

# trustee tale

## Newsletter for Public Library Trustees

### The Myth of Free Library Service

*Jim Trojanowski, Director, Northern Waters Library Service*

In their early days, public libraries often used the word “free” in their name, perhaps to distinguish themselves from subscription libraries, whose members paid a fee to use the library. It was common for a benefactor to open a new “free” library and provide an endowment to furnish and staff it in the future. The Enoch Pratt Free Library, for example, began as a gift of a central library, four branches, and an endowment of \$1,058,333 from Enoch Pratt to the City of Baltimore, Maryland. The library opened in 1886, and received public funding for the first time in 1908.

While few public libraries use the term “free” in their names today, many advertise free services. For example, a Google search of “free wireless internet” locates links to many library websites listing free wireless Internet as a service. (Ironically, the search also finds an article about a man who was told by police that his use of the library’s wireless Internet service from his car after the library had closed constituted theft.)

Today, 26 of 29 members of Northern Waters Library Service provide wireless Internet. Growing use of wireless, rapidly expanding availability of downloadable audio and video, and ever increasing demand for new Internet accessible workstations in the library is creating a constant need for additional bandwidth. Library directors recognize the importance of meeting this need, but they aren’t sure how to fund this “free” service.

At an NWLS meeting in June, several library directors commented that municipal officials and citizens have begun to ask that their libraries extend coverage of wireless Internet to town halls, private businesses, even entire towns and cities. One business, located adjacent to a public library, was able to use the library’s wireless, saving itself the cost of its own high speed connection. Sure, this creates demand for bandwidth, but since wireless is free, why be concerned?

I recall a discussion with a library patron nearly 15 years ago in which I was asked to mail books to a friend of hers who worked at another library. This was before the statewide delivery service began, so libraries paid directly to send books through the US mail. When I refused to send the book because I could not justify use of public funds to ship personal materials, she insisted that libraries received free postage. Why? Because they advertise free interlibrary loan, which meant to her that there was no cost to move books between libraries.

Act 420, a new law passed in 2006 requiring counties to provide new funding for public libraries, will take effect next year. As I explain the new law to county officials, I often hear the remark that library service isn’t free anymore. Whether we agree with Act 420 or not, we should be concerned that any elected official believes library service is, or ever was, free. On the other hand, it isn’t difficult to understand why the misperception exists.

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Why do librarians advertise “free” services? They want their services to be used and nothing attracts customers like something “free.” Libraries want all to feel welcome to use the library and advertising services as “free” helps those who cannot afford to pay a usage fee recognize that they will not be required to do so. Further, state law requires that public libraries not charge for their services.

Still, it is difficult to understand why library trustees and directors advertise “free” services even as they express growing frustration with the difficulty in funding them. We must tell people that our services cost money, whether that money comes from government or the funding or service is donated.

Instead, we need to find a way that lets patrons know they will not pay a fee to use the library without telling them these services are free. One library director I know tells patrons that their use of the library is pre paid through taxes. Another simply says that there is no charge to get a borrowers card, attend a library program, surf the Internet, or use other library services. Both are careful to avoid use of the word “free” because they recognize that if people believe library services are free, there is no reason to advocate for their funding. They refuse to perpetuate the myth of free library service. May they be an example to us all.

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## Is your community viable?

According to Census Bureau statistics rural population peaked sometime in the 1920s and has been slowly declining ever since. Currently, while three-quarters of the country is considered rural, only 20% of the population lives in a rural area. As people move to urban and suburban areas our small towns lose businesses, institutions, and organizations.

Will your small community survive the next 50 years? Will it grow and develop or will it dwindle away? The Heartland Center for Leadership Development in Lincoln, Nebraska has found that strong rural communities share these characteristics.

1. Evidence of community pride.
2. Emphasis on quality in business & community life.
3. Willingness to invest in the future.
4. Participatory approach to community decision making.
5. Cooperative community spirit.
6. Realistic appraisal of future opportunities.
7. Awareness of competitive positioning.
8. Knowledge of the physical environment.
9. Active economic development program.
10. Deliberate transition of power to a younger generation of leaders.
11. Acceptance of women in leadership roles.
12. Strong belief in and support for education.
13. Problem-solving approach to providing health care.
14. Strong multi-generational family orientation.
15. Strong presence of traditional institutions that are integral to community life.
16. Attention to sound and well-maintained infrastructure.
17. Careful use of fiscal resources.
18. Sophisticated use of information resources.
19. Willingness to seek help from the outside.
20. Conviction that, in the long run, you have to do it yourself.

