



65+: Engaging underserved patrons - a success story!

Jasmina Ninkov

and

Vesna Vuksan

Belgrade City Library
Belgrade, Serbia

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Abstract:

Today, Belgrade City Library represents the largest public library system in Southeastern Europe with 275 employees, covering over 70 locations throughout the City of Belgrade. The idea to conduct research was initially born as a result of BCL's desire to identify groups that are not using the library and determine the reasons. On the other hand, the inspiration came from the City of Belgrade public sector's best practices. At the end of 2009, BCL conducted market research with the following objectives:

- *Identify non-user groups.*
- *Engage the largest underserved group.*
- *Develop services to meet their needs.*

Conducting applied research in library environment is a lot of work. Starting with clear goals and a good plan vastly increases the probability that the assessment will go smoothly and yield genuinely useful information. As we have had a chance to see, the accurate information obtained through research leads to enormous benefits. We believe that active communication with our patrons and potential members through different channels including applied research and effective data collection will help build a library network that can, in turn, build a better community.

BELGRADE CITY LIBRARY

Founded in 1929, the Belgrade City Library has gone through many changes throughout history. During World War II, even though the old building and a valuable part of the collection were damaged, the library was open to the public throughout this time. After the War, the library developed by creating new organizational plans, opening new divisions, founding a professional center for libraries in Belgrade and striving to form a unique network of all public libraries in the city.

Today, Belgrade City Library represents the largest public library system in Southeastern Europe with 275 employees, covering over 70 locations throughout the City of Belgrade. Being a parent library for a network of 13 municipal libraries and their branches, BCL has a special responsibility to reach out and change widespread public opinion that defines a library more traditionally - as a collection of books. In the past several years, the BCL has been proactively involved in redefining the role and perception of the libraries and striving to reach out to more and more patrons each year.

Tireless in its efforts, the Belgrade City Library has reached the best results in its history in 2010 by attracting 11.2% of the population to the library. In the same year BCL had over 3.500 cultural programs, 2.5 million circulated materials, almost 150,000 patrons, 200,000 reference services, and has introduced numerous new services and communication tools according to patrons' rapidly changing needs (Digital library, QuestionPoint, Web 2.0 tools, internet centers, audio/video collection, etc). While these numbers may be the norm in other countries, they represent a very important step forward for Serbian libraries.

Our mission today is to focus on the ways in which the values of librarianship and the trust the community places in our library could reinforce a positive image.

LIBRARY ENVIRONMENT

There are 2,300 libraries in Serbia, out of which 160 are public. Despite new services and opportunities that the new millennium brought to the libraries, it has been hard to attract new audiences and change the statistics. The average percentage of public library card holders in Serbia is 5 – 7%, which is below minimum standards recommended by IFLA. It is even below local standards recommended by the National Library of Serbia and Serbian Library Association. The reasons for such statistics differ from one library to another, but mostly relate to:

- lack of good governance (directors are often appointed through political parties and not based on their managerial skills)
- unmotivated staff (human resource departments deal more with paperwork than with creating a motivating environment for staff)
- low percentage of new professionals (bad retirement policies and political connections are preventing young librarians to enter the profession)
- fear of change (the “safe old school” is recognizable in majority of public libraries).

Over the last few years, BCL has made real progress in enhancing existing users' experiences as well as opening up the library's resources to new audiences. The success we achieved in 2010 was partially based on applied research and effective data collection.

THE IDEA

The idea to conduct research was initially born as a result of BCL's desire to identify groups that are not using the library and determine the reasons. On the other hand, the inspiration came from the City of Belgrade public sector's best practices.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND FINDINGS

At the end of 2009, BCL conducted market research with the following objectives:

1. Identify non-user groups.
2. Engage the largest underserved group.
3. Develop services to meet their needs.

To meet the objectives of the research, two combined surveys were conducted using:

1. Random sampling
2. Focus group methodology

1. Identifying non-user groups

BCL management board nominated a team of six librarians to work on the research and report back to the board. They created a survey using random sampling methodology with a task of identifying non-user groups that have not been using the library at all in the past five years. The survey lasted two weeks, included 420 citizens, and was conducted in several locations in the city including the main pedestrian zone, market, shopping malls, bus stops and two recreation areas in the city. It contained six questions as follows:

