Networking Information Services to Support Local Business

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Every now and then the local newspaper asks me two questions when it is doing a story on library services or funding. First they want to know what my middle initial is as this is apparently part of a universal journalistic style mandate. The other question concerns my job title. Do I prefer to be called director or do I want to be the head librarian?

I've always liked the title head librarian because it suggests the library is a growing organism with me in my upstairs office as the head and somewhere, down in the basement, a foot librarian controlling the action there.

But this summer I read an article in "Wired" magazine which gave me a new favorite job title. In the August issue, Brian Caulfield wrote an article called "Morphing the Librarians." In it, he reports the information age is positioning librarians for a whole new role because we have traditionally been the community's information managers. If we just stop hiding behind the Dewey Decimal System, librarians will become the masters of the global datasphere managing the information needs of business and government. So, next time the Williamsport Sun-Gazette asks, my middle initial is L and my job title is master of the global datasphere.

I have worked in public libraries for more than 25 years and I regard it as the best job on earth because of the chance to interact with so many people pursuing projects, reports, business propositions, hobbies, investigations and occasionally, paranoias. One lesson I have learned is every day is different and people are seldom predictable and always ingenious.

Today I'd like to talk about four things:

- How libraries contribute to economic development and how rural libraries are uniquely positioned to capitalize on this opportunity.
- "Who", "what" and "where" the North Central Library District is. We won't tackle "why."
- What we're doing now to network information to stimulate economic growth.
- What I see us doing next.

When most people hear the term "economic development" they think of Chambers of Commerce, planning commissions, technology transfer

centers, government agencies - local, federal or state and economic development councils. If they think of libraries at all, it's as part of the "quality of life" of the community they can use to market the area.

When most people hear "public library," they think of story times, bestsellers (and how long you have to wait to get them), homework, and large print books for senior citizens. But even the smallest library has always provided some level of service to their business customers: how-to books on starting a business or selecting a franchise, and interlibrary loan for other information. Larger libraries purchase standard business directories, the Thomas Register and tapes and videos on management and personnel issues. The ability of the local library to provide current, up-to-date information in print of use to the business community diminishes as the size of the budget and the size of the community shrinks. Rural libraries are often left with fewer resources to attract the business community or the job seeker. While larger libraries are able to provide more materials, often the extent of their support effort has been fairly passive - buy it and hope that they will come - or send out a booklist.

The Brown Library geared up its efforts to serve the business community last year by designating a reference librarian as the library's business librarian. A series of monthly business breakfasts were begun. Topics include personnel issues, pension plans, starting a small business, performance appraisals, marketing and the Internet as a business development tool. Next month, the woman who developed the library's brochure will talk about developing an effective business brochure. In February, the topic is outsourcing human resource management.

Six hundred people have attended these sessions with any topic dealing with technology drawing the biggest crowd. The sessions begin at 8 a.m., we provide bagels and beverages, and you're out by 9 a.m. In addition, we made, for us, a substantial budget commitment to serving the information needs of business by buying two CD databases: The American Business Disk and Infotrac's Business ASAP which we put on our local area network.

A room on the main level of the library was turned into a Small Business Development Center with books, videos and software and four computers. Because we know small businesses are contributing most to overall business growth and because up to 50 percent of them feel the focus of the materials in this collection is to serve people in the entrepreneurial mode or those whose small businesses are now poised for the "grow or die stage" which brings with it a whole new need for information.

We also have always served the job hunter. Ask any library to limit its collection to two dozen books and one of them will probably be on

resumes. Half the people who use the library are looking for a good book to read. The other half needs information on a wide range of things but the two major areas that draw them in most often are the need for health and career development information: how to find a job, how to find a training program, how to pass the post office civil service test, who to talk to about learning to read.

A few examples from the past month show how the business community has used these services:

- Someone was so impressed by our business resources yesterday that he popped our reference copy of "Pennsylvania Corporation Laws" in his briefcase and tried to leave with it. But our security system prevailed.
- The owner of the largest hotel in our central business district brought his local manager down to introduce him to the Small Business Development Center and the Thomas Register so he can locate product suppliers.
- An aspiring entrepreneur used our business planning software and our market research resources to write a business plan for the company he was trying to start. Today Solution Technologies Group is off and running.
- Sales people "qualified" leads by identifying shoe stores in communities of a certain size in Pennsylvania.
- Business people took advantage of the way we rewired the main reading room during a recent renovation to fire up their laptops.
- And this is my favorite: When a contractor in our area dug up a lot of large rocks during an excavation job he found himself stuck with a pile of stones pushed to the side of the job site. He didn't see the problem. He saw it as an opportunity.

