



## **Nurturing a Nation of Readers: Sharing the Joy and Adventure of the Reading Experience through the Singapore public libraries**

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### ***Abstract***

*The paper provides an insight into the critical success factors that lie behind the successful implementation of the following key reading programmes and initiatives organized by the Public Library Services Group of the National Library Board (NLB), Singapore:*

*Library 2010 Reading Programmes: [BookCross@Sg](#), *Read & Reap*, *Deliver Me**

*Nation-wide, Community-based Programmes: *READ! Sg*, *kidsREAD*, *10, 000 Fathers Reading*, *Junior Reading Ambassadors* and *MOLLY**

*This paper will accompany a multimedia presentation designed to show how these programmes help to achieve NLB's aim to cater to the unique reading and learning needs of different library customer communities in Singapore.*

### **Introduction**

This is a multimedia presentation on the various reading programmes and initiatives organized by the Public Library Services Group of National Library Board (NLB), Singapore to cater to the unique reading and information needs of different library customer communities in Singapore.

For the year 2007, the Public Library Services Group embarked on some key reading initiatives and programmes with the belief that:

- Reading (especially reading for pleasure) is key to igniting the cycle of innovation and creativity
- Reading is a non-threatening, non-partisan means of promoting social bonding within the community
- Promotion of reading will help to achieve NLB's aims of creating the collaborative social space and environment that builds social capital and deliver knowledge dividends to Singapore

### **(A) NLB Library 2010 strategic plan**

The Library 2010 report sets out the strategic direction for NLB till year 2010. It addresses some of the key challenges faced by the Singapore society and provides a strategic response to the nation's effort to move towards a knowledge-based economy by recognizing that "libraries help in nurturing a society of life-long learners who can accelerate the creation of intellectual capital and create a new cycle of national innovation"<sup>1</sup>

By aligning with the Library 2010 strategic goals and specific outcomes for the public libraries (that is, public libraries are envisaged to become active social learning spaces and help to nurture self-sustaining learning communities), the following programmes were initiated:

#### [BookCross@sg](#)

This is a nation-wide reading initiative between Bookcrossing.com to promote exchange of books and the joy and adventure of sharing the reading experience. This is a major attempt made by NLB to promote a self-sustaining learning community by proactively encouraging Singaporeans to read and share. In fact, Singapore is now listed as the only country that has officially participated in this bookcrossing venture. To-date, more than 4000 books have been released (most of them are donated although the initial release during the launch were mainly new fiction books sponsored by local bookstores.

#### **Read & Reap**

This is a pilot project to introduce short excerpts of reading that aims to stimulate reflective thinking and provoke discussion. It is conceived with the recognition of the busy urban city lifestyle of Singaporeans (having little discretionary time for pleasure reading) and to encourage young reluctant readers to enjoy the reading experience. A pilot project was implemented in 2007 in selected primary and secondary schools as well as the Singapore Civil Service. It was very well

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<sup>1</sup> Library 2010 Report,  
<http://www.nlb.gov.sg/ShowBinary/BEA%20Repository/corporate/Publications/L2010Report> (last accessed on 29 April 2008)

received and the project will be launched officially throughout all schools in Singapore by 30 May 2008.

## **Program 2: Active Citizenry**

### **Deliver Me**

This project targets at the homebound, that is, library users who will otherwise be unable to visit and use the library. These are mainly wheelchair-bound library users. Through a pool of dedicated library volunteers, a library delivery service is provided to bring books and audio-visual materials to homebound library users.

### **(B) Nation-wide, Community-based reading campaigns**

**READ! Singapore**, modelled after the “1 book, 1 city” campaigns of major cities such as Seattle, Brisbane and Houston, aims to promote community bonding through fiction reading for adults and young people. Now into its fourth year, READ! Singapore is a nationwide initiative of the National Library Board (NLB) that aims to cultivate the joy of reading, enhance community bonding and spark imagination and creativity among Singaporeans. Held over a 12-14 week period from May annually, the campaign seeks to encourage communal reading, with facilitated discussions and activities centered on a common set of books and stories selected according to a different theme every year.

