching tool that recommends librarians to help patrons quickly find librarians who share their interests.
- Enable librarians to make informed recommendations through comprehensive patron profiles with reading histories and preferences.
- Make intake forms short and simple.
Conclusions and Recommendations

Emphasize the benefits of the program through a strong name and communications plan.

- Use a name that conveys the overarching benefit like “My Next Reads.” “My Personal Librarian” works well if it is primarily a one-on-one service.

- When fully launched, run a visually compelling campaign on the website splash page, with a pop up in the catalog, at self-checkout, next to the Lucky Day shelves and on staff (button or tee).

- In addition to educating patrons about the service and its value proposition, communications must reverse misperceptions about the role of librarians. Pleasure readers need to know that:
  - No librarian is too busy to help a patron who is stumped.
  - There are librarians devoted to helping people find their next great read.
  - Books found with the help of librarians will help readers discover the unexpected.
Conclusions and Recommendations

Explore opportunities to engage pleasure readers in dialogue to further cement the library’s position at the center of our reading community.

- Given the value of user reviews, consider running a weekly campaign like Powell’s Daily Dose to create a new opportunity to stumble upon a great read, encourage patrons to write reviews, and reward participation.
- Extend the pilot of the program to include testing of on-going communication platforms (Twitter, Facebook, email, in-person event) to identify preferred platform(s) and refine approach(es).
- Connect the dots for patrons with the programs where readers advisory is a natural, like Everybody Reads.
- Given the strong interest in readers advisory for kids, consider further research with parents to develop a separate program that addresses the unique needs of families.