## Not Just For Librarians

The Wisconsin Library Association Fall Conference is not just for librarians. The Conference, which will be held on 5 – 7 November in Middleton, has sessions for library trustees as well, including:

- Email as Public Records
- The Cross-Generational Workforce
- Privacy 2.0: Implications in a Connected World
- I Can't Thank you Enough: The Importance of Good Stewardship
- What's New Under the Dome (library legislative issues)
- Promoting the Economic Impact of Libraries at the Local Level
- Policies for Effective Management of Employees and Benefits
- Reflections on Intellectual Freedom: From the Local to the Global Community

And you can meet library trustees from around the state at Thursday's Wisconsin Library Trustees and Friends (WLTF) Luncheon and program.

You can find more information and a registration form at <http://www.wla.lib.wi.us/conferences/2008/index.htm>

## How to Draw More Latinos into Public Libraries

### 1. Get to know your local Latino community

Library personnel should be aware of the overall diversity of Latinos and the particular composition of the Hispanic community in their own area, including how long most have been in this country and what socioeconomic levels are represented.

### 2. Advertise the library as a place to learn English

Satisfaction with English language materials is more pivotal in increasing library visits than satisfaction with Spanish language materials. In addition, use of the library to learn English is the third biggest factor associated with higher library visits.

### 3. Advertise public access to computers and availability of general information

Our research found that Latino library-goers who use available computers frequent the library more often. In addition, although Latinos who go to the library for general information go less frequently than others, they may be influenced to go more by seeing what is available, such as books for children.

### 4. Inform the community that the library does not share library user information

Many foreign-born Latinos in this country are not U.S. citizens, and the total foreign-born population comprises about half the adult Latino community. Our research found that foreign-born Latinos are much less likely to use the library, and one reason for this may be that some Latinos fear signing up for a library card and may not be aware that libraries must keep personal information confidential.

## Latinos and Public Library Perceptions

The Tomás Rivera Policy Institute with funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation recently studied the perceptions of Latinos towards libraries and their use of libraries. This article gives a few highlights of the report and a summary of the report's recommendations. The entire report can be found on the WebJunction site at [http://www.webjunction.org/c/document\\_library/get\\_file?folderId=10860985&name=DLFE-2520003.pdf](http://www.webjunction.org/c/document_library/get_file?folderId=10860985&name=DLFE-2520003.pdf). A shorter URL is <http://tinyurl.com/56bwqh>

This study found that Latinos hold positive perceptions of libraries and also determined that:

- Latino library visits are affected by demographic factors, as is the case for the population at large.
- Library-use differences exist between foreign-born, second-generation, and third generation Latinos. However, these differences are due to demographic differences in age, education, and income between these groups.
- Although Spanish language materials are of importance to Latinos, their perceptions of staff service are a stronger factor in terms of increasing visits than Spanish language materials.
- The more fluent a person is in English, the more likely they are to have visited the library and accessed its services.
- Availability of resources including computer access, information on jobs, and general information influence library visits.

## Are you ETDBW?

How simple is it for a new user to find something in your building? When was the last time you examined your policies & procedures? Do your services and hours of operation fit your community's needs today (not their needs of 20 years ago)?

At one time libraries could survive, and sometimes even thrive, doing the same old thing. But now consumers want it their way and institutions that don't change will be left behind. If you don't provide the services customers want they'll use the competition (the Internet or the library in the next community). You need to be ETDBW: *Easy to do Business With*. Like it or not, that's the way the world is now.

You need to take a close look at your whole operation with fresh eyes, always keeping in mind the question: *What does the customer want?*

- Are you open convenient hours?
- Is it easy for people to find the things they want?
- Are you buying materials members of the community want, in formats they prefer?
- Are your policies & procedures "user friendly"?
- Are you doing things that make you look stupid? By this I mean do you have rules or procedures that, no matter how well-intentioned or apparently important, look stupid or silly to an outsider who doesn't know their background or purpose.

One last word... You can't just look at things, make changes, and assume you're done. Your community is constantly changing and the library

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must change with it. It's like gardening. Twice a year, spring and fall, your garden takes lots of attention. But you can't ignore it the rest of the year. You're always fertilizing here, cutting back there, and cultivating somewhere else.

**Wisconsin Libraries:  
Building a Better Tomorrow**

**Wisconsin Library Association  
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November 4-7, 2008, Madison Marriott  
West, Middleton**

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Editor/Author: Mark Arend  
Graphic Artist: Renee Miller

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**Winnefox Library System  
106 Washington Avenue  
Oshkosh, WI 54901-4985**