

Check Your Ego at the Door: Successful Customer Service through Collaboration

As the role of the library in the community continues to evolve, one crucial and unchanging constant is the mandate to provide the very best customer service to all users. But how best to accomplish this with shrinking budgets, rising costs, limited human resources and the plethora of new demands for additional types of materials and services?

Two small libraries in suburban Union County, NJ, have found success through a collaborative partnership in much greater measure than either could have accomplished on their own. Scotch Plains and Fanwood are, like many municipalities in the state, two adjacent communities that have many interests in common. They already share a school system and have a good track record of other shared services initiatives. In 2005 the Fanwood Memorial Library and the Scotch Plains Public Library joined together to forge a unique Shared Services Cooperative Partnership model. Each library continues to be an independent, municipally funded entity with separate Boards; but they have become, in essence, one library system with two locations more effectively serving the 30,000 residents of both towns.

The history of quality library service is long and well-established in both communities — over one hundred years for the Fanwood Memorial Library and dating back over two hundred years to the first library society in Scotch Plains. The two operations have been successful providers of the highest quality library services to their residents and both actively participated in local and statewide reciprocity. But now, due to the partnership approach, access to library materials, online and in-house library services and programming have been dramatically expanded and improved. There is wide-spread and seamless use of each other's collections and facilities by residents of both communities.

Since 2005 the two libraries have used Interlocal Shared Services Agreements to accomplish the following:

- Share a common library automation system and encourage reciprocal borrowing
- Secure over \$250,000 in grant support to further their collaboration
- Save money and effectively maximize the use of existing funds through cooperative efforts
- Forge a collaborative relationship with the existing joint school system
- Sponsor four years of a student film festival, "Movies in May"
- Improve and upgrade both libraries' materials, shared policies, programming and staff development
- Support increased electronic connectivity and promote public awareness of joint services
- Expand a joint digitization project of local historical materials and develop an open-source solution for the online presentation
- Create a training program to empower staff to provide more inclusive and comprehensive customer service skills to better serve the autism community

The ultimate goal of all of this collaborative effort is enhanced customer service to the patrons both libraries collectively serve. The mere act of bringing two sets of policies and procedures to the table to develop one unified approach for staff and patrons has caused the libraries to simplify all rules. Taking a fresh look at longstanding policy with a commonsense collaborative approach demanded flexibility and compromise. This has not only resulted in more effective library administration, from the circulation desk to technical services to the public PAC, but has clearly provided patrons with a comfortable, predictable, uniform and less restrictive experience regardless of which facility or webpage they use.

The population of Fanwood (7,174) is approximately a third of Scotch Plains (22,732). Repeatedly this three to one ratio is reflected in almost any statistic tracked, from operating budgets and collection size, to circulation, holds and fine collection. As an example, since fines were now being collected at any location for either library's materials, there was initial concern about recording these monies fairly. Believing the unified service approach was ultimately the best for their customers, both directors pushed ahead trusting they could review and resolve any inequities down the road. After having a special report developed by the automation vendor, the result at the end of the first year confirmed initial instincts were justified, and each library was receiving its proportionally appropriate share of all fines collected. As an aside, overall fine collection has steadily increased over the past three years.

Other recent successful examples of the beneficial collaboration are shared IT support and an open-source Linux network, The Joint Digital Archives of Fanwood and Scotch Plains, and the "Libraries and Autism: We're Connected" project. To overcome the complexities of providing internet to the public, the libraries pooled their resources to implement a Linux-based open-source technology environment. With the assistance of a shared IT company, the libraries developed a custom thin-client network that serves up the internet and application software to the public. They have also co-designed new features for the unified public catalog they share. The joint servers allow for the sharing of online events calendars and public display message boards, and the backup of crucial data between the two sites each night.

The Joint Digital Archives of Fanwood and Scotch Plains (www.thejointlibrary.org/archives) was undertaken as a collaborative project with financial support from grants, both Boards of Trustees and contributions from both Friends of the Library groups. This growing collection of materials related to the rich history of the two towns allows for in-depth searching to support research as well as browsing for pleasure; it includes local newspapers, high school yearbooks, municipal ordinances and historic books and ephemera. One of the current issues with digitized material, especially when working within a small budget, is how it will be presented online; will it look good, how fast will it load, will it be searchable and so on. After examining the available options for 'front ends' to present the materials and finding them either too expensive or ineffective and unappealing, the libraries developed a unique open-source software solution. Again it was collaboration that enabled these two smaller libraries with limited funds, to pool financial and personnel resources and come up with an attractive and functional presentation shell.

