Enhancing Financial Support Through Strategic Partnerships And Innovative Strategies: A Case Of Singapore Public Libraries

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ABSTRACT

Possible alternatives for funding sources for public libraries are identified and the need for libraries to develop innovative strategies and strategic partnerships for enhancing financial support are highlighted. Three partnership initiatives of the National Library Board of Singapore (NLB) in the areas of information literacy, use of radio identification technology for improved loan and management functions, and community funding for innovative use of pathfinders are described. It was found that such strategic partnerships were not only helpful in gaining financial support but also assisted in the repositioning of libraries as competitive agencies for information delivery and contributors toward improving learning lifestyle of citizenry.

Keywords: alternative funding, public libraries, innovative library strategies, strategic partnerships.

INTRODUCTION

In view of increasing competition for funding for public services, libraries worldwide are exploring alternative sources of financial support. Several guidelines have been provided to explore different possibilities to improve library budgets. Bremer (2001) lists local taxes, state funds, and federal grants as major financial sources for public libraries in the U.S. and suggests that libraries seek alternative sources of revenue to support activities thought to be the responsibility of tax dollars. Knit and Aalot (2003) expand the list of funding sources by pointing to possible charges and fees and raising funds through events, donations, endowment, and grants. They highlight the need for supplementing
library funds by proactive fundraising showing through examples and case studies how libraries can improve their budgets focusing on foundations, trusts, property development projects and private sector grants. Hood (1996) highlights the need for understanding the principles of fundraising for finding new sources of financial aid for libraries.

Libraries have also been advised to look into the possibility of corporate sponsorships to support their special programs. They are also reminded that they no longer enjoy the monopoly over supply of information, as there are other reasonably competitive sources of information including the Web. Coffman (2000) suggests that the library must stand on its own two feet and try to generate revenue that can replace the institutional support. Entrepreneurial projects outside the library field have also been suggested as a viable alternative. Best (2001) stresses on the importance of entrepreneurs in public libraries and emphasizes that library managers are the critical success factor in increasing resource generation. Best recommends that library managers should improve their performance by developing more entrepreneurial behavior by undertaking further training in business skills, increasing their knowledge of community characteristics, and extending the level of inter-library cooperation.

Holt (2002) highlights that libraries need to set up strategic partnerships to help them cope with the effects of limited public funding, rising customer requirements and the increasing demands made by policy makers. A number of various possibilities of partnerships including training and funding partnerships, alliances to disseminate information, program development partnerships, partnerships to build and share audiences, research and product development partnerships and political alliances were suggested.

We undertook a study to examine if the trends of partnerships and alliances for gaining better support for libraries were prevalent in Singapore. We reviewed policy documents relating to public libraries and held discussions with the senior management of the National Library Board (NLB), which has been given the mandate to establish and administer libraries and information services in the country. We studied a number of initiatives and strategies of NLB with a view to assess their impact on the financial support for public libraries. A summary of such strategies deployed by NLB for introducing innovative library and information services are presented in the following sections. In particular, three partnership initiatives are described: One Learning Place, RFID (Radio Frequency Identification Tagging) and Aspiration Pathfinder. The paper concludes with a summary of the impact of these strategies and initiatives on the financial support for library services in the country.

TRANSFORMATION OF SINGAPORE LIBRARIES

The Library 2000 report (Library Review Committee, 1994), which led to the creation of the National Library Board (NLB) in 1995, recommended that fast prototyping of new services be adopted as a basis of testing new ideas and concepts. The report also stressed on the innovative use of technology as one of three enablers and pre-requisites for the
successful implementation of the library of the future (Abu Bakar, 2002). Public libraries in Singapore undertook strategic initiatives and deployed innovative strategies to transform libraries into exciting places of discovery of knowledge. Among other things, Singapore public libraries made fundamental changes in their approaches to leverage technologies. These changes started with the creation of the National Library Board (NLB) in 1995, and in a short period of time, attracted the attention of world wide professional community. NLB is the main library authority in the country and is responsible for maintaining the national library and a network of public libraries, in addition to its role as the national bibliographic agency. The choice of NLB for a case study by the prestigious Harvard Business School made these initiatives known even outside the LIS community. In recognition of its efforts in innovation in the country, NLB was awarded the National Innovation Award. The creativity, innovation, and entrepreneurship have helped NLB to change the image of libraries, and in addition, assisted in improving the financial support of libraries. The National Library Board’s approach to creating an inclusive information future in Singapore was twofold – building an info-literate nation through providing facilities for IT Literacy training programs, and a nurturing environment in its libraries for further skills development (Chia, 2002).

