

Raising the Visibility of Consumer Health Libraries in the Community

The Ann Arbor District Library in Michigan serves as an excellent model for conducting effective community outreach efforts. It has its own Community Relations Department, which reminds health library patrons that the public library is an invaluable resource for accessing quality health information. Tim Grimes, Public Relations Manager for the library, uses a variety of outreach activities to raise the visibility of the library within the Ann Arbor community.

“Ann Arbor is home to a large international community with new people coming and going all the time, so we are constantly creating awareness of the library and its services,” says Grimes.

Beth Andersen is the librarian who oversees the health materials section of the Ann Arbor District Library. Her collection offers an array of materials on subjects relating to health, diet, nutrition and exercise, and she is diligent about keeping up with the latest health reference books, dictionaries, encyclopedias, handbooks, directories and textbooks.

Developing an Online Resource Center

A unique health information service offered to the Ann Arbor community is the library’s online Health and Wellness Resource Center. This database includes excerpts and full textbooks, pamphlets and journal articles on a wide variety of health-related topics. The general public can access this full-text database on the library computer network from their homes or offices by using their library card numbers.

To help library patrons effectively search for health information online, Andersen offers classes on the overall health care system and how to use the Internet through reliable portals. Ten to 12 people attend each of Andersen’s classes, and many participants are senior citizens and minorities. One of her goals is to help patrons learn that Web search engines like Google® pull an endless stream of health information that is not necessarily reliable or evidence-based. Web sites such as WebMD or MEDLINEplus (see <http://www.webmd.com> and <http://www.medlineplus.gov> for more information) are far more credible resources.

Andersen says that consumers today are much more involved in managing their own health. “There is a large demand for health information outside a typical health clinic or hospital, and unlike 20 years ago, public library patrons are learning that a consumer activist approach will help them find the health information they need,” says Andersen. “Our library is dedicated to bringing new people into the library.”

Reaching Out to the Community

Most public libraries do not aggressively market their services like Ann Arbor does. Thanks to generous funding, Grimes and his team of communication professionals promote the health library through grassroots efforts and continuous press releases, signage, informational programs, library exhibits and extensive media coverage. Here are some examples of what works:

Media Outreach. The library's Web site links visitors to *The Ann Arbor News* and a considerable list of community events, government sites and local businesses, along with local nonprofit associations, the University of Michigan, and art and literature resource centers.

Grimes and his colleagues develop relationships with reporters from local newspapers, which helps the library to stay visible at all times. He sends out at least 40 to 50 copies of a press release announcing upcoming special events to local and regional newspapers and magazines. He frequently refers to an updated media list of contacts from Ann Arbor, Detroit and other surrounding areas, and keeps abreast of which reporters cover which topics.

"Human interest stories seem to get the most media attention," says Grimes. "During African-American history month, for instance, we invited African-Americans to come and speak about their experiences growing up in Ann Arbor. If you host events at which the public can learn about local history, they tend to be big hits in the local newspapers," he says.

Promotional Giveaways. For major events such as the library's reading program or special art exhibits, its in-house graphic designer creates posters and postcards, which are displayed throughout the community and sent to members on the library's mailing list. The library also produces four-color flyers and bookmarks that are used as giveaways at events to promote each of its branches. The public relations staff also places ads in the *Ann Arbor News'* weekend entertainment section, which a lot of community members subscribe to and read regularly.

Outreach to Community Leaders. Achieving a high level of community participation means reaching out to community leaders who are well-connected to various groups of people. With the right contacts, Grimes and his colleagues have managed to spread the word about the health library's resources. The key to reaching out to community leaders, according to Grimes, is to identify an individual who is a community activist and can become passionate about improving visibility of the library and its health resources within the community.

Grimes explains how he began a dialogue and outreach with Ann Arbor's Hispanic community: "Through a simple round of cold calling, I connected with a

Latin-American activist who has since been able to introduce us to other community groups and advise us on the best ways to conduct outreach efforts with them. The activist helps us arrange activities in Hispanic communities. For instance, a storyteller and musician from the library recently visited an apartment complex in which a high population of Hispanic-American families reside. They informed the community of the library's services, and since then we've had increased interest and attendance at the library from that group."

Community Outreach. To promote special events, the Ann Arbor library forms partnerships with local community and civic groups. For instance, the American Library Association recently presented a film series called "From Rosie [the Riveter] to Roosevelt: The American People," which tells the story of how millions of men and women headed for battle in World War II while millions more mobilized to support the war effort at home.

Through partnerships with local veterans, African-Americans, Japanese-Americans and other community groups, the library was able to spread the word about the film series and increase the number of people who attended the film, listened to its guest speakers and perused its special collection of World War II memorabilia. "This event received a tremendous amount of local media coverage because it attracted so many different groups within the community," says Grimes.

Outreach to Senior Citizens. To increase usage and visibility of its traveling book collection, the Ann Arbor library conducts outreach to more than a dozen local senior citizen homes. The library's outreach coordinator personally visits each home to learn about the needs and interests of its residents. Then, customized sets of books and music are developed and either taken to the homes or are available when residents visit the library. Services provided include computer classes and memoir writing activities.

Future Outreach. New outreach efforts will focus on teenagers and how to let them know about the health information resources available at the Ann Arbor District Library. "We'll look at the goals of the teen organizations, form a strategic plan, and try to reach out to them by providing them with activities and programs they can really benefit from and enjoy," says Grimes.

Beth Andersen, Health Librarian
Tim Grimes, Public Relations Manager
Ann Arbor District Library, Ann Arbor, MI