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The Salem Public Library internet project

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In early 1995 the Salem Public Library applied for two grants that would give the library seed money to start a community network. The network would run through the library and Marion/Salem Data Center and would provide patrons with access to local information as well as the World Wide Web and other Internet services. The concept was to have both in-house Internet workstations and dial-up accounts for patrons who had computers at home. These services were developed in response to strong patron demand. SPL's success with bringing cutting-edge information technologies to the community had inspired patrons to ask for Internet access. As the Internet's acceptance and value increased, patrons began asking for SPL to "hook them up."

The Library was notified in the Summer of 1995 that it had received both grants: a $53,500 Libraries Services and Construction Act (LSCA) grant and a $231,565 Telecommunications and Information Infrastructure Assistance Program (TIIAP) grant. The first grant would provide Salem patrons with both in-house Internet workstations and low cost dial-up service. The TIIAP grant would expand the network into the tri-county area, providing local dial-up service for individuals and businesses in rural areas of Polk, Marion, and Yamhill counties as well as placing 22 Internet-ready computers in community gathering places, such as libraries. The City of Salem and Marion County rounded out the funding by contributing $60,000 each to the project. The City of Salem/Marion County Data Center was involved from the beginning by providing technical assistance to the library staff, as well as setting up and maintaining the server and taking care of hardware and software problems. The library set up our four workstations at the beginning of November 1995, and the Oregon Public Electronic Network (OPEN) dial-up service began the following month.

Staff Training

Prior to the Internet workstations going into our reference area, the library held a series of Wednesday morning training sessions for the reference staff. The staff learned the basics of moving around on the World Wide Web using Netscape, as well as how to perform searches, make bookmarks, telnet into a remote computer, and provide basic troubleshooting for the workstations. The library also held a series of introductory sessions for the support staff. They were encouraged to sign up for training sessions taught by reference librarians. All staff, both librarians and paraprofessionals, were given the opportunity to attend outside training sessions and workshops. Although the staff was aware that the Internet constantly changes and provides new challenges as a reference tool, the staff felt comfortable with incorporating the Internet into the reference division.

In-House Workstations

The staff knew there was patron support for Internet workstations in the library but were not prepared for their popularity. Prior to setting up the workstations, the reference librarians established guidelines for their use. Of the four workstations, three are available for patrons for one hour blocks of time. The fourth terminal is available for half-hour sessions only. The staff feels that this shortened time period will give more patrons access to the Internet as a reference tool. Sign up is available at the Reference desk. An individual may only use the Internet for one session a day even if a terminal is free. The staff wants some of the workstations to be available in order to entice patrons to try them. Patrons can sign up one day in advance.

The workstations were positioned in the middle of the reference area, near the reference desk. Three main issues influenced this placement: 1) The new service would need much assistance from reference librarians, 2) The new workstations might be a target for vandalism, and 3) The central placement of the workstations might dissuade people from looking at potentially offensive graphics. The library decided not to create new guidelines for usage but rather use the existing library code of behavior, which states that a patron cannot "be disruptive, disorderly, or harass patrons and/or staff." Based on this code, staff would not allow a patron to walk around the library holding a Playboy centerfold picture for all to see. Staff believed that a patron drawing attention to similar images on a computer screen in the middle of the library would likewise be disruptive and that a patron could be warned that his or her behavior was not acceptable under the library guidelines. So far, in the five months of operation of the Internet workstations, librarians have asked seven patrons to stop displaying potentially offensive graphics. Although the problems have been few, staff is experimenting with filters on two of the four workstations. So far the filters have proven to be too restrictive. As new filtering technology emerges, the possibility of finding the right product increases.

The workstations' popularity has been overwhelming. All of them are almost always in use, and there is an average of more than 1,100 users a month. The service has been well received: Of 120 Internet users who filled out surveys, only two said that they did not expect to use the service again. One-third of those surveyed had never used the Internet before. A volunteer comes in eight hours a week to assist people in using the Internet. The goal is to have Internet helpers all hours the library is open.

