

Hospital book-lending machine

A different way to provide library services

Introduction from Ayub Khan MBE

I have been a library and information professional for more than 20 years. I am currently Customer Services Manager (Face to Face) for Warwickshire County Council with responsibility for Libraries, One-Stop-Shops and Registration Services. I am based in the county town of Warwick - about 40 minutes from here. Warwick is famous for its medieval castle and is a few miles from Stratford-upon-Avon, where Shakespeare was born - in the Midlands region of England.

Context

Today I am going to talk about delivering library services in a new and innovative way. My service has installed a library book-lending machine in a local hospital. First let me explain the context. Warwickshire has been actively exploring different ways to deliver library services, and to increase access, for some years. This is partly due to budget cuts - or 'austerity measures' as we call them in the UK - and, more importantly, because of changing lifestyles.

We live in a 24/7, on-demand society. Today's customers want ease, convenience and quality services. Meanwhile we, as service providers, are constantly being asked to do more with less.

Virtual library services are ever more popular. However, the demand for traditional book-borrowing remains high. The book-lending machine offered a way to widen access to library services and deliver them in a different way, cost-effectively and with no extra staff.

About Warwickshire Library and Information Service

Warwickshire Direct and Libraries currently provides a three-tier service:

- Library Hubs in three main centres of population offering the widest range of services and longest opening hours
- 16 additional council-run local libraries serving neighbourhoods and towns with opening hours that reflect local need
- Library Direct comprising the online library open 24/7, plus mobile libraries, outreach and housebound reader services

We also provide stock, systems and professional support to 12 community-led libraries run by local volunteers.

Our libraries increasingly offer a wider range of local services - from citizens' advice to police enquiries, and even a food bank distributing food parcels to people in need. Some share premises with partner service-providers, such as children's centres.

Facts and figures

- More than half the Warwickshire population has a library card
- We stock more than one million books for free loan to Warwickshire library members
- Last year nearly 25,000 people attended more than 2,000 library events

Every day our libraries:

- Welcome around 9,000 library visitors
- Lend out around 10,000 books and other loan items
- Handle around 1,600 enquiries
- Provide around 1,700 public computer sessions

Each year the online library receives:

- 900,000 searches
- 50,000 requests
- 260,000 renewals

Hospital partnership

The book-lending machine was installed at the George Eliot Hospital in the town of Nuneaton, in February 2013. It is sited in a busy walkway, near to where patients go for blood tests. The project was the result of a partnership agreement between the library service and the local National Health Service Trust, which runs the hospital.

The hospital's staff and ever-changing patient population is a huge community much larger than many Warwickshire villages. With a workforce of 1,800 staff and a throughput of 245,000 patients a year - plus visitors - the George Eliot is busy 24 hours a day.

The hospital has added 'library card' to the list of things incoming patients should bring with them.

As part of the partnership arrangement, hospital volunteers handle day-to-day operations, such as restocking the machine. The hospital already had an army of willing volunteers (Friends) - which was a big plus. They came up with the idea of using ipads or tablets to help people without a Warwickshire library card to join online - instantly - so they could borrow books from the machine straight away.

About the machine

The Italian-made machine dispenses up to 400 different books, and anyone with a county library card can use it for free. It also takes returns - although borrowed books can also be returned to any library in Warwickshire. The equipment uses RFID technology and is linked to county library systems.

The machine is quick and easy to use - borrowing a book takes less than a minute. Customers can search available titles in various ways, then scroll through pictures of book-covers, choose what they want - and their selection is dispensed. It really is that easy, as extensive pre-installation testing demonstrated.

I understand similar book-lending machines have been set up successfully in Sweden, the Netherlands and in California - but primarily at shopping centres and railway stations. As far as we know, the George Eliot Hospital machine is the first stand-alone of its type, in a non-library community venue, in the UK.

Getting there

I'll now briefly explain what was involved and the timescale. Warwickshire Libraries successfully bid for alternative service delivery funding from the County Council. We were mindful that maintenance and other on-costs were manageable. Developing a sound business case was essential.

Warwickshire Libraries bought the machine and project-managed its installation. The hospital provided a suitable location, access to network links, and volunteers. A joint project team was set up and a Memorandum of Understanding was signed, clarifying respective partner roles and responsibilities.

The project had a long lead-in time, and there were many hurdles to overcome. The concept itself was challenging. Most vending machines only dispense - and from multiple stock - but ours issues hundreds of different book titles and takes returns, so it had to be custom-built. The equipment had to be linked to the library management system and borrower records. We also had to create a procedures manual and train the hospital volunteers.

Benefits

The book-lending machine brings many benefits. It provides a 24-hour book loan service to local people, hospital staff and patients. It serves multiple audiences in a non-library setting, attracts new and lapsed members, and extends library services with no extra staff. It supports the wider health and wellbeing agenda and Books on Prescription scheme. It has proved to be a platform for other joint projects and helps to promote reading and library use in a relatively disadvantaged part of Warwickshire. As such, it is a council target area for social, educational and economic improvement.

Making changes

However, to be honest, early usage figures were disappointing. We have learned an important lesson - that one letter of the alphabet can make a big difference. We originally called it a 'book vending machine' - which put people off using the service because they thought they had to pay. So the livery has recently been changed to 'book-lending machine'. We also found, through user-testing, that instructions for using the machine needed to be clearer - and we have addressed that, too.

Conclusion

This is a case of using new technology to enhance and promote real library services and not just virtual alternatives. It is part of the Warwickshire drive to test new delivery methods - putting library services when and where people need them.

At nearly £100,000 all in, the library book-lending machine was a significant investment - particularly in such tough financial times. But it has extended the library service offer without incurring extra staffing costs, supports the wider health and well-being agenda,

and promotes reading and library use in a disadvantaged North Warwickshire target area. The machine provides a taster of what is available in libraries across Warwickshire - and encourages more people to use them.

We believe it could work in other settings - taking books to people who might otherwise have neither the time nor inclination to visit traditional libraries.

(A short movie about the book-lending machine project will be shown at the end of the talk.)

ABSTRACT

Fewer libraries, lower staffing levels and less money so how do you extend services and reach wider audiences? Online libraries are only part of the answer - physical services are important, too. Warwickshire Libraries have found a way to extend their service offer with minimal on-costs or staffing implications. It's a custom-built Italian book-lending machine installed in a local hospital that is busy 24 hours a day. Believed to be the first of its kind in the UK, the machine is definitely a different way to loan out books - to what might be termed a 'captive audience'. In theory, the model could work in almost any community venue or public place. Brave, not cheap - but certainly worth considering.

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