OLAQ

Community Builds Libraries

Jim Scheppke
Oregon State Library

Community Builds Libraries

by Jim Scheppke
Oregon State Librarian

We are going from a world where value is created in vertical silos of command and control to a world where value will be created increasingly horizontally by who you choose to connect and collaborate with.
— Thomas Friedman

In this issue of the *OLA Quarterly,* our President has asked me and others to reflect on her presidential theme, "Finding Community." Much has been written recently about how libraries can "build community." There are ample opportunities to observe this phenomenon here in Oregon.

To brag on Aletha a bit, anytime (and I mean *anytime*) I meet someone who hails from Baker County, and I bring up the subject of the Baker County Library, I never fail to get the same response. It appears that anyone you meet from Baker County can go on and on about how outstanding their public library is, and what an asset it is to everyone in the community. And they never fail to mention Aletha by name, and to praise her leadership and what she has done to put the Library at the center of the community.

Here's another example. It's hard to find any silver lining in the disaster that has befallen the public libraries in southern Oregon due to the expiration of federal funding that the counties had relied on for nearly a century. But if you doubt that libraries build community—a community of readers, a community of learners, a community of people who still believe that libraries are indispensable—all you have to do is pick up the *Medford Mail-Tribune* from any given day in the past several months. Turn to the editorial page and you will see this community speaking loud and clear. The outpouring of support for the Jackson County Library has really been inspiring. It's been there in the paper nearly every day. And it was out in the street, at a rally held on January 31st that drew about 300 citizens who then proceeded to testify to Jackson County Commissioners at a public hearing on the future of the library. A Commissioner who I spoke to after the hearing said it could have gone on most of the day if they hadn't cut it off after three hours.

I could cite many examples of how Oregon libraries have done a good job of building community. And not just public libraries. Oregon academic libraries have done a particularly good job of building new facilities in the past couple of decades that are designed to be at the center of their campus community, and to attract students to surroundings that are beautiful and comfortable and inspiring — just the place for a campus community of learners. For public, academic, and other types of libraries, leadership has been the key to building community, and I think this generation of library leaders in Oregon will be remembered as one of the best.

But what I spend more of my time thinking about these days is not how libraries build community, but how community can build libraries. "Community" as a business strategy. Thomas Friedman's *The World is Flat* has done the most to popularize this notion. Friedman's ideas have been controversial. Some see him as simply an apologist for the worst aspects of the global economy. But I happen to agree with him that the global economy is here to stay, and that it brings more opportunity, not less, to people in the U.S. and people around the globe. It challenges the dominance of the U.S., but this may be a good thing in the long run. We still have many advantages here that can keep our economy strong in a flat world, given the right political and economic leadership.

The old-style organization that won't thrive in a flat world is characterized by Friedman as "the vertical silo of command and control." Unfortunately, this kind of organization was pretty much the norm for libraries for centuries. To cite an obvious example, until quite recently it was the stated or unstated goal of most libraries to independently acquire as many books as possible—to fill their silos, as it were, as much as they could. If the silo gets filled, you build a bigger silo.

You still see vestiges of this way of thinking. Even though the Web site of the Association of Research Libraries states that membership "is necessarily limited to research institutions sharing common values, goals, interests, and needs," to qualify as a member, an academic library is judged on the number of volumes in its collections, volumes added, periodical holdings, and annual expenditures. These are the big silos of the academic library world. Of course the business need to try to mimic the Library of Alexandria went away decades ago with the advent of library automation, which brought with it effective and efficient ways for libraries to share their resources. These systems continue to improve and become more effective and efficient all the time. (Strangely enough, the ARL libraries are in the vanguard of libraries allowing a commercial online advertising company to digitize millions of their holdings without compensation, perhaps bringing us closer than we might realize to the day when big silos of books become totally irrelevant.)

And how about "command and control?" Do we still find that in the library world? When I first came to the State Library in 1986 there were still a lot of longtime employees who could tell hair-raising stories about the many rules and restrictions that controlled the work of State Library employees in years past. To hear these stories it was hard not to imagine a kind of caste system that was more about conferring rank and privilege than it was about the best way to get work done. I don't think the State Library was much different from other libraries of that era. Our old friend Melvil Dewey was the father of library "command and control," at least in this country, among his many other, more useful, innovations. The library culture he invented in the late 19th century persisted well into the 20th.

I think we have gotten well beyond all this in most libraries. What a relief! But have we fully embraced the new way of doing business that Friedman advocates? Call it "connect and collaborate," as he does, or call it, more simply, "community." Again, we can see some good examples here in Oregon.

How about the Orbis Cascade Alliance? What began as a Meyer Memorial Trust Grant to the University of Oregon to try to promote resource sharing among a handful of academic libraries in Oregon has become a tremendously successful community of libraries, big and small, throughout the Northwest, meeting a wide and growing range of needs, not only for resource sharing, but for ground delivery, cooperative licensing, and in the future, shared storage, preservation and digitization. For academic libraries in particular, the Alliance has become a fully integrated and indispensable part of how they do business.

Another favorite example of mine, from the public library world, is the Oregon Digital Library Consortium that was established last year by the eight largest public libraries and library federations in Oregon for the purpose of more cost-effectively providing their users with downloadable audiobooks. This year about two dozen more public libraries are planning the join the Consortium. Who would have predicted, say, ten years ago, that the Multnomah County Library and the Curry Public Library in Gold Beach would be sharing the same collection of downloadable audiobooks? And yet, from a business standpoint, this "community" effort by public libraries, large and small, makes sense.

While you can point to these and other examples of Oregon libraries doing business in a new way, the "community" way, I believe we still have a long way to go to maximize the potential for libraries to work together. For a glimpse of one potential future, look how far Georgia has gone with its Evergreen project. In case you haven't been paying attention, Evergreen is a new open source integrated library system that serves nearly all of the public libraries in Georgia. In a way, it creates one public library system for the entire state that gives public library users access to millions of books and other library materials throughout the state. It also saves a huge amount of money, compared to the cost of purchasing and maintaining integrated library systems for individual public libraries or even groups of public libraries (as we mostly do in Oregon).

When libraries adopt business practices that maximize "community," does it take away from their ability to be perceived and valued as a unique component of their own community? Do libraries risk becoming homogenized, like franchise stores? I don't think so. If done right, the "community" business practices all operate in the background, and the face that libraries present to their communities is the same.

So I hope in the decades ahead, Oregon libraries will continue on their current, successful path. Let us continue to "find community"—by building it with our customers, and building it with ourselves. ❧