Pivoting Toward the Future

Cincinnati & Hamilton County Public Library evolves services and takes on vital new responsibilities to fill community gaps.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated a trend toward digital content and virtual experiences at the Cincinnati & Hamilton County Public Library in Ohio — and the experience likely will have a long-term impact on how patrons consume library services.

The sprawling library system, which operates a 500,000-square-foot main library and 40 branch locations, saw demand for e-books and audio books spike when physical locations were shut down in March due to the pandemic.

"We put a bunch of additional dollars into our online collections, which were always popular, but we saw double-digit increases in their use," says Paula Brehm-Heeger, Eva Jane Romaine Coombe Library Director. "We saw hundreds of additional users who signed up for library cards. We made it as easy as we could for people who didn't have a card to get one immediately so they could check out eBooks."

The library also shifted in-person events to digital platforms — a move that has proven surprisingly popular and may drive lasting changes in library programming. For example, in-person family story time sessions which typically drew 10 to 20 families began reaching thousands of people when the library started offering them on-demand via video. Significant increases in participation also were seen in niche programming such as genealogy and book conservation, Brehm-Heeger adds.

"We've realized there is a real appetite for local content by the children's librarian or the genealogists. People can't always come to the in-person program, but that doesn't mean they won't watch if it's available in another dynamic format," says Brehm-Heeger. "I think that's a real indication that people are interested but their lives dictate when and how they can actively engage with the library or other civic institutions. Acknowledging that is really important."

Behind the scenes, the library system was well positioned to continue serving clients remotely during the public health emergency. Several years ago, the library created a central contact center to answer questions from residents and provide technical support for eBook users via phone or chat. The central facility was launched to improve service and ensure callers received a uniform experience. When COVID hit, the contact center technology provided a flexible platform for library staff to continue serving patrons from home.

"Those folks were able to just take their laptops home and continue answering calls," says Brehm-Heeger. "We closed down the physical contact center on Friday, March 13, and we started answering calls remotely on the morning of March 16. We paused for a weekend, but we answered hundreds of calls every day until we resumed in-person service this summer."

Library facilities reopened in mid-June with modified service hours, but she expects the pandemic to have a permanent impact on demand for digital content and services.

"People have come back to our print books now that we're back open, but we believe more people have become comfortable with eBooks," she says. "There will probably be parallel use. I don't know that we'll see less demand for print; we just may see more use of eBooks."

New Network Capabilities

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic highlights the need for flexible network connectivity, says Andrew Klepacz, Client Solutions Executive, AT&T. Reliable and scalable networks are fundamental for supporting growth of remote work and digital services. Fortunately, network technology is evolving to make it easier for organizations to increase capacity to support additional remote workers or accommodate spikes in digital content consumption.

"A new generation of network services supports this type of flexibility," Klepacz says. "At AT&T we call it Switched Ethernet on Demand. With a few clicks of a button, customers can increase or decrease their network bandwidth as needed."

Network services like these also offer improved reliability, which is a key concern as libraries tap into cloud platforms to store expanding digital content collections and provide other new functions.

Traditional voice services are evolving, as well, to give organizations more flexibility in how and where they work. For example, cloud-hosted voice services let organizations put software applications on employee cell phones that support seamless communication among internal staff and customers during remote work.

"Employees are no longer tied to a desk phone. You can add a remote client on a cell phone that gives employees communication just like they're sitting in the library," says Klepacz.

These hosted services also provide important features like faxing and the ability to digitize documents that are popular with library patrons during normal in-person operations.

Physical and Digital Future

Although digital content and services gained a new audience during the pandemic, physical library facilities continue to play a vital role in their communities. Cincinnati & Hamilton County Public Library provides vital in-person services, as well as access to technology and innovation.

Basic capabilities such as printing and faxing are extremely popular, especially for residents dealing with medical issues or seeking government safety net services like unemployment benefits, says Brehm-Heeger. The library offers free faxing and partners directly with the Hamilton County Job & Family Services agency to help residents submit application paperwork.

"We have a large number of people who come in for help with a technology device or with an application for

Market Overview:
Library Districts

THE COVID-19 CRISIS ACCELERATED DEMAND FOR DIGITAL CONTENT and services at public library districts. Library patrons have grown comfortable with eBooks and video programming during the pandemic, which is driving long-term changes in how they consume library information. This trend puts more pressure on library networks around scalability and reliability.

These changes come on top of a dramatic evolution that has occurred at public libraries over the past decade. In addition to their traditional role as providers of information, these organizations are now hubs for civic connection and doorways to government services.

Library systems are partnering with local social services and career development agencies to simplify access to important safety net services and improve workforce readiness. They're also filling gaps in community connectivity — an issue that has taken on even greater importance during the COVID-19 crisis — by offering expanded Wi-Fi access at physical facilities and through hotspot lending programs.

Just as important, libraries are putting extremely sophisticated technologies into the hands of everyday citizens. A growing number of facilities offer makerspaces stocked with 3D printers, design software and other advanced tools that support entrepreneurial activity and small business growth.

government services and they don't know how to file it," she says. "If you look at our statistics, it's unbelievable how much faxing we do for people."

At the other end of the technology spectrum, the library offers access to cutting-edge capabilities that help residents build new workforce skills and pursue entrepreneurial ideas. The main library in Cincinnati offers 3D printers, laser engravers, computer-aided design software, large-format printers and other high-end tools.

These are a few reasons why libraries will remain a powerful physical presence in Cincinnati and Hamilton County. To guide development over the next decade, the library system is completing a new master plan, based off of numerous listening sessions with community members. The document addresses how the library's services and physical spaces — which average more

than 40 years in age — should evolve to meet future needs.

"We have a lot of people who want to come to the library to connect with their community and also have access to technology that they're not going to be able to buy at home," says Brehm-Heeger. "The master plan we're creating is really a guidepost. It's about diversity and inclusion. It's about good stewardship and it's about effective government."

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