The Joint Digital Archives



The most recent example of the strength of the Fanwood – Scotch Plains partnership is in a new project called “Autism and Libraries: We’re Connected”. As successful applicants for a regional contract to promote better inclusion of people with autism and their families at NJ libraries, the Scotch Plains Public Library and the Fanwood Memorial Library produced a customer service training video to help library staff serve individuals with autism and their families more effectively. The video focuses on what you need to know about autism spectrum disorder and empowers the viewer with specific techniques to offer more inclusive and comprehensive customer service when interacting with this growing and underserved population.

Copies of the DVD were sent to every public library in New Jersey, many schools, special and academic libraries, as well as to every New Jersey State legislator. As the project evolved it became clear a website would be the best way to share and disseminate the depth and variety of valuable information and tools that were created. Libraries and other organizations are encouraged to explore the site (www.thejointlibrary.org/autism), watch the video and make free use of the support resources. The video was posted to YouTube and has already begun to generate national and international attention from libraries as well as individuals in the autism community. As one parent who responded to the online survey said, *“It was about time that the community got involved in such an important topic. We need the support. I took my son to the library a couple times when he was 3, right before his diagnosis, since then I never took him back because people used to stare at us when he was acting up. My son is now 8 and after I found out about your web site, I took him back last week. Thank you for the great info and support!”*



As a logical extension of the collaborative efforts, the idea of a new building that would serve both communities began to take shape. This idea, while still in the feasibility stage, would replace the outdated and undersized existing facilities and would capture much of the cost savings and other benefits inherent in a cooperative approach. Some advantages and efficiencies that would result from the formation of a joint library in a single shared facility include:

- More effective use of existing staff
- Consolidation of all administrative functions
- Reduction in costs and an increase in results of building maintenance
- Expanded results and more efficient use of existing funds for materials purchase, technology costs and public relations
- Reduction in duplication of services
- Ability to provide expanded reference service
- Expanded Sunday and evening service hours
- A new ‘green’ energy efficient building conforming to all ADA requirements
- More centralized location for all residents
- A larger and more extensive collection of materials, all available in one location
- Increased programming for all age groups
- More flexible and diversified usable space within the building
- Large, effective Adult, Young Adult and Children’s program spaces
- Community meeting rooms



Initial focus groups have garnered enthusiasm from residents of both communities and the project has had the unilateral support of both Library Boards and Mayors. Pending successful identification of a site, the completion of the feasibility study with architects and fundraisers, and a final building and business plan by the Library Consultant, the libraries hope to move forward with their biggest collaborative effort of all — formalizing the first new joint library system in the state in over thirty years and building a new, green joint library.

The success that the two libraries have enjoyed has been a direct result of the willingness and ability of the two directors to work effectively together to improve services to all the residents they jointly serve. While both directors had extensive histories of involvement in regional and state activities, it took a major commitment and refocusing of their time and efforts toward more local issues to bring the collaboration to success. The modeling of cooperative and unselfish intent by the directors created an environment that encouraged both Boards of Trustees, the two Mayors and Councils, and most importantly, the professional and support staff at both libraries to work together effectively. At any number of times over the past few years, and in the course of the numerous collaborative projects undertaken, there was ample opportunity for discord and negativity. Here's where the need to remove ego while staying focused on the goal of enhanced customer service for the greater good proved to be the key to success.

Other valuable and unforeseen benefits of the collaboration have grown from staff interaction. Despite being less than half mile apart, many of the staff had never been face to face with their counterparts. Resolving problems over the phone is much easier when you know the person on the other end. Joint training sessions in topics ranging from library confidentiality to circulation issues to leadership skills have often gone beyond the specific issue of the workshop and helped to foster a growing sense of a unified community. For small libraries, it is an invaluable positive experience to have the opportunity for intellectual interaction and professional support from colleagues, something a large library has the benefit of each day. This creates an atmosphere where creativity, cooperation and problem solving are valued, and mitigates the “burnout factor” often felt by staff in a small library.

Regardless of whether or not the libraries are able to move forward in the future with their plans for a single facility, it's clear that although collaboration is not a magic elixir to solve every problem, the benefits far outweigh the problems. Rather than pursuing what is easiest, what might make one individual look best or be the most politically expedient, the two directors continue to set the standard for decision-making by keeping compromise in the forefront and by embracing the principle of replacing ego with collaboration to the ultimate benefit of the public. The commitment of these two small New Jersey libraries to their joint and cooperative path to the future most effectively enables them to serve their patrons by providing that one crucial and underlying commodity all good libraries must deliver – excellent customer service.

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