Smart Public Libraries in Smart Communities
Combining people, ideas, and speed in the digital age

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Abstract:

The Report of the Panel on Smart Communities delineates an essential role for the smart public library in the smart community. First, the public library's historic mandate ensures comprehensive access, excluding no one in an increasingly electronic information universe. Second, the public library delivers intellectual as well as physical access, seeing to the organization of information and the orientation of the user. There is a third role as well for the well-positioned, innovative public library: that of smart community organizer. In this role, the public library contributes its understanding of information-seeking behaviour, its organizational strength, and its experience in partnership development and implementation. More than any other institution, the smart public library bridges the frequently-profound gap between "wired" and "smart" in the community.

Leadership of the Public Library in the Smart Community

When you read the report of the Panel on Smart Communities and the new Program Guide issued by Industry Canada, it is clear that the leadership of public libraries in creating and sustaining smart communities in this country is essential. So why doesn't everyone know this? It's certainly obvious to many librarians and library boards. Why is it not obvious to more decision-makers, especially decision-makers in government and business? Why not to all senior public servants, the well informed, the strategically clued-in? Most people who carry the advocacy for public libraries within government will tell you that by times they find it an uphill battle for even basic relevance. After all, the myth goes, we are galloping towards ubiquitous in-home access, aren't we? And what could be easier to learn? Aren't our small community-based businesses fully apprised of the threat on their doorstep from the electronic big box store and busily engaged in turning it into an opportunity for themselves?

Clearly the public library is understood to be an essential facility for public Internet access. But I am talking here about the **broader leadership challenge of the smart public library**, and not just providing public access, essential thought that is. It seems to me that, for us, the successful realization of the enormous potential of smart communities requires three key elements. These are library positioning, library advocacy, and proactive library leadership in the building of the community.   Why is a such a strong response called for?   Because without a public library firmly focused on these requirements, the learning and transaction potential of the Internet simply will not be open to all citizens. The ability to use and therefore to benefit from the Information Highway will be cruelly uneven. I say that with particular concern about the fate of two constituencies: the independent adult learner and the small business.   Nor, without the active commitment of the public library, will the **local content** that enables our citizens to reach each other and the wider world be organized for presentation and use.   And what of our local businesses? In the March 1999 issue of the journal *Business 2.0*, an article "Are you next?: 20 industries that must change" (edited by Jeffrey Davis) reviews the state of the travel, insurance, auto and auto parts sales, event ticketing, toy sales, and other

industries. It shows how they are affected by Net-based transactions (he calls it being "fossilized" by the Net), how that is expected to grow by 2003, and what the Net-based industry leaders are doing. Most of the industries listed are well represented in the typical medium sized Canadian city, including mine, and I know what I must do as a public librarian, together with the Business Self Help Office, the Chamber of Commerce, our Community Futures group, Human Resource Development Canada, and other obvious partners. Our local businesses do not have the luxury of wait and see. The economic well-being of our cities and towns is at risk. The potential is clearly there for the hoped-for two-way information highway to become simply a one-way bus that only leaves town, taking the town's money with it.   This can and will happen unless we act to help our businesses reposition themselves to take advantage of the opportunity side.

As I see it, the three key responses for the smart library in the aspiring smart community are positioning, advocacy, and community leadership. Not surprisingly, they are related. Although there are excellent examples out there of public libraries doing all these things, I am going to illustrate the points I am making here with examples from activities in which I have been involved personally, in the wider community of Brantford, the County of Brant, and Six Nations -- a unique urban, rural, and Aboriginal community.

First, what does the smart public library do to position itself?

- **The smart public library understands, articulates,** and **acts on** its fundamental role: to be the informal education system of our communities. Public libraries (and, more recently, community networks) were created by their communities to model the whole concept of "smart", long before the technology of the smart community. And further, our communities chose to create and support public libraries with tax dollars, long before governments had much of a role in our lives.   The role of the public library in a learning society is absolutely fundamental, and even more so in the digital age. It is the only learning institution in society that is completely open, inclusive, and free; the one that combines the traditional and new media; the one that combines the virtual and the real.   Don't expect anyone to articulate this if the public library does not do so, *actively*. The pull of the library-as-warehouse concept is simply too strong, especially among influential non-users -- i.e., people who may have a great deal of influence on local decision-making, but no personal direct familiarity with the services of modern public libraries.

