

A Three-Phase Business Connection:

Library Services for the Workplace and Beyond
by Jeffrey Krull and John Dickmeyer, Allen County Public Library

The premise that a public library should serve the needs of its community is one that has been greatly espoused in this century, but service to the business (and government) portion of the community is a concept which is slowly taking hold. At the Allen County Public Library, we like to think of such service in a "three-phase" approach very much like the "three-phase" alternating current systems which power manufacturing. Phase one is collection development. If a library does not have the books, periodicals, CD-ROM's, on-line services, etc., or convenient and rapid access to them, service to business is an impossibility. Furthermore, these materials must be appropriate and easily used. Phase two is superior reference service. Whether the business client comes in or telephones, the service must be cost effective, efficient, prompt, and reliable. The librarian must demonstrate the highest qualities of professional responsibility and personal creativity to provide the best on-demand service possible given the resources and personnel. Phase three is in-depth outreach service. It is characterized by thorough reference interviews and very specialized services (beyond those normally available at a reference desk). Phase one and two are the subject of countless books and professional journal articles; however, phase three is seldom undertaken and less frequently actualized. It is the Allen County Public Library's approach to in-depth outreach service to business that is the subject of this article.

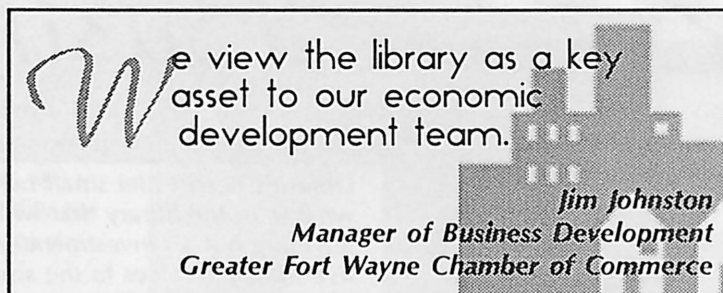
One can characterize in-depth outreach service to business as having five basic characteristics. First, there must be **time**. Time is required to talk with clients and perform the necessary tasks required. Two and a half minute reference interviews don't make it. If the librarian providing this service cannot spend at least one hour per client (very often much more), then this service will fail. To think that the actual reference work in special reference service does not require more time than

ordinary reference work is an example of faulty thinking. The truth is that often this type of reference service demands almost time and a half to complete because of the additional care which is necessary to make a lasting and viable product. Second, the information must be the best, most **accurate** available. Third, information delivery must be more or less immediate. **Speedy** delivery is characterized by the willingness to fax, UPS, Fed Ex, US Mail, or even, and especially, hand deliver. Fourth, outreach service must be **personal**. If one client

cannot call a single person by name and identify that name with the service, then outreach will fail. To paraphrase spy films of the late 60's, this program needs an OUR MAN FLINT! Fifth, outreach service must be totally **confidential**. The client needs to know that his information specialist will not disclose anything he

requests or says. PERIOD! Sixth, the librarian so designated must be **mobile**, able to go anywhere within the library's service area, and beyond. With these characteristics delineated and realized, one can describe real outreach services to business.

An anchor of outreach service to business is cooperation with the local chamber of commerce. The business specialist of the Allen County Public Library performs sophisticated on-line and CD-ROM database searches, provides demographic and other statistical database information, and consults with chamber staff members on economic development information needs. Results of this cooperation have been a greater influx of jobs, quicker access to information for the chamber, and a best response time to chamber clients. Jim Johnston, Manager of Business Development for the Greater Fort Wayne Chamber of Commerce states: "We view the library as a key asset to our economic development team. Without library assistance, we would be at a severe disadvantage in competing with our national and international competition." This participation in community and economic development directly builds community resources as well as the library's tax base.



"The computer at my library gives me up-to-date business information in any configuration. In a short amount of time, I can walk out with an accurate listing of potential customers. Sure, I could do it without the computer... if I had a few days to spare. But spare time is hard to find for a busy salesman."

Greg H.

Another prime client is Indiana Northeast Development, a consortium agency dedicated to increasing industrial economic development in a nine-county area in northeastern Indiana. This agency's needs are similar to the chamber, but they tend to focus around the annual conference held at Pokagon State Park every June. Lincoln Schrock, the director, says it this way:

[The library] is critical to our ongoing industrial development efforts in Northeastern Indiana. As a repository of information without which we cannot do our day-to-day work, we depend upon the library to provide this material accurately and quickly. We particularly appreciate the direct hands-on information provision given at our Pokagon conference. We can't go into "battle" without library assistance.

