

## HAVE YOU HEARD IT ON THE GRAPEVINE?

by

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"Is there anyone in town that can read a letter to me that is written in Swedish?"

"Does anyone around here do professional typing?"

"Can someone tell me now to run a backhoe?"

As a librarian what do you do when questions like this come across your counter?

To answer these questions, we could request an inter-library loan or use the knowledge our staff has accumulated about our community.

Last year, frustrated by our inability to answer tough reference questions, we made application to the Oregon State Library for LSCA funds "to identify and document individuals within the region who have knowledge, experience or skills not common to the rest of the community." We were given a grant for our Grapevine Project to use the community as its own reference resource.

Our library computers use Follet's *Circulations Plus and Search* program. This gives us control over our daily circulation activities and subject search capability. We decided to enter each resource as a "book" in our computer with a call number under the materials heading indicating that they were a "human resource." The variety of skills, training and education that were made available to the public through the library by organizations such as the Forest Service and Bureau of

Land Management are listed as community resources. We made them as accessible as possible to the public by using many subject listings.

We learned a great deal during the entry period. The theory works just fine, but practical application is another matter. Additionally, we noticed the general public doesn't think like a librarian who is constantly dealing with different sources of information. I suppose this shouldn't be a surprise, but it was.

Members of the community tend not to see themselves or anyone else as potential information resources. They simply do not think in those terms. When they have a question they often come to the library. They tend to rely on librarians who think in terms more broad and diverse.

The first attempt to apply the human resource theory was to take some questions that fit into the framework of the Grapevine. (Reference questions that are more likely to be answered by a person than a book.) Then we put the questions to the public on local radio and newspaper looking for anyone who could assist the individual.

The ratio of responses to questions was low. In all fairness, we did have some successes, but not many. We were unable to determine whether the problem lay with apathy in the community, our manner of approach, or whether people just don't think of themselves as information resources. This was not a very efficient manner of building our database.

Next, we addressed small groups of people within an area of interest (photography, senior citizens, etc.) to request their assistance with the project. This manner of approach elicited little more than a blank stare.

Our most effective method of securing listings in the database was to keep the project director in a position of high visibility. We directed borrowers to sources of information when they approached the circulations counter and weren't sure what they wanted. In other words, the most effective way we found was to work one on one, using our communities' grapevine for our "Grapevine."

If I was asked whether I thought this project was a success, I would say, "that depends on how you look at it." As a taxpayer, the amount of money the project cost in return for the number of references received was high. We gathered 40 names of people who agreed to be listed in our database and had one outright refusal. The project handled 30 to 35 questions over the year. You can buy a great deal more reference materials for your dollar in books and databases.

From a public relations point of view, it was a partial success. We had comments that range from "Wow, I never realized we had this kind of talent in town!" to people who preferred not to be involved.

But, there is the question: Does it work as a source of reference information? Our reference librarian feels, "As a reference tool the people resources are another vital source of information."

In my opinion, the project had only moderate success. The bottom line dollar figures just weren't there, but then I haven't figured out a way to attach a dollar figure to the smile on the face of a library user who finds the author of a poem she has been looking for for years. Nor have I found a spot on a balance sheet for the pride of patrons who find themselves listed as a reference resource with other interesting and intelligent people in the community.

One year later, our Grapevine Project is no longer a project, but a fully integrated reference resource. It will grow and change as our library's needs grow and change.