- **The smart public library knows what Canadians have said that they want and expect** by way of public access and related services and communicates that information within and outside the community in highly strategic ways.   Smart librarians and trustees know what Canadians expect of public libraries in the digital age, and how strong the evidence is for public support and funding, both capital and operating. The Ekos survey, for example, indicates that public libraries top the list of public access sites. We know the survey (from the Canadian Centre for Management Development) that establishes once again that public libraries are regarded by Canadians as one of the best performing public or private institutions, surpassed only by fire departments. They know the Benton Foundation findings, that no other public institution today has the high regard and public trust of the public library. Smart libraries treat this kind of current intelligence as urgent, they know their advocacy resource material backwards, and they talk it up strategically. The evidence is clear that the adult public look first to public libraries, and not to public schools, and not to shopping malls, for public Internet access, and the numbers are significant. In Brantford, we know that in our recent survey, 87% of residents supported a strong and continuing connection between electronic access and personal assistance at the Library. The access to the Internet needed by Canadians includes not just physical connectivity, but also organization of content and access, technical troubleshooting, and public convenience, and these are possible on a mass scale only through the leadership of the

public library. The smart public library is strategically deployed wherever this is discussed in the community and in the Province -- in all policy making circles. (There is a well-maintained list of the advocacy resources referred to above, and others, on Industry Canada's LibraryNet web site.)

- The smart public library knows the strengths of public libraries as community partners and community builders, with and without technology.

    I. Libraries know information and its role in society; they understand information as a necessary condition for change, as a catalyst for change.

    ii. Libraries know information management -- analysis of information needs, analysis of the information-seeking behaviour of real people, organization of information for retrieval (e.g., in access to government information, librarians know that the major initial barrier to the citizen is knowing *which jurisdiction* to search), use of information technology, and estimating resource requirements (e.g., role of human assistance in the mix, and the cost of sustaining that assistance). Why does this matter so much? First, because intellectual access is as essential as physical connectivity if any benefit is to result. Second, because the sustainability challenge of public access is the sleeping giant of the whole access piece, and we understand that better than anyone, because we manage it.

    That is why a reference librarian from Brantford Public Library is ideally suited to chair the Information Committee of the Brant FreeNet, which has more local information than any freenet we are aware of.

    iii. Libraries have organizational support and fiscal stability, even in tough times. They have organized bookkeeping and budget processes; established human resources policies, including continuing education, in place; and they are not bureaucratic unless they choose to be. They have visible, accessible, trustworthy, and neutral service delivery points, typically open more than just office hours.

- In fact, libraries have longstanding principles, use patterns, participation rates, and services that should position them perfectly for smart community leadership. Why then are they so frequently perceived by decision-makers as hidebound, inflexible, or worse, just irrelevant in the digital age? One reason may lie in the way the mass media cover the issue -- they deem it "libraries *versus* the Internet". Of course, practical experience demonstrates that users are becoming quite comfortable combining the two. But the gap of perception remains serious, particularly among influential non-users. One key to bridging this gap is active advocacy.

Advocacy

- One of the major benefits of working in partnership is that partners become advocates for the library because they have come to understand it in a new way. In some cases, this benefit can even outweigh the direct service impact of the partnership-based service.

    For example, the Kiwanis Club of Brantford works in partnership with the Brantford Public Library on a program called Born to Read, developed to introduce teen mothers to the benefits and joys of reading to young children. The Club members have a clear understanding of the library's role in family literacy. When we subsequently approached a local company for funds for a multimedia

centre for children who struggle with their reading skills, the company's donations committee was chaired by a club member already familiar with our work.