County and regional economic development contracts have an indirect influence on the library's tax base in that jobs created outside the library's taxing district may result in economic development within the district. The result is both business and workforce building within the area directly served by the library and in surrounding areas.

Small business relationships tend to focus around the new-business startup activities of the local SBDC office and SCORE chapter. The library's business specialist works to provide startups with a list of competitors, normative data from Robert Morris and Associates (RMA) and Dun and Bradstreet for their industry, and demographic and statistical support data necessary to write an effective business plan. The SBDC and SCORE aid in the writing of business and financial plans and provide financial and business management counseling. A.V. Fleming, Director of the Northeastern Indiana Small Business Development Center, describes the library-SBDC relationship as follows:

From our experience, the biggest contribution [of the library] is establishing *feasibility* for startups and existing businesses. It is most important for the business operator to have a clear notion whether or not his prospective business is a good or bad idea. Library involvement also helps to extend the *learning curve*. Participants in the library program know twice as much as non-participants. Furthermore, these clients develop a level of *quality* in their performance faster and continue to improve consistently in their movement toward business success.

Involvement in small business is an excellent example of succinct use of library resources. Small business is the largest collective creator of new jobs in the American marketplace. A library which has a good program of outreach to small business builds a good job base for its community and reinforces its own tax base at the same time.

Library services also support the local activities of the Indiana Department of Workforce Development and Jobworks, the local JPTA agency.

This support consists of specialized research on demand and demographic and statistical assistance. Representative of comments from this sector was one by an unusually heavy user of library materials, Milton Cragg, labor market analyst for the Indiana Department of Workforce Development: "I was able to provide affirmative action tables for all 92 Indiana counties as a direct result of the library's ability to download the data from CD's in a timely manner."

Aid to not-for-profit agencies, such as the Allen County League for the Blind, Fort Wayne Women's Bureau, and United Way, has centered on census-derived demographic data packaged for individual grants, research centering around the topics of specific grants, and identification of grant-making agencies. Government agencies, such as the City of Fort Wayne,

The library is critical to our ongoing industrial development efforts in Northeastern Indiana. We can't go into "battle" without library assistance.

Lincoln Schrock
Director, Indiana Northeast Development

City of New Haven, and Allen County have also heavily used these services.

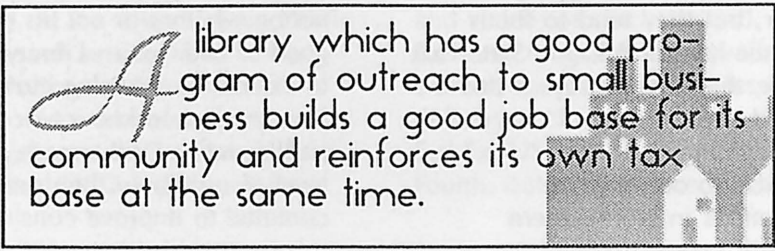
In addition, large corporations, including, but not limited to, ITT, Rea Magnet Wire, Essex Group, North American Van Lines, Navistar International, and General Electric have utilized the services of the Library's Business Specialist, as have a variety of smaller firms. Source-of- supply questions, international trade, government procurement, and related questions may be added to the types of questions asked by representatives of other groups.

The goal of proactive libraries is to integrate the functions and resources of the library into the overall

organism of the community. The three-phase business connection accomplishes this goal in three ways. First, it requires the library to "beef" up the two most important

roles of its public service functions: collection development and reference work. Second, it demands a real in-kind, in-person, and in-time commitment to the world of work in the community. Third, it recognizes the fact that

what is good for the economic health of the community as a whole will directly benefit the library. Streamlining and improving the library goes one-third of the way toward meeting this goal. Direct in-depth outreach service to business completes the three-phase circle of excellence.



A library which has a good program of outreach to small business builds a good job base for its community and reinforces its own tax base at the same time.

Small business development is responsible for a large share of our new economic activity. Like their larger counterparts, small business requires up-to-date, precise, and authoritative information. The truth is, we need good, reliable information just as we need good, reliable water and good, reliable power. For the largest number of people including most businesses, the public library is their best source of this information.

In attempting to keep our communities economically competitive, we would never allow our infrastructure like roads, electricity, and water to become inadequate. We need to include in that basic infrastructure public libraries. They are essential to our economic vitality.

Thayr Richey
President, Strategic Development Group
Former Executive Director,
Indiana Department of Commerce