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Catherine Jasper
Collection Development Librarian, Deschutes Public Library

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Putting our Money Where Our Customers Will Be:

Investing In Digital Collections Today to Ensure a Customer Base Tomorrow

by **Catherine Jasper**
Collection Development Librarian
Deschutes Public Library
catherinej@dpls.lib.or.us



CATHERINE JASPER

Catherine moved from sunny Florida to sunny Bend in 2001 and has worked at Deschutes Public Library for 11 years. For the last eight of them, she has ridden the digital download rollercoaster in her role as the Adult Services Collection Development Librarian.

Reading habits have experienced a tidal wave of change in recent years. Ten years ago, iPhones, iPads, Nooks and Kindles did not exist, and virtually no libraries offered downloadable audiobooks and e-books. Starting in 2007 a rapid succession of new devices—the Sony eReader, the Kobo, the Kindle, the Nook, the iPad—were released, but adoption of this new technology was slow. As of 2010, only four percent of the population owned an eReader and three percent owned a tablet (Zickuhr & Raine). Around 2010, e-books began catching on, and libraries jumped into the game. Unfortunately, money was short and the offerings were slim. That year 73 percent of public libraries were offering e-books, but the median collection contained only 813 items. Momentum built, and by 2014, 28 percent of Americans had read an e-book in the previous year. Ninety-five percent of libraries offered e-books and the median collection size was above 10,000 (Romano, Girmscheid & Genco). Despite struggles with publishers, licensing agreements, and budgets, in a relatively short span of time e-books have become a standard offering of public libraries and a significant portion of books read and purchased.

Library staff and budgets have struggled to support this new collection. Often, digital collections are not given the same priority as physical collections. Budgets are not proportional to demand, and holds ratios are kept higher to keep costs down. Marginalizing this collection compromises libraries' ability to take full advantage of this new technology. Harnessing the momentum of this new wave of reading habits requires much of libraries: knowing the landscape of the publishing industry and local communities, making a significant initial investment in anticipation of demand, selecting the vendors and platforms that have the most potential, and staying on top of changes in vendors, formats and trends. But staying ahead of demand is crucial to positioning libraries to be the community reading hub into the future.

The Aspen Institute's report *Rising to the Challenge: Re-Envisioning Public Libraries* recognizes this importance. The report identifies four key strategies for success for public libraries in the digital age. The second of these is "Provide Access to Content in All Formats." The report elaborates that an immediate and major challenge is "being able to procure and share e-books and other digital content on the same basis as physical versions" (Garner, 2014, p. 36). Some obstacles to accomplishing this are out of libraries' control. For example, integrat-



ing e-book circulation and holdings information into a library's ILS or OPAC is limited by the capabilities of current technology and software. Library's digital collections are currently almost always tied to a vendor platform—limiting libraries' purchasing choices and complicating the reader's experience. However, there are ways that libraries can already be working toward the Aspen Institute's directive to develop digital collections “on the same basis as physical versions.” The development and management of digital collections should be given equal priority and should not be treated as secondary or supplemental collections. Building excellent digital collections today positions libraries to be an attractive reading resource for today and tomorrow's communities.

Deschutes Public Library has been aggressive in budgeting for digital collections. As reported by Library Journal's 2015 Annual Materials Survey, libraries on average spend 10 percent of their materials budget on downloadable audiobooks and e-books. Libraries our size (DPL serves 170,000 people) spent an average of 17 percent of their materials budget on these formats. During the last fiscal year, DPL spent 31 percent of its materials budget on these two formats. With that money, DPL has built a digital collection three times as big as the median size of these collections—55,000 books versus a median of 14,397. Accounting for library service population, DPL's collection significantly outsizes both libraries serving populations of 100,000–459,000 (with a median collection size of 21,000 books) and libraries serving populations over 500,000 (median collection size 30,000) (Hoffert).

In addition to building a large collection, DPL uses this money to maintain a low holds ratio—3:1 for both downloadable audio and e-books. The average holds ratio for all libraries is 7:1. For libraries the same size and bigger, the average holds ratio is 6:1. According to the Library Journal Materials Survey, the three biggest barriers to customers reading e-books are “user prefers print or other format” (61 percent reporting this as a barrier), “unaware of ebook availability” (60 percent), and “long wait time/not enough copies of popular titles” (59 percent) (Romano, Girmscheid & Genco). Libraries may not be able to influence preference (although I would argue building excellent digital collections does sway preferences). Making customers aware of library services is a constant goal for all libraries. But an immediate and direct way to remove the third barrier is to invest money to bring down holds ratios. This accomplishes two goals: 1) increasing circulation and 2) attracting and retaining potential e-book users.