- The basic approach of the advocate is to make the case that the agenda of the decision-maker will be advanced by what the advocate has to offer. This is different from both promoting and marketing. This is the perfect moment for the public library skilled in advocacy to say to its decision-makers: "You want smart? We do smart!" (Personally, I believe that advocacy is now a survival issue for libraries; it is what is necessary to convert the esteem of citizens into the concrete support of decision-makers. What is the value of all our technical skill development at conferences such as this if our libraries are closed or their hours reduced? Take the Library Advocacy Now program!)

- Advocacy training teaches us to identify our messages and express them in short, clear "sound bites". What is the sound bite, the message, of the public library in the aspiring smart community? Quite simply, the public library can deliver up the pillars of the smart community. There are some excellent sound bites in the follow-up to the Benton Foundation study, *The future's in the balance.* For example, "Librarians: the ultimate search engines," echoed by Mark Deacon at the earlier plenary session, and "Libraries balance books and bytes." And that wonderful comment from Dr. Gertrude McIntyre's presentation at the same session in this Conference: "Librarians are wisdom workers." Can there be any doubt about who the best advocates for libraries are, after hearing these presentations?   The people who use them!

The trick is to ensure that the **Library's users speak for the Library** to decision-makers, and not just the boards and staff and associations, although these people are often formal spokespersons. This is a far more valuable role for Friends of Libraries than fund-raising, in my judgment, because it helps to create fuure understandings that are key to adequate base budgets. For example, the Southern Ontario Library Service has just completed a survey of users of our Library's business services. It is the words and phrases from this survey that we will use to make the case to other businesses, and our municipal council, in the future, as we implement the move of the Business Self-Help Office from City Hall to the Public Library.

Leadership and Organization of the Smart Community

The public library with a strong history of partnership development is going to be a key organizer in a smart community. The core principles of partnership are the same, whether the partnership is public/public, public/private, or private/private sector. They involve a balance of give and get. There is no magic, but instead a great deal of discipline involved. Because the public library has a strong role in the building of community, especially through partnerships, it is therefore a natural leader in the organization of the smart community. I'll conclude with some lessons learned during several years of partnership development that I think have particular value in smart community organization.

Points for Partners

1. Be alert to partnership opportunities. You have to be out there - they don't come to the library. Allan Wilson's presentation earlier at this conference showed how much progress even a small library can make just by taking the show on the road, so to speak. And don't forget the virtual community -- our networks include national networks like the CNIB Library for the Blind, which became a partner

together with the Regina and Brantford libraries in n urban CAP pilot program to enable blind people to access the Internet.

2.   Identify the library as a key player. Don't hesitate to state the obvious -- be the producer of the resource list. Articulate your skills and exemplify them personally. For example, be the writer of the discussion papers that clarify the issues, record the agreements, and initiate the proposals. On behalf of the Board of the Brant Business Information Network, on which it serves, the Brantford Public Library administers the funds, hired the consultant, staffed the development of local content via electronic transfer and other means for the Network.

3.   Offer a positive and seamless view of your library's contribution to the partnership. Say what you *can* do, and don't mention your constraints until they are critical success factors. They are a distraction and a bore. We have just agreed on the framework for providing library services from Brantford Public Library to the students at the new Brantford campus of Wilfrid Laurier University, about to open this September. We and the University Library focused all our efforts on what we *could* do, and not on how hard it would be to align public and academic library service, and we will be proud of the results.

4.   Be prepared to invest a lot of time, within and outside working hours. The "talking" stage of partnership development is very long, but an essential investment. The Brant Business Information Network project noted above was over two years in the making.

5.   Develop trust with potential partners. Be trustworthy. Be a builder and support your partners. Share information. Circulate draft documents as a way of clarifying positions and approaches ahead of time. Best and easiest of all, bring pertinent and useful information to the table -- that's our specialty. It does more than deliver information; it delivers a message: as a public librarian, I know about this, and I care about it, too.

