Reaching Underserved Patrons by Utilizing Community Partnerships

By Christina C. Wray

Regardless of the size of a library or the outreach budget, it can be challenging to get the right message to the right patrons at the right time. It becomes even more difficult when working with a small staff, tight budget and a dispersed audience. One way to increase the impact of outreach efforts is to build partnerships with community members who already have strong relationships with the patron group with which libraries would like to have a stronger connection. This article will explore ways to identify potential partners; identify their training needs; design training for a new audience; and promote your library as part of the training curriculum. Real life examples from the Center for Disability Information and Referral (CeDIR) will be used to help illustrate practical applications of the concepts discussed.

CeDIR is a small specialized library that serves people with disabilities, their families and caregivers, service providers and educators throughout the state of Indiana. One of the greatest challenges that CeDIR faces is that people with disabilities and their families tend to need information at specific times in their lives, such as when they first receive a diagnosis, times of transition and emerging symptoms or changes/increases in behaviors. The sporadic nature of information needs for families and people with disabilities makes it difficult for CeDIR to build lasting relationships and maintain a presence in patrons' minds who are not professionals in the field with ongoing needs.

Identify target patron group

The first step is to articulate the problem or goal. In CeDIR's case it was, "How can CeDIR connect with patrons at the point of need?" The answer to this question varies based on a variety of factors such as age, culture and location. This question was too broad to tackle at once, so it was important to narrow it down. To design a successful outreach program it is necessary to clearly identify a definable target patron group. Here are some questions to answer before getting started:

- What patron group is the focus of this outreach initiative?
- What are the demographics of this patron group in the community?
- Are there subgroups within this patron group that may interact with different community groups?
- Is this group easily definable?

- Is the library ready to support the needs of this patron group in increased numbers?

CeDIR chose to focus on families with children aged zero to three. Building relationships with patrons at the beginning of their journey when there is a more sustained information need helps CeDIR maintain a connection when information needs become more sporadic.

Identify potential partners

Once the goal of the outreach project and the target patron group has been identified, then it is time to identify potential community partners. When choosing partners ask the following questions:
- Who does the target group come in contact with on a regular basis?
- Who do they go to for support?
- Who holds a position of authority in their community?
- Who is a natural fit to talk about resources with the target population?

It can be difficult to answer these questions as an outsider, but a first step to answering these questions may be to interview members of the target audience to help identify potential partners.

Parents of children with disabilities interact with a variety of community partners influenced by a number of factors including economics, availability of appropriate childcare in their area, religious beliefs and cultural background. However, only a few of those community partners have statewide reach. When identifying partners, it is important to think about how much of the target population they interact with. Choosing partners with similar coverage to the library can potentially increase the impact of the partnership.

With this in mind, CeDIR chose to focus on building relationships with service providers working in the First Steps program. First Steps is a state run program through the Family and Social Services Administration for families of children experiencing developmental delays or who are likely to experience developmental delays based on a diagnosed condition (Indiana Family and Social Services Administration).

It is open to all families who qualify and provides a sliding scale of cost for services based on the annual income of the families. First Steps providers are a good partnership because:

• They provide a variety of services to the target population which are topically related to CeDIR's collection and services.
• They are a state-wide organization, like CeDIR.
• They work will families from diverse socio-economic backgrounds.
• They are often present or contacted during times when information needs arise.
• They are a strong patron group in their own right.

When choosing a partner, libraries should ask: Does the library have something to offer the partner, and does the partner bring the library closer to the target population? If the answer is yes to both parts, pursuing a partnership is a good idea. Identify potential partners training needs.

Once a potential partner has been selected, libraries can approach them in a variety of ways to begin building a relationship with them. Partners can be approached as a "gateway" to the target population; libraries can offer "integrated" programming; and sometimes partners give libraries "opportunities" by approaching the library. Each approach has its pros and cons; it is important to evaluate the partner and the goals of the outreach programming to determine which option is the best fit.

Gateway

Approaching a potential partner and explicitly stating that the library would like to form a partnership so that they can better serve mutual populations of interest works best if the library already has an established relationship with the partners. Partners are more likely to act as advocates for the library with the target population if the partners independently value the library and have a high degree of knowledge about resources and services that the library can offer the target population. In these situations, libraries can develop training opportunities that increase knowledge about resources and services that may be of interest to the target population and create library advocates.

The pros of this approach are:
• Develop highly effective outreach campaigns for the target population through shared knowledge of wants and needs.
• Strengthen partnerships through shared goals.
• Easily gauge impact of outreach activities by creating project specific access points.

Cons:
• It is less likely to succeed if a strong pre-existing relationship isn't already in place.
• Often the goals of one side of the partnership take precedence.

• It can be a missed opportunity to provide better services to the community partner.
• May change the dynamic in negative ways between the library and partners.

Integrated

The integrated approach is subtler, harder to quantify, but arguably more organic and sustainable. When libraries take an integrated approach on a project, the focus of the programming becomes meeting the needs of the community partner while highlighting ways that the library can also serve the target population.