In line with the annual theme, NLB and the respective language sub-committees select 8 novels and 8 short stories from the four official languages, written by local and international authors. Each of the short stories will be translated into three other languages and will be compiled into three separate anthologies to encourage Singaporeans to read across communities and cultures and promote literary appreciation in people from all walks of life in Singapore.

Working with more than 120 partners, book agencies, schools, community and business organizations, the campaign has over the past 3 years, resulted in more than 700 book discussions and other reading-related activities and attracted over 54,000 participants from all over Singapore. We have reached out to a wide and diverse target audience, such as the National servicemen, taxi drivers, hairstylists, healthcare workers, and civil servants. This year, READ! Singapore is reaching out to an even wider target audience especially to workers in the hospitality/service Industry.

For the first time, READ! Singapore 08 has produced an audio book (in CD format) of the selected short stories in 4 languages. This project also supports Singapore’s push to encourage the production of new Singapore and Asian content. The audio book will be launched during the opening ceremony of READ! Singapore in May 08. The objective is to reach out to a special group of Singaporeans who may not be able to enjoy the simple joy of holding and reading a book, for instance, the physically and visually handicapped, and senior citizens who are failing in their eyesight or are illiterate. These short stories will also be converted into podcast to attract the young and internet-savvy generation to discover the joy of reading.

Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has rendered his strong support to READ! Singapore by reading the Forward of the audio CD. Besides that, we have voices of well-known Singaporeans reciting the short stories. This will be a huge boost to our drive to bring knowledge alive to a wide spectrum of Singaporeans, especially to the underprivileged citizens, media-savvy youths and working adults.

We believe that READ! Singapore's objective to inculcate the reading habit among Singaporeans will help in developing a globally competitive workforce to support Singapore's vision of a knowledge-based economy.

READ! Singapore has been able to create a greater awareness among Singaporeans of the possibilities in learning and enjoyment through reading fiction, and this is made clear in the sustained involvement in reading clubs and other activities as well as interest in the selected texts. We have stimulated much great interest amongst the community in the 8 translated local short stories we have selected through these few years and many community groups are using these short stories for cross community reading and building bonds.

**kidsREAD** is a community-driven reading programme that has just received funding for the next 4 years. It recruits volunteers from community self-help groups to engage in reading-related activities with children aged 4 to 8 years old from low-income families. This nation-wide reading initiative, officially launched on 23 April 2004, aims to promote the love of reading and cultivate good reading habits among all young Singaporeans, in particular children from low-income families, regardless of race and religion.

### **10, 000 Fathers Reading**

This is yet another inaugural year long reading event that was launched with a major carnival on Father's Day on 17 June 2007. It aims at promoting father-child bonding through reading and emphasizes the important role of the father in the reading development journey of the child and serves to emphasize the importance of the reading process in aiding children's development and creativity.

The Minister of State for Education and Manpower, Mr Gan Kim Yong, said at the launch ceremony, "Fathers who read to their children tend to develop a stronger bond with them. Children also tend to do better in school and grow up to become more self-confident...Quality time spent reading together promotes bonding and enhances parent-child communication...good stories also provide precious opportunities for parents to impart positive values to their children at an early age"<sup>2</sup>.

To facilitate father-child reading, fathers were each given a goodie bag containing a book to read to their child, a resource guide of suggested reads, reading record cards and a picnic mat. More father-child reading activities were organised in the libraries during the 6 months after the launch. These include Raise-a-Reader workshops for fathers and storytelling by fathers.

**Junior Reading Ambassadors** - 13 young avid readers aged 9 - 12 were specially selected by their teachers and peers for their passion for reading and books to participate in a year-long campaign as

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<sup>2</sup> NLB (2007), "Once upon a...times 10,000!" in *Discover NLB*, Issue No. 01, September 2007, page 7

Reading Ambassadors for NLB to promote reading both in schools and public libraries as well as to appear in public events organized by NLB. They were put through a 3-day holiday camp in June 2007 where they learnt more about the magic of books and discovered how to bring stories to life. They learnt how to introduce themselves and their favourite reads to a public audience. They also learn how to perform skits in which they act out their favourite stories.

