

From Information Providers to Community Connectors

How investing in Web 2.0 technologies can strengthen libraries and communities



With 20 branches and more than 8 million visits in 2007, the Columbus Metropolitan Library in Ohio is not only one of the most-used library systems in the country, but also a veritable proving ground for how libraries can strategically implement and manage emerging technologies for staff and customers. As CML's Digital Strategy Director, Helene Blowers uses her unique vantage point to inform her work as a Steering Committee member of TechSoup's MaintainIT Project <http://www.maintainitproject.org/>, where she shares her perspectives on the rapid growth of Web 2.0 technologies at small and large libraries around the country.

An Evolution in Tech Innovation

Prior to joining CML in early 2008, Blowers spent more than 12 years at the Public Library of Charlotte & Mecklenburg County in Charlotte, North Carolina. At PLCMC, Blowers created new information pathways and used new technologies to develop groundbreaking services including StoryPlace.org (an online digital library for children), BookHive.org (an online guide to children's books), and ReadersClub.org (an online reader's community).

In both North Carolina and Ohio and through her work with the MaintainIT Project, Blowers has witnessed an evolution in how libraries connect to and use information.

"In the past, we relied on our vendors because the cost of developing technology to reach out to our customers in different types of ways wasn't there," Blowers said. "But with Web 2.0 technologies, new channels have opened up. Now the tools are freely available [to anyone] so innovation has shifted away from vendors and more into the

hands of the users.”

Yet despite the opportunities Web 2.0 technologies can bring, Blowers recognizes the hurdles — both in infrastructure and in thinking — that libraries need to overcome to keep up with the pace of technology and with the tools their customers are using.

While she jokes that one of the greatest challenges of Web 2.0 is “remembering your username and password,” Blowers said it’s often the broader issue of library leadership supporting risk-taking and creativity among staff that hinders progress. “To encourage innovation within libraries, I think first and foremost you have to encourage creative thinking and risk-taking,” she said.

Blowers notes that her own experience has taught her to encourage creativity when it comes to online technologies. “If it fits within the mission, vision, and strategy that your library has outlined then it’s easy to support and let staff with the idea. I find that often that innovation is driven by your most passionate people. You need to encourage risk-taking risk in order to deliver new services. And whether or not you succeed or fail you learn something from it.”

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Not only does Blowers advocate that libraries let go of some control when it comes to new staff initiatives, she also recommends that they allow library patrons to engage with each other — and with technology — on their own terms.

“If you let your community start to take ownership of some of these things, they really will become part of [your technology solution],” Blowers said. At the start of any new technology initiative at her library, Blowers asks, “Is the project enabling something good to happen or are [we] trying to disable our customers from something so that we have a greater sense of control? In order to be innovative, I think we have to let go of control.”

Yet giving up some control isn’t an “all or nothing” proposition, said Blowers, noting that she often takes a more incremental approach. “When trying out these new Web 2.0 tools, as I’m doing it here at Columbus Metro, I’m saying ‘Let’s create a series of small engagement activities for the community,’” she said. “Let’s try out these tools in small chunks around something that we can promote to our community, see if it really engages them, if they’re really into it, we’re not committed and we learn from it.”

Blowers notes that being open to new technologies — and new ways of approaching technology — can be just as beneficial to small libraries as it can to large. “I think smaller libraries that already are tightly knit

communities will benefit from this just as much as big libraries will," she said. "I think that web 2.0 technology is enabling us to shift from just being information providers to really being community connectors. And since this area is so new, don't worry about building it in for the long term. Think about ways that you can market small campaigns to try out the feasibility of using these tools as new ways."

Blowers shared an example of a way one library has successfully engaged patrons on a small scale. "Allen County Public Library [in Indiana] has used Flickr for three years in a row to do 'A Day in the Life of Allen County.' They've encouraged their community – on one specific day – to take pictures in the community, upload them to their own Flickr account, and tag them a specific way, or email them to the library, and then Allen County showcases it on its Web site."

For smaller libraries looking to embrace new technologies, Blowers offers the following encouragement:

"For small libraries, this boom in Web 2.0 tools is huge because being able to get your library's information out there, to engage in the community in new and different ways has never been easier, and you don't need a county IT department or somebody else to do it for you," she said. "These tools have enabled a library to directly connect with the customer without having to rely on IT or a Webmaster. It just takes a little bit of ingenuity, thought, and creativity to utilize these things in some really amazing ways."

Growing Bandwidth

This shift toward Web 2.0 technologies has given libraries across the country new opportunities to innovate and be creative, but it's also added new challenges to existing structures, Blowers said, noting that her library is always thinking ahead about bandwidth growth to meet the new demands of a Web 2.0 world.

"YouTube and the social networking sites encourage your customers to start sending video to each other. They say 95 percent of cell phones right now have the capability of capturing images and video," Blowers said. "When people are walking around with that type of capability in their pockets, and they're actually putting stuff up the Web and sharing it with people, it sucks up [bandwidth] like you wouldn't believe. I think if any library has not added to their bandwidth in the last two years that's where they need to be paying attention in this coming year," she said.

In addition to uploading images, Blowers predicts that mobile technology will soon find a new home in libraries across the country. "I think the shift in mobile technology is huge and we haven't been paying enough attention

to it. But as more and more people are walking around with smart devices in their pockets I think we're going to see SMS [short messaging service; a type of text-messaging used on mobile phones] reference start to blossom, just like IM [instant messaging] has been out there."

Peer Learning and Community Connectors

Aside from the benefits of engaging with customers through using new tools, Blowers said that Web 2.0 also provides a way for smaller libraries to create online communities with peers around the country. "I think for small libraries that may be out in the middle of nowhere and not have a peer library around to bounce things against, they can become part of a support system in their own learning community by coming together through some of these new tools. And I think that's what's really empowering," she said. "The tools that are out there now allow communities to come together around either niche interest areas or shared learning opportunities. Libraries can share things so they're not working in [their] own little vacuum."

"[Libraries] are connectors – community connectors, knowledge connectors, information connectors," she said. "It's the greatest skill set that I think librarians have, and I think sometimes we worry too much about being the knowledge expert in a specific area and we lose sight of our ability to connect everywhere else," Blowers said. "Libraries are shifting from being information providers to community connectors."

To keep up on the latest trends and information on emerging technologies and how your library can use them, Blowers recommends, "Get [news aggregators] Google Reader, Bloglines, Netvibes, Pageflakes – whatever it is that you're comfortable with. Subscribe to at least five blogs and build 15 minutes into your day to spend some time there. The blogs that I recommend are LibrarianInBlack by Sarah Houghton-Jan, TechCrunch by Michael Arrington, or Lifehacker, Stephen Abram's Lighthouse, Wired magazine, and Learning 2.1."

Helene Blowers will be building new systems and expanding emerging technologies at the Columbus Metropolitan Library for years to come. To read more of her leading thoughts on library technology, you can read her blog at LibraryBytes.com.