He came to the public library and used the American Business Disc, a CD-database with information on millions of American businesses in communities of all sizes. He located landscaping companies in the area who might be interested in buying the rocks. It worked. He sold them. This is economic development.

The term economic development often conjures up images of sophisticated business deals involving high-level government officials and the management of foreign manufacturers negotiating the location of a new plant in the United States. While it is this, it is also connecting someone with a product with potential buyers. It's also helping someone locate the training or build the skills they need to advance in the workplace or get a better job. It may also be going into a workplace and providing on-the-job basic training for workers performing new job duties.

The common theme that runs through all of these levels of economic

development is the need for the right information to pull it off. How to market the community to the foreign manufacturer, how to understand the customs and business etiquette of a different culture, how to find potential customers, where training programs are available and how to develop job specific basic skill training for local employees.

Information is the public library's business and it's what gives us a growing role in economic development initiatives in even the most rural areas. In rural communities it may be easier for libraries to get a foot in the economic development door: the library and the librarian may be in the forefront of using technology and telecommunications to connect their users with "big city" sources of information and there may be less "competition" from other resources available within the community such as a college or a larger chamber.

The information that contractor used in the public library in Williamsport is also available in the public library in Galeton in Potter County and in McClure in Snyder County. Through the "miracle" of consecutive user licensing and remote access to centralized databases, even the smallest library can provide their local residents with access to the kind of information online that they could never have afforded to purchase for their own collections.

This is how we are trying to position our smaller libraries as economic development assets in North Central Pennsylvania.

Our library serves as a District Center Library for an 11-county area which is kind of a mongrel chunk of geography. Within our borders we have:

- The largest geographic county in the state
- The smallest geographic county in the state
- The county with the smallest population
- 17% of the state's geography and only 3% of its population
- Rural counties such as Bradford County in which the cows out number the people almost 2 to 1
- 40 small public libraries serving a half-million people
- 12.5 professional librarians or a ratio of one librarian to every 40,000 people

In no other part of the state are there so many small geographically remote libraries. This is why technology and telecommunications have helped improve the delivery of information so dramatically in the past five years. Before we had modems, we had the U.S. Mail and too many Scrooge library boards unwilling to pay for a phone call to Brown's reference staff to get the statistics, addresses or financial information some-

one in their community needed.

In 1995, we partnered with the library at Mansfield University of Pennsylvania in a project to provide dial-up access at local public libraries to databases containing government information of benefit to business and government: census information, legislation and federal regulations and the national trade data bank. Mansfield is a depository library for selected federal documents.

Using this project as a model we developed a parallel project to expand remote access to additional electronic databases through North Central Pennsylvania called "Online with Libraries" or OWL, information power for North Central Pennsylvania.

Through an earlier grant we had been able to put microcomputers, modems and printers in district libraries. Originally this was to give them a way to dial into our online card catalog. These machines were upgraded for the OWL project and we spent $20,000 to acquire new databases and expand the licenses to others currently available only on Brown's local area network. We also purchased a magazine index with full text of more than 100 magazines on hundreds of CDs in jukeboxes. Our libraries can now log on, search the magazine index, select articles and have them faxed on demand without a reference librarian at Brown needing to retrieve and copy each microfilm or bound copy. Suddenly, a library with a budget of $37,000 a year had access to reference materials and magazines which it would have cost more than the entire budget to buy. Several of these databases contain essential resources for the business community: market demographics, company information, annual reports and business and trade magazines.

Training programs were done to help librarians develop a comfort level with this technology and marketing materials were developed to help the local librarian promote their new role as information heavy-weights. The first place the Internet hit in many of our rural areas was at the public library.

The year before the OWL project began, the Wyalusing Library in Bradford County, which serves a population of 1,921 people, did not have a current encyclopedia, spent less than 1 percent of their small materials budget on reference books and had no one in their staff trained in online searching or using CD-ROM databases. Last November, this library provided their users with information from InfoTrac's Business ASAP, a computerized index to more than 240 business, management and trade periodicals with coverage of current business trends, new technologies and specific companies. Other databases like Facts on File, Current Biography and the Health Reference Center benefit students and people needing current health information. Today we use phone lines to

accommodate this use. Next year we're planning to shift this to Internet access for the 30 libraries in our district which were recipients of Bell Grant computers.

