A Delightful Challenge: 330 Days, $410,000 for Books, and No Staff Added

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The Challenge

As a result of receiving $410,000 from the Maricopa Library District to purchase, receive, catalog, process, and pay for approximately 20,000 replacement library books within a 9 month period, the Phoenix Public Library (Library) needed to quickly identify a process to increase yearly purchases by 7% without the addition of staff.

With only two Collection Development librarians available to order the replacements and no added Technical Services staff to catalog and process these materials, staff looked for other ways to accomplish targeted, community-based material purchases in a fraction of the time usually allotted to such a large project.

In the past, the Library's ILS provided turnover reports that offered generalized collection use data; however, the Phoenix Library, as with most public libraries, did not have the technological staff to write code and pull and pull from the ILS system the branch and title-specific data to make more targeted selections. Over the past 7 years, similar opening day projects took over 20 months to complete.

With only weeks to develop the profiles for system selection, the first and most critical task was to identify areas of need and get the materials ordered within a 4 month time frame. This paper concentrates on this challenge.

Library System Description

The Library Department is a system of 17 branches with a circulating collection of 1.3 million items serving the city of Phoenix (1.5 million) and Maricopa County (3.8 million) residents. More than 13.8 million item checkouts were logged by the Library in fiscal year (FY) 2012. The materials budget for FY 2012 was $4.8 million.

Meeting the Challenge: The Process

The Phoenix Library has had a form of centralized selection, using frontline staff, since 2003; however, since FY 2005 Phoenix has had formal relationships with librarians in the custom selection groups of three major vendors. These vendors select approximately 80–85% of all circulating items for the system based on annual profiles provided by the Collection Development Coordinator and the Children/Teen Specialist. These two librarians are the only staff in the system who concentrate solely on physical collections. They coordinate activities with a network of vendor and branch staff to maintain a responsive system collection.

Fortunately, the Phoenix Library System had four key assets that were critical to the successful completion of the project. Established tools were

- The long-established partnerships with our vendors and mutual trust and understanding of process;
- Willingness of branch managers to lend frontline staff to complete certain activities;
- Floating collections which helped to maximize the use of the collection within the system.

The fourth and newest asset was collectionHQ™ which began processing monthly data in May 2011. CollectionHQ™ is a web-based software program that provides evidence-based action plans (aka reports) backed by data on circulation. Staff, in minutes, can see branch specific and system-wide overviews of material usage statistics.

By August/September, collectionHQ™ had enough data to assist the collection development staff to profile retrospective needs in four key areas for the Phoenix Library system. These areas had been identified using turnover and floating reports from Polaris. They were:

- Nonfiction for the central library which was supplying many more floating items to branches than it was receiving;

- Popular reading for children;

- Graphic novels for teens;

- Key popular adult authors with many years of publishing.

Because collectionHQ™ was new and the effectiveness of its data had not been tested, two branch librarians were drafted to evaluate its recommendations. Within a week, after consultation with colleagues, they verified that the data was good.

Profiles were then drafted from which our vendor librarian partners produced lists of possible retrospective titles.

Using the Action Plans to Produce Profiles

Two particular action plans proved particularly valuable in writing profiles.

Nonfiction

The Nonfiction Collection Summary for Burton Barr identified areas of high use for that facility. When compared to the System Nonfiction Collection Summary, staff were able to identify areas that matched and areas where Burton Barr had specific needs. CollectionHQ™ reported, and the Burton Barr librarians verified, that there were areas of high use that had a much longer tail and proportion of use than collection staff had thought based solely on turnover data.

Having a list of needed subjects, the Collection Development Coordinator then consulted with the Top Charts action plan (both for authors and titles), pulling up action plans that identified the most used items for each area. From this she was able to identify topics and, in a few instances, authors that were needed.

An Excel spreadsheet was prepared for the vendor showing the proportion of the budget to be expended on a prioritized listing of most needed subjects. Additional data indicated if there were any specific needs.

Baker and Taylor librarians have a long history of providing lists that match Phoenix profiles, and the lists that were produced were excellent.