6.   Make a visible effort to learn the language of your partners and use it. For example, what do you mean by "counselling", if you are talking about partnership with employment support organizations? What do your partners mean by the same word? Be aware and respectful of the mandates of partner organizations. We are about to relocate the Business Self-Help Office, which provides advice and mentoring to new or growing businesses, from City Hall to our Main Library. In effect, it means that our reference librarians are being cross-trained as economic development officers, a recommendation made at last year's conference.

7.   Have your facts ready, especially about your library, and give your partners what they need to hear. Drive home points that help to dispel possible myths about the Library every time you have a chance. Especially, you need to dispel influential community people who are non-users. For example, you will find that people are amazed at the statistics of use and your experience of trends. Did reference librarians need David Foot's books to learn that genealogy and bird watching were becoming big hobbies? We remind people at every opportunity of the more than half a million visits to our library annually, and the high percentage of citizens who use it frequently.

8. Work with people who have both influence and authority, and a predisposition to act, not "representatives". If you have an existing committee, identify the people who can move the group forward. Put the advocacy in their hands; they will reach the people you can't reach, and credibly. When we were trying to raise the funds for the Brant FreeNet, the most helpful business group was the past presidents of the Chamber of Commerce. They had the time, the big picture, and the commitment to the future of the community. One of them wrote over 90 personal letters to people he knew, encouraging them to support the FreeNet, because he knew it was important to the young people of the area.

9. Come to the table with some authority to act. Reserve the Library's position only when you must. This requires that you personally have solid credibility in your library, and that you have a good grasp of your board's perspective on community initiatives. In my library, we have a Board motion authorizing the CEO to participate in partnership initiatives that are consistent with our philosophy and goals, and partnerships are a strong theme in our strategic plan. This does not mean that any and all partnerships are on, but it is a significantly empowering framework.

10. Notwithstanding the last point, be sure to check back with your library, reporting progress and new developments. This is essential to maintaining your authority to act; it gives you important support, feedback and advice, and minimizes surprises of the distressing kind. In particular, do not allow the Board Chair to be surprised -- keep that person in the loop.

11. Partnerships involve some loss of control. Define roles and responsibilities carefully in any proposal, and make sure the issues of control and accountability are dealt with. The role of any advisory committee must be especially clear.

12. At the detail level, the visionaries tend to be impatient and their interest may lag. Keep visionaries involved as long as you can. Have them impart the vision to newcomers to the partnership. As someone put it well, you have to staple the visionaries to the implementation plan.

13. Address sustainability. Grants are required to get most initiatives off the ground, but don't propose something that will be 100% dependent on the same grants, indefinitely. The partners have to bring resources to the table, but cash isn't the only resource. Be the person to articulate a plan for sustaining the initiative. In the case of the Brant FreeNet, an alternative and successful community network, the public libraries throughout the county provide the free part, enabling the FreeNet to charge affordable fees and stay in business.

14. Specialize. There are too many unmet needs and you cannot respond to all of them. Look at the most significant unmet needs in your community, and consider what information will contribute to them. In our community and our library, we believe we can do our best job on partnerships for employment support, small business support, and family literacy support.

15. No partnership is forever. Change is continuous. Be prepared to see it grow and develop beyond the original vision. Otherwise, the partnership can slip into becoming an organization in search of a mission.

In conclusion, I recall again Mark Deacon's excellent presentation earlier in this program. He commented that we are at the point of convergence between the human spirit and the fruits of 35 years of technological innovation. I think we are at, or near, the intersection of wired and smart. Our challenge as public librarians in smart communities is to present our libraries to our communities as a strategic asset in the creation of a better community. We have the knowledge and the skills. I often think of Nike for inspiration. Nike was not the Greek goddess of athletic footwear, but instead the goddess of victory. The slogan of the modern Nike company could easily be that of the smart public library, though. Just do it!

Thank you.

Thank you.

Brantford Public Library is a member of a community network of organizations providing employment

support services. When that network developed a series of workshops on job search and career planning, one of our roles was to prepare the list of "best of class" information resources on the Internet and attached the list to our web site.