"Economic development, like charity, begins at home." This is one of the new rules for economic development identified by the Corporation for Enterprise Development in 1990 in a study called "Playing by the New Rules." The concept that most new jobs come into a community from businesses that relocate from outside is outdated. Most new jobs come from on-site expansion and business start-ups. Governor Ridge's Business Calling Program has been established in recognition of the fact that more than 80 percent of future job growth in Pennsylvania will come from companies already doing business in Pennsylvania. "Tell us what your job needs to grow" they'll be asking 2,000 companies of all sizes, to stay and to prosper. The answer to that is increasingly going to be cutting-edge information and a convenient way to get it. Another outdated economic development concept is the idea that a community needs to offer the lowest wages and taxes to be "competitive" the report concludes. Business is attracted to locations where they get value for their expenses like a skilled workforce, nearness to markets and a good infrastructure. Where else in a community of 1,291 people can you find a computer terminal which is a digital doorway to hundreds of business journals, reports, company data, market data and trade information?

In 1998, thanks to the Bell Online With PA Libraries Project, we want to shift the way our rural libraries access our databases to the Internet. A product called InfoTrac Searchbank is helping us do this by restricting Internet access to their vast and varied resources through use of a PIN. This will be a library card number. Winframe technology is helping us use the Internet to access the databases on our local area network now available by modem. The program with Mansfield has been shifted to the Internet which now has web sites for their governmental agencies which serve as a gateway to their data.

Next November, if we can pull it off, that person in Wyalusing or Galeton will find a digital doorway in their local public library to the text of 460 magazine titles ranging from the *ABA Banking Journal* to *World Tobacco*. They'll also find sections in ValueLine Investment Report and an index to 500 more magazines. Our local card holders will have 24 hours (well actually 22 1/2 hour access, it takes us 80 minutes to backup our system) access to these databases from home or office. All they will need is a library card which will be their PIN number. When you put a computer and Internet access into a rural library you open up the world.

Brown is fortunate to have a web-accessible catalog and a web server. Our library web site is developing a special business page called The

Briefcase with links to other sites of interest. At the bottom of our home page is an icon which links to the local Chamber because we're a member. One of the menu items on the home page is local links which will connect the user with all the home pages maintained by businesses in our area. Currently, this page has our OWL Logo on it but this will be moved to the district page. During next year, we will be developing home pages for our rural libraries with an icon on the bottom linking them to our page with access to our business sites which from there goes out to the other "library tested" sites of interest to the business community.

Organizations are starting to e-mail us to request links of mutual benefit such as the Public Register's Annual Report Service. Because we have server space available, we're also hosting web pages for area non-profits to develop the foundation for a community network. Our Children's Discovery Workshop has a page up. The local historical society is close to having a page up and so is the Mifflinburg Buggy Museum. The bloodmobile schedule is on-line. So is the bookmobile schedule.

Our web server statistics are interesting. We average 75 hits a day from outside which is not too hot in my view, so we're working on it. Our URL address appears on everything we have printed but it's fun to see where people are coming from which is, in this order, .net .com .edu .org .us .sweden and then .gov. We also get visitors from 28 other countries. This may be a standard traffic pattern. I don't know.

We also have put the index to our local paper, maintained for 90 years by diligent librarians, on the web and current indexing continues that. This is primarily of interest to genealogists, but any item indexed about local businesses are also available online.

There are two impediments to what we can do. Library and district staff are too busy or too insecure to reach out to the business community. We're afraid we don't speak the same language. But we do. We understand value added. This is a book. This is a library book. We understand just-in-time inventory when we buy John Grisham. We understand just-in-case inventory when we buy Shakespeare. Those of us who have undergone renovation projects backed up by a five-year-pledge period understand lines of credit. We understand market share: ours is 35 percent. We understand all the regulations involved in being an employer: job descriptions, workers compensation, personnel manuals, law suits. And boy, do we understand cash flow.

We will also be marketing these services to our business and economic development community via a special business card, increased staff assistance and personalized "tours" of our resources for county administrative officers, business groups and chamber officials. If we're

fortunate enough we'll get a TIIAP grant we're conspiring about with Mansfield University and the Elmira Public Library.

Libraries are positioned to be increasingly useful in economic development under the new rules. Astute municipal officials and astute librarians will forge effective partnerships to the benefit of the community. We must identify the economic development players in our communities, introduce ourselves and astonish them with what's available in a place they thought was just for children and senior citizens.

My vision of a growing state economy includes a professional children's librarian in every county, even those with more cows than people, an economic development\information specialist on the staff of county libraries and, probably, a chicken in every pot.