1. Have you been a public library member in the past five years?
 - a. yes
 - b. no

2. If yes, how old are you?
 - a. 18-25
 - b. 26-40
 - c. 41-55
 - d. 56-64
 - e. over 65

3. If no, why?
 - a. high membership fee
 - b. poor book collections / services
 - c. poor conditions (space, accessibility, ...)
 - d. I am not interested
 - e. other _____

4. How old are you?
 - a. 18-25
 - b. 26-40
 - c. 41-55
 - d. 56-64
 - e. over 65

5. Highest degree you have earned:
 - a. primary school
 - b. high school
 - c. college

6. Do you know if there is a public library located in your neighborhood?
 - a. yes
 - b. no

Out of 420 participants, 21% (89) have been members in the past 5 years, largest group being students between the age of 18 and 25 (28%) and smallest citizens over 65 (11%).

The remaining 79% (331) have not been members due to high membership fee (29%), poor collections / services (23%), poor conditions (space, accessibility, etc.) (22%), not interested (15%), and other reasons (11%). Among non-members the citizens over 65 represented the largest group.

When we cross-referenced the results to see which group specified certain reasons, one group was particularly singled out (37%), and that was the retired citizens over 65 with college degrees. The reasons for not having a library card were primarily financial. Membership in public libraries in Serbia is not free for most patrons. BCL charges for annual membership from \$5 - \$14, depending on the category, which is 1-3% of average monthly income in Serbia, or 2-6% of average pension.

61% of non-members had no idea where the nearest public library was. Our next step was to determine ways to engage the largest underserved group.

2. Engaging the largest underserved group

Due to the above findings, in April 2010, BCL introduced a new membership category “65+”, which allowed this target group to acquire their library cards at no cost and without a need to renew each year. This particular idea was derived from similar concept that the City of Belgrade introduced to the same target group but in a different field. Public transport system in Belgrade has been successfully offering free lifetime tickets to citizens over 65 since 2007.

From April to December 2010, over 2,300 new “65+” members joined Belgrade City Library. After this initial step, we needed to discover our new patrons’ needs in order to develop new services.

3. Developing services for new patrons

The second survey used focus group methodology and dealt with our new 65+ members. The task was to identify missing services for the 65+ group. This survey was simpler than the first one and contained two questions as follows:

1. Which library services do you mostly use?
 - a. I borrow books
 - b. I attend cultural events
 - c. I use the internet

2. What would you like to see more of in a library?

This survey showed that out of 138 respondents, 82 mostly borrow books, 53 attend cultural events and only 3 use the internet. As a follow up, 62% of focus group participants stated that they wanted free computer literacy courses. The rest of the answers referred to collection acquisition, suggestions about the cultural programs and language courses.

As a result, BCL initiated series of computer literacy courses in June 2010 in one central branch within the BCL network. The first course was held by the U.S. Embassy Information Resource Center director who volunteered to run it for one group. Inspired by initial success, librarian-held courses were launched later on, achieving great success. Instead of having the courses once a week, we had to increase the frequency to five times a week.

In addition to these efforts, we assembled a course evaluation form for 65+ trainees with a few standard fields (content, presentation/instructor and additional comments) and learned that they needed a practical handbook. This led us to publishing a handbook "IT for Beginners: Practicum for 65+" that was free of charge for each trainee. It covers issues and topics that our patrons learn about at the courses, including "How to use the mouse?", "Googling", "E-mail services", and "New to Skype".

THE AFTERMATH

We achieved great success as the only public library system in the country to have this type of membership and course offerings. By the end of 2010, the program spread to five more central branches, 2,300 new 65+ members joined, and 340 IT course certificates were awarded.

Our new members now come to the library more often and use online resources for information and correspondence with their friends and family worldwide. Belgrade City

Library will build on its success in reaching underserved patrons and will continue the project in future years.

Conducting applied research in library environment is a lot of work. Starting with clear goals and a good plan vastly increases the probability that the assessment will go smoothly and yield genuinely useful information. As we have had a chance to see, the accurate information obtained through research leads to enormous benefits. We believe that active communication with our patrons and potential members through different channels including applied research and effective data collection will help build a library network that can, in turn, build a better community.

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Mrs. Jasmina Ninkov, Belgrade City Library, Director
direktor@bgb.rs

Ms. Vesna Vuksan, Belgrade City Library, Assistant director
vesnavuksan@bgb.rs