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Local Libraries in the Digital Age-it's About the Experience

By Sophie Braccini



Lamorinda's Senior Community Library Managers:
Beth Girshman (left), Caroline Gick, and Susan
Weaver Photo Sophie Braccini

A September survey by Harris Interactive confirmed that digital readers are a hot commodity, and that they get people to read more books. The trend does not surprise or worry Lamorinda's librarians, who are constantly reinventing the role of local public libraries in the digital age.

Contra Costa County Library (CCCL) recently announced that the Amazon Kindle will join other digital reading devices, including the Barnes & Noble Nook, the Android, iPhone and iPad, that can access the library's free eBook collection. (<http://guides.ccclib.org/ebooks>)

Could this mean that people will stop going to the library? "Our first mission is to get people to read," says Susan Weaver, of the Lafayette Library and Learning Center, "it is important that we offer different media so people with different needs have equal access."

Weaver and her colleagues have already embraced the new tools for themselves. "I'm a librarian and I use my Kindle in bed," says the Orinda Library's Caroline Gick, "the angle is right, and it has a light." "I use my Nook while traveling or camping," adds Moraga's librarian, Beth Girshman, raising Gick's bid with a friendly smile.

"iPads are turning out to be the number one gift for seniors because the screen is bigger," says Weaver, "but so far, people are using these devices mostly for purchasing books rather than renting them."

Is the library ahead of the technology curve?

"The CCCL has a team of about four people, led by Cathy Sanford, in charge of the technology-watch," says Gick, "they anticipate and respond to the demands of our patrons."

Other unique online services are provided by CCCL, such as the use of QR codes (the two-dimensional bar codes that can be read with a mobile phone) to provide additional information about a book or related topics, and the pioneering free museum-pass system.

As the use of mobile technology grows, so does the attendance at public libraries. "We are more than books," says Gick, "we offer all kinds of informational and educational services. We are as much about place and community as about content."

In Moraga and Orinda, the 'new library effect' of Lafayette has impacted the growth trend, but attendance numbers are still up. "We are a place for the community to meet," confirms Girshman, "Every time I enter in the library I check out the people who are there, working with their computers or reading printed material. They want a place out of the home or the office where they can be and feel close to other human beings." The diverse activities that are offered in the three Lamorinda libraries also bring people in.

"Futurist Thomas Frey explains that libraries have been reinventing themselves constantly over the past 2000 years," says Weaver, "we are transitioning from a product-based economy to an experience-based economy. Libraries will develop more experiences for our patrons, such as studios to create music or movies."

"We will be places where people will not only find content, but can also create it," adds Gick.

"We are a part of people's day," concludes Girshman, "the way we do it will continue to change. We do not know where it will take us, but it is an exciting time to be a librarian."

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