The staff has incorporated the Internet into the reference area with relative ease. It has vastly expanded our reference collection. Among other things, with the Internet, SPL has become a partial depository library. Previously, patrons had to go to the Oregon State Library when they needed federal documents. Now, more often than not, the information they seek is on the Internet. With the Internet there is little publication time lag. For example, one librarian had a patron who wanted the schedule for

the NCAA Basketball Tournament a month before it started. She checked all of the sports magazines and contacted the local newspaper to no avail. She searched for it on the WWW and found it immediately.

Staff knew that having the Internet in the reference area would be a challenge, but hoped it would be such a valuable tool for reference work that the positive aspects would outweigh the negative. Surprisingly, most of the problems encountered at the public Internet workstations were familiar to reference librarians. There were patrons who had never used windows or a mouse and had difficulties moving the cursor. Some patrons had unrealistic expectations about what they would find on the Internet. Staff encountered one problem that was completely new: They no longer knew the reference collection completely. Reference librarians were used to quickly bringing patrons the answer or information they sought. The Internet is not set up for finding information in a quick and efficient manner. The workstations have a list of bookmarks and the SPL Web site has a Web page with reference resources, but normally, staff shows a patron how to use the search engines and lets them explore on their own. At times it has been hard for staff to admit that they do not know exactly what is out there. SPL patrons had come to expect that staff would be able to tell them exactly where they can find a particular piece of information, but the Internet's scope and organization makes that difficult.

While the Internet brings in a great deal of information, staff have lost their power of selection. The librarians are very careful about the resources they purchase for the library. Staff members read reviews and talk to colleagues to make sure that the information in a publication is accurate and correct. The Internet offers us no such selection or review process. Although the staff can confidently provide answers found on pages authored by the National Institute of Health or Microsoft or the Library of Congress, they cannot be so sure of pages that either have no discernable author or do not cite their sources. Although the answer is often found on the Internet, staff is less confident of the quality of information they are providing.

Dial-Up Service

The decision to become an Internet Service Provider (ISP) was made when there was only one other provider marketing its service in Salem. The library believed that there was a need in the community for affordable Internet service and that such a service would fit nicely into SPL's already existing services. Ken Phillips and his staff at the Marion/Salem Data Center were instrumental in bringing this project to fruition. The staff knew that the library had the ability to take care of the public side of the project: making accounts, giving out information, and holding training classes, but the technical aspects of setting up and administering an Internet service were better left to computer professionals.

The Oregon Public Electronic Network (OPEN) was launched in December of 1995. The expectation was to have 500 subscribers by the end of the first year,
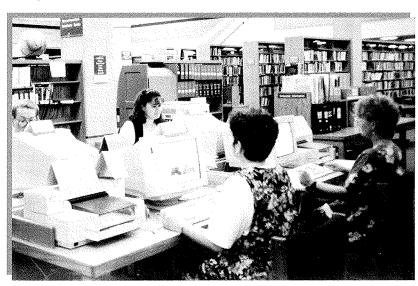
and have the service begin paying for itself. As of the end of April 1996, OPEN had 1,800 accounts. In addition to having access to the Internet, OPEN provides a community network through which residents can look for city and county information as well as other community resources. To encourage this, non-profit agencies are provided with free accounts if they agree to put a Web page with community information on our server. The response has been encouraging. So far there are 20 non-profit accounts and seventeen city/county government departments.

The second phase of the project will extend local dial-up capabilities to rural Marion, Polk, and Yamhill county patrons. It will go into effect in the summer of 1996. There will be 22 computers, identical to the workstations at the Salem Public Library, placed in community sites within the tri-county area. Extensive on-site staff training for these remote sites will be provided by staff from the Salem Public Library. There are already technology advocates in these communities who are looking forward to having user group meetings and training sessions.

Conclusion

Six months into the OPEN Internet project, we are pleased and amazed with the public response. The Internet workstations are always busy and the comments are overwhelmingly positive. Although the workstations sometimes add to the noise and chaos of an already busy reference area, the reference staff has come to look at them as an integral part of library services. The staff is pleased that the community looks to the Salem Public Library for leadership in an increasingly wired and digital age. We expect to continue leading in this area for a long time. [Q]

If you have any questions about SPL's Internet project, please contact Jennifer Frankel at 503-588-6038 or jfrankel@open.org

Patrons use Internet workstations at the Salem Public Library