**MOLLY, our MOBiLe LibrarY** is the first-time ever after the inception of the National Library Board, Singapore where a mobile library bus is set up to cater primarily to the special needs and disadvantaged community. The aim is to reach out to the under-served community especially children with special needs by providing them with better access to library books, services and programmes through the library bus. This is a wireless-enabled bus with a book collection of 3000 titles and RFID terminals to enable real-time borrowing and returning, laptop counters for enquiry assistance as well as an e-Kiosk for membership registration, checking of library accounts and payment of library fees.

## Critical Success Factors

The key behind the success of these reading initiatives and programmes lies in adopting the following strategic approaches to planning and implementation of these programmes:

- a. Leveraging on “Mavens” & “Connectors”
- b. Community engagement
- c. Customer segmentation

### Leveraging on Mavens and Connectors<sup>3</sup>

Identified mavens and connectors were critical in ensuring widespread publicity and participation in some of the key community-based reading campaigns that we have organised. These may be government agencies or important community groups whose active involvement and advocacy have helped to ensure the success of these events.

For instance, in the case of **READ! Singapore**, connectors such as the hairstylists, taxi drivers, nurses & doctors, teachers and public service officers are prime movers for the campaign. Annually, the campaign managed to recruit and train up to 600 teachers as reading facilitators. The taxi drivers have gone to establish a book club at one of our community libraries since the first READ! Singapore campaign was organised in 2005. Another maven for the programme is none other than our Chief

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<sup>3</sup> A maven is a trusted expert in a particular field, who seeks to pass knowledge on to others. Malcolm Gladwell used it in his book *The Tipping Point* (Little Brown, 2000) to describe those who are intense gatherers of information and impressions, and so are often the first to pick up on new or nascent trends. Gladwell also suggests that mavens may act most effectively when in collaboration with connectors - i.e., those people who have wide network of casual acquaintances by whom they are trusted, often a network that crosses many social boundaries and groups. Connectors can thus easily and widely distribute the advice or insights of a maven (Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maven>, last accessed 29 April 2008)

Executive, Dr N Varaprasad. In a talk to more than 150 Public Service Division officers in conjunction with READ! Singapore 2007, he personally extolled the many benefits of reading. He said “Reading is basic to lifelong learning and personal growth. It is critical in the knowledge-based economy as it develops the cognitive.”<sup>4</sup> By being personally involved in READ! Singapore activities, he has helped to harness a great amount of community support.

For the **10,000 Fathers Reading** programme, the key maven in this project was the Centre for Fathering. They were key drivers behind this project especially in harnessing the participation of fathers in promoting the reading habit and bonding through reading.

In the case of [BookCross@Sg](#) and **MOLLY**, our mobile library bus, our mavens are none other than our stakeholders in NLB such as the NLB Board and senior management. Their support has enabled ready access to talents and resources that lie beyond the immediate realm of the public libraries. We were able to obtain involvement of staff from different libraries, the programming and community outreach & partnership divisions. Connection to strategic partners and the media was made possible through the network of contacts of these staffers.

Picking up a book at a neighbourhood Café Cartel outlet, bring it back home to read and then leave it in the next SMRT taxi ride for someone else’s reading pleasure is made possible by the collaboration with such partners to create [BookCross@Sg](#) hotspots throughout Singapore. Thanks to these partners, there are now more than 2000 official hotspots around Singapore which include roaming SMRT taxis, Café Galilee and Café Cartel outlets where anyone can bring a BookCross@Sg book home.

### **Community Engagement**

Strong advocacy through the active involvement and participation of volunteers and avid library users/readers has helped to promote the widespread appeal of our reading programmes.