Pros:
• Libraries have the opportunity to provide valuable services to community members, who in turn have a personal connection to the library resulting in strong library advocates.
• By selecting partners who have influence with the target population, libraries can dramatically increase the impact of programming hours.
• Creating a strong foundation with a community partner allows opportunities to develop balanced "gateway" opportunities in the future.

Cons:
• It can be difficult to find the right balance between meeting the partners' needs and highlighting services for the target population. If the highlights are too overt, the partners' needs will not be met, resulting in a negative experience. If the highlights are too subtle, the partners may not recognize the library's value for the target population.
• If libraries do not successfully connect with the community partner, they may in turn negatively influence the target population against library services.
• It is difficult to assess the impact of integrated programming on the target population's library use.

Many partners may struggle to find quality, affordable professional development opportunities on technology and 21st century literacy skills. It is important to keep in mind that the audience of the proposed programming is the community partner, not the target population. Here are a few options to initiate contact with community partners:
• Explore whether partner members have continuing education requirements. If so, could the library be a qualified provider?
• Approach the partner with a menu of types of programming or customized trainings that the library could offer to community partners.
• Contact the education coordinator or leader of the organization and ask if there is any way the library could be of service.

CeDIR began working with First Steps by having informal talks about their collections and services with local divisions of First Steps service providers.

The librarian at CeDIR was later approached by the company that oversees the continuing education program for providers to develop a three hour program on finding disability related information online efficiently and ways to keep abreast of new research in the field. This format allowed the librarian to highlight resources that they could share with their clients, one of which was CeDIR. This opportunity allowed the librarian to:

• Establish CeDIR and herself as an authoritative resource on disability related information as well as online technologies.
• Highlight ways that CeDIR could help First Steps providers improve their knowledge and resources.
• Highlight ways CeDIR could directly help First Steps providers' clients.

This has resulted in an ongoing opportunity to connect with a community partner that has created new users in the partner community as well as the target population.

Opportunities

Libraries are often approached by community partners to provide training or space. This is also an opportune time to brainstorm about target patron groups with which these partners may interact. Be sure to take advantage of opportunities offered as well as sought. The positive opportunities like this are that the partners are already interested in building or strengthening a relationship with the library. The drawback is that the community partner will likely already have a preconceived notion of what the programming should look like. It can be difficult to integrate opportunities to highlight resources and services for the target patron population. If it does not work out for this programming opportunity, keep this community partner in mind for future opportunities. They already feel connected to the library and comfortable working together—trust is established

Design training for a new audience

Once a community partner has been confirmed and it is time to design programming, the most important thing to identify is what outcomes the partner has in mind. Typically library programming objectives are at the discretion of the library. When libraries start offering customized training opportunities or continuing education opportunities, community partners may be used to more formal educational settings. Also, there may be education objectives that are required for participants to receive credit. Here are things to keep in mind when developing a more formal training:

• Build a relationship with a contact that can help guide educational outcomes to best meet the needs of the community partner.
• Before planning the programming, find out the type of environment where it will take place. If participants will not have access to technology, it is important to plan accordingly.

• Provide community partners' leadership with a detailed outline of the training, including educational objectives. The University of North Carolina at Charlotte has created a helpful guide to writing educational objectives using Bloom's taxonomy and can be found at: http://goo.gl/cM8JwU (University of North Carolina at Charlotte Center for Teaching at Learning).
• Check ahead of time to see if any of the participants need accommodations.
• Be sure to provide feedback opportunities (i.e., reviews, evaluations).

Promoting the library

Promoting the library during trainings is particularly important if the training takes place outside the library or is not directly dependent on library resources. Further, it is important to remember to promote the library on two levels: first as a resource to support the training objectives and second as a resource for the target outreach population. There are a variety of ways that the library can be reinforced as an important resource. Here are a few tips that may be helpful:

• Provide resource guides for participants that highlight library resources.
• Host the resource guide on the library's website.
• Be sure to provide the speaker's contact information and reinforce that participants are welcome to contact the speaker or stop by the library for more information.
• If the programming takes place outside the library and it is possible to provide remote checkouts, bring potentially useful materials and allow participants to check them out on the spot.
• Provide topically related resource guides that participants can share with the target patron population in their own work.
• If you utilize public databases such as Medline Plus, ERIC, etc. and they are linked on the library's website, be sure to navigate to the databases through the library's website.

Any time a connection can be made to library resources or services in a natural way, be sure to do so! One of the best ways to promote the library during a program is by giving participants a friendly face to associate with the library. Utilizing networks of community partners benefits all members of the network. By actively cultivating library advocates at a systems level, libraries can help partners provide better services to their clients and exponentially increase the impact of outreach programs that promote library resources and services.

Resources

Indiana Family and Social Services Administration (n.d.). Bureau of Child Development Service (BCDS) --First Steps. Retrieved June 5, 2014 from: http://www.in.gov/fssa/ddrs/2814.htm.

University of North Carolina at Charlotte Center for Teaching at Learning (2014). Writing objectives using Bloom's Taxonomy. Retrieved June 5, 2014 from: https://teaching.uncc.edu/learning-resources/articles-books/best-practice/goals-objectives/writing-objectives