Utilizing TitleSource3™ carts and preset distribution profiles, the Collection Development Coordinator was able to quickly go through large lists and identify the best books to add. For the areas of critical system-wide need, she was also able to add materials for branches and multiple copies for Burton Barr so that it would better retain needed items.

Fiction

The primary tool for identifying the authors needed fiction was Top Charts Action Tool.

While all staff had been asked to contribute names of the most needed authors, only about 30 names were suggested. Using the System Top Charts, hundreds of authors for each area were recommended by collectionHQ™ within minutes.

The strategy used by the Collection Development Coordinator was to select those authors with a long history of publication for whom it was reasonable to assume that the system might be low on earlier works.

The Children/Teen specialist who is very familiar with graphic novels was also able to do a similar evaluation for works that would appeal to teens that were likely to be in print.

The big surprise for her was when she looked at the Children's Fiction list. While the "usually suspects" (J. K. Rowling, Lemony Snicket, etc.), she discovered authors who had an audience of which she was not aware and which she ordered heavily in response. As she said, "I have seen enough princess and fairy books to last a lifetime, and they are what keep kids reading." These authors are not award winners; they are the bread-and-butter authors who keep children engaged with reading while they are waiting for the next great children's book.

Once again, lists of critically needed authors were developed for Baker and Taylor who then supplied TitleSource3™ for Phoenix Library. Staff was recruited from branches to select critically needed

adult book titles. The Children/Teen specialist selected from her lists buying most titles for all branches and using large distribution profiles.

The Outcome

By year-end 2011, most selection lists had been processed by library staff and received by the vendor. All the books (approximately 25,000 items) were received and invoiced by late May 2012, thereby allowing the Library to meet the purchasing deadline one month early and add to the popular item infrastructure of the Library system in a significant manner. The process of selecting/ordering similar projects previously took two librarians 250-300 hours over 8 months. Using the targeted collectionHQ™ action plans allowed the librarians to provide Baker and Taylor with focused lists. As a result, the two librarians were able to complete the selecting/ordering process in 140 hours over 3 months. The complete project, including selection, ordering, and fulfillment, was completed in 9 months. The previous process took over 20 months to complete these same steps.

This project proved the value of the collectionHQ™ action plans: only minor adjustments of the basic data were needed. The process also produced surprises:

- The long tail of some areas (e.g., medicine) that had previously been assumed to need only the most current items;

- Areas where it makes sense to purchase multiple copies for the central library and branches in order to deal with floating issues;

- In children's fiction there is a significant number of "ephemera" that produce high circulation and keep children reading;

- There are areas of high and low use in each of our facilities, and balancing the system collection while having the most needed materials at local facilities is a future challenge.

The most pleasant surprise though was how easy it was to access and utilize detailed item information at both a system and a local level.

It is critical to keep in mind that vendor partnerships for selection and for Technical Services were also critical to the success of this project.

Phoenix established vendor partnerships, because in the transition from decentralized to centralized selection, Collection Development received no system selectors. Successful vendor partnerships provided the selection staff that was needed. With collectionHQ™, staff has a level of detail that allows Phoenix and vendor staff to make more precise community-based selection.

Implications for the Future

Both collection development librarians are scheduled to retire within the next decade. With their retirement, inevitably, a large portion of institutional knowledge may be lost. However, with succession planning, written profiles, successful vendor partnerships, and a third-party resource that can provide accurate and specific use reports, this loss may be minimized.

Phoenix Public Library is going to work with both the ILS vendors and materials vendors to automate and maximize institutional practices for defining selection. The job of the collection development librarians both in the present and future will continue to be:

- Understand the reports and plans and make adjustments as needed;

- Continue to seek effective partnerships and resources;

- Determine those few areas that require local selection and see that this is documented and done regularly;

- Looks for ways to expand the use of the library's collection and the formats and subjects carried;

- Defend the carrying of a wide range of materials needed by our customers;

- Coordinate the de-selection of materials and ensure that use patterns are analyzed and are part of the review of reports and plans.

In this manner, the Collection Development Section hopes to ensure excellent collections for customers well into the future.