For instance, in our **Junior Reading Ambassadors** programme, avid young readers from primary schools were recruited to advocate and promote reading to their peers. In 2007, as a pilot programme, 13 junior reading ambassadors were recruited and put through a 3-day holiday reading camp before being emplaced in schools and during public events such as the 10,000 Fathers Reading to perform story dramatizations, storytelling and gave book talks.

Aspiring to spark off a new fiction-reading trend within Singapore, **READ! Singapore** managed to reach out to a wide spectrum of the workforce over the last 3 years of its inception. These include the taxi drivers, hairstylists, beauticians and officers from the public service and healthcare sectors. This was done via the setting up of reading circles and book discussion groups among occupational groups.

**kidsREAD** is a collaborative effort by NLB together with a key local community grassroots organisation, the People’s Association and 5 other community self-help groups representing all the

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<sup>4</sup> National Library Board (2007), “Re-discovering Reading” in *Discover NLB*, Issue No. 01, September 2007, page 3.

major ethnic groups in Singapore. The running of this initiative for the initial 3 years (2004 – 2006) was made possible via a sponsorship by the Singapore Totalisator Board and with the support of the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports. Other corporate sponsors and partners from the local publishers, pre-school educators and local post delivery service lent active support to the programme. Community clubs and schools showed their support by hosting these clubs on their premises.

To-date, there are a total of 85 kidsREAD Reading Clubs set up throughout Singapore. Volunteers are vital to sustaining the reading programme. They come from all walks of life. We have students who participated as part of their Community Involvement Programme and working adults who devoted free time and energy. Volunteers and Volunteer Coordinators are recruited to manage and coordinate the activities of the Reading Club. As their main task is to read and engage in reading-related activities with the children, they are important means to achieve our aim of promoting and nurturing the reading habit among the children. To help them with their tasks, training in basic storytelling and read-aloud skills, book selection skills were provided. Each child and volunteer are given a starter kit to kick start the exploratory journey into the reading world.

### **Customer Segmentation**

To promote and nurture a nation of readers, NLB has implemented these nation-wide reading programmes targeting at different segments of the community. Our programmes aim to reach out to:

#### **Working adults & Reluctant Readers**

These are mainly adults who hardly have time to read for pleasure as well as those who are not avid fiction-readers (**READ! Singapore**, [BookCross@Sg](#)). Read & Reap is also targeting at the busy Singaporean with his/her fast-paced urban lifestyle as well as reluctant teen readers, people who can but chose not to read. Providing opportunities to network through [BookCross@Sg](#) Socials and Monthly Meet-Ups as well as the myriad of reading circles and book discussion groups formed as a result of READ! Singapore, these are strategies used to encourage reading as a shared experience and adventure. Much effort is put to using performances, music and other interactive activities to engage and spur our readers into reading. Short stories or excerpts are chosen to spark off conversations and helped to ignite an interest in the books featured during these programmes.

#### **People with Special Needs**

These can be homebound people who are unable to visit and/or use the libraries on their own (**Project Deliver Me**), children with special needs (**MOLLY**, the Mobile Library) as well as children from low income families (**kidsREAD**).

#### **Fathers**

This is an important yet often overlooked customer community that NLB decides to target in 2007 (**10,000 Fathers Reading**). Fathers are important reading role models especially to their sons hence they are viewed as an important partner for the library to work with in order to reach out to the boys and girls.

## Conclusion

Recognizing the different reading and learning needs of our various customer communities and crafting unique and specially tailored reading initiatives, campaigns and programmes to meet these needs are part of the strategic response of the Singapore public libraries to meeting the L2010 strategic goals and outcomes of NLB. Being open to adapting best practices from overseas library systems (eg READ! Singapore), creating innovative public-private sector partnerships (eg [BookCross@SG](#)) and engaging the community proactively either in sponsorship or direct participation (eg kidsREAD) are key to the successful implementation of these reading initiatives. The catalytic role of NLB through these programmes also help to cement the role of the public libraries in contributing to the social fabric of Singapore and building up our social capital.

The presentation at the Fair will provide a multimedia overview of these programmes. Brochures, collaterals, video clips and publications will be displayed during the fair.

## References

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