Building a quality collection and keeping holds ratios low has impacted our digital circulation. The median circulation for digital downloads for libraries in our size category in 2015 was 50,392. The average circulation for these libraries was 109,539 (Romano, Girmscheid & Genco, p. 26). DPL's digital circulation was 389,449. Digital download checkouts represent almost 20 percent of DPL's total circulation and surpass circulation at five of our six physical locations. While there have been reports of demand for e-books waning (Milliot) and declining eReader sales (Alter), DPL's digital checkouts grew by 31.4 percent last fiscal year. Also significant, DPL added almost 10 percent more new digital users in 2015 than it did in 2014. These new customers are happy enough with the collection to stay active. As a snapshot, during June 2016 there were 15 percent more unique users than in June 2015. DPL enjoys a high percentage of e-book users. Twenty-five percent of active library users (customers who have used their library card for any reason in the last year) use downloadable audiobooks or e-books. Looking at our total service population—those with or without a library card—almost nine percent of our community checked out a digital download last year.



The addition of new users is not as exponential as it was a few years ago, but there is still more growth potential. Younger readers are more likely to read e-books, and this is an important trend to recognize. According to a 2014 Pew Report, almost half of American readers (people who had read at least one book in the previous year) under the age of 30 had read an e-book in the previous year. “Among readers in the 18–29 age group, 47 percent said they’d read at least one e-book, versus 35 percent of 50- to 64-year-olds and just 17 percent of people ages 65 and over” (DeSilver, 2014). The rising price of e-books is often cited as a possible factor pushing readers away from e-books. If this is the case, now is the perfect time for libraries to appeal to e-book readers who are looking to save money. As we look ahead, we must attract these readers today so that they will still be with us tomorrow.


The obvious question this issue raises is “Where do libraries find the money to robustly support this ‘new’ collection?” Deschutes Public Library has carved out this money in two significant ways. First, every collection and budget line was scrutinized and adjusted to reflect current reading habits and information needs. From fiscal year 2008/2009 (pre-e-book) to fiscal year 2015/2016, DPL’s budget for Reference material has been reduced by 90 percent. Print magazines have been reduced by 30 percent, standing order plans (primarily reference) by 77 percent, teen nonfiction by 46 percent, juvenile fiction by 25 percent, and juvenile nonfiction by almost 75 percent. These reductions have not resulted in unmet information needs or empty shelves. Adults and children are turning to print reference or non-fiction books for research or reference questions significantly less often than just a few years ago. A substantial portion of magazine reading has migrated online. In a world that is changing so quickly, a close and honest look at use and circulation statistics must happen each budget cycle to see where old habits are resulting in excess spending.

The second effort that streamlined money into digital collections involved our Friends of the Library groups. For a few years, each group was asked to devote a significant portion of its donations into a fund for e-books. Their focused efforts maximized the impact of their funds. During that time, these Friends of the Library groups were thanked on our webpage and at DPL Board meetings to raise the profile of this generous and impactful donation strategy.

Prioritizing digital collections involves more than just a materials budget. Initially, staff-training, formal classes and creating help sheets enabled our staff to help customers navigate the cumbersome process of downloading books. Ease of use and customer savviness has increased, so these strategies have shifted to open labs for troubleshooting and referring customers to online help pages. In the early days, a mobile kiosk served as a device petting zoo—drawing attention to the collection and helping to answer the regular question, “What device should I get?” Librarians have set up camp at local bars and coffee shops to promote and support digital download services. Prominent positioning on the website and radio and print advertising made our communities more aware of this service. All digital titles have records in the catalog, and when a discovery layer was chosen, an important consideration was the ability to integrate digital and traditional account information. Strategies for making a digital collection visible and discoverable have evolved over the years, and doing so will be a constant goal.

All this outreach and promotion will be wasted if customers find a mediocre selection and months-long wait lists. Every customer who is turned off by an unsatisfying digital experience is a customer who will find somewhere else to go for his or her digital reading hab-



it. Budgeting is about balance and compromise, and no budget is ever perfect. But a wave of change has come over library materials budgets these last few years, and this requires a shift in mindset. Digital collections are not less important than other collections. Their development and management should be a priority equal to the physical collections that have been a mainstay of libraries for decades. As the Aspen Institute's Report has charged, rising to the challenge of the new information society requires libraries to provide access to content in all formats—procuring and sharing e-books on the same basis as physical versions. We must do this for today's customers because the demand is current and real. But we also must do it for tomorrow's customers. Investment in high-quality digital collections today will attract and retain customers well into the future. 

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