Providing detailed information on Singapore libraries is not the intention of this paper. Details about the Library 2000 Report, NLB approach to libraries, and various services and sources available in Singapore libraries are available from different sources including the NLB web site (www.nlb.gov.sg). Discussion on various NLB initiatives on innovative services has been summarized in a number of conference papers and journal articles: Ramachandran (2001), Lee (2002), and Wong (2002).

Most notable among the NLB initiatives and strategies are the introduction of life style libraries; collaborative programs for mass information literacy; improvement in functional efficiency through business process reengineering; exploitation of digital technologies to support communities of users; initiatives for regional cooperative programs to pool resources for joint professional development activities; provision of information services to non-traditional markets through contracting; and partnerships with public and private sector institutions for delivery of services and management of operations. NLB has undertaken several projects in the areas of business process re-engineering, quality management, and operational efficiency aimed at gaining economies of scale and cost reduction for indirect financial help to public libraries.

The three initiatives we have selected to describe in this paper include One Learning Place (a collaborative program for mass information literacy launched with sponsorships from industry partners); RFID (application of radio frequency identification tagging for improvement in functional efficiency through business process reengineering); and Aspiration Pathfinder (a recently introduced prototype to seek funding from The Enterprise Challenge (TEC) making use of programming and information packaging elements of library services).
STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

One Learning Place

NLB took an initiative in 1999 to promote mass awareness and widespread adoption of network resources like Singapore One in collaboration with the National Computer Board (NCB) – now the Infocom Development Authority (IDA) of Singapore. One Learning Place is aimed at carrying out training programs catering to the needs of people with various levels of IT literacy, even those without IT experience. A mass training center devoted to Internet and information skills courses was jointly set-up at the Toa Payoh Community Library (a branch public library of NLB) by NLB and NCB. This center has some 120 multimedia personal computers that are connected to Singapore One using the ATM (Asynchronous Transfer Mode) broadband technology at 2 Mbps. Tools such as the pen input device, smart-card reader, and video-conferencing kit are also put in place on each of the training stations to allow trainees to experience the benefits of Singapore One.

Basic, intermediate, and advanced information literacy courses are conducted by the Center. Besides the generic information literacy courses, the Center also works with key user organizations and community groups to tailor the programs to fit the needs of the various sectors and communities. Participants also learn to access various information resources such online databases, Internet sites and printed quick reference materials. Apart from information literacy skills, participants also get a chance to explore information services and products offered by NLB. These include the InfoXpress database, which contains valuable information on Singapore, the library’s On-line Public Access Catalog (OPAC), the Student Virtual Community and many other multimedia services.

The strategic partnership of a variety of industry partners is an important feature of this project. The main sponsors are Siemens and SingTel Magix. The co-sponsors include 3M, ADC Technologies International, Cisco Systems, Creative Technologies Ltd, MG Logic, Microsoft Singapore, Star+Globe Technologies, and SUN Microsystems.

This project contributed towards financial support to NLB in two ways: it provided excellent infrastructure and equipment without requiring expenditure out of NLB’s regular library budget and it provided assistance in covering maintenance cost through nominal fees charged from participants. But more important was the visibility that was achieved by the library through collaborative work with a variety of companies and community groups. This visibility was helpful in gaining recognition for the contribution of libraries in training and information delivery by different sectors of the society. This opened up several new avenues of possible financial support from institutions earlier perceived irrelevant to libraries and library services.

Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) Tagging

In 1997, NLB developed a partnership with Singapore Technologies LogiTrack Pte Ltd (STLT) to prototype an innovative system to improve control over the movement of
library materials. NLB’s current policies allow libraries members to borrow information materials from any public library and return them to any branch once they are members. This requires a very fast movement of information materials from one branch to another to make it available to other users when needed. This was a challenging task and NLB has been looking for a solution. At about the same time, ST LogiTrack was developing and marketing innovative RFID-based solutions to enhance the productivity and efficiency of business processes. NLB’s partnership with this company allowed the revolutionary use of RFID in libraries for the first time to improve the loan and return of material. Using RFID technology, the Electronic Library Management System (ELiMS) was implemented in 1998 in a couple of libraries. Since then STLT has been working closely with NLB to implement the solution in the rest of its libraries. RFID technology was implemented system wide in 2001.

Under this system, smart labels, which emit 13.56 MHz radio waves, are used for a slew of applications – from tracking and monitoring items to shelving and stocktaking. It combines RF components with complete library management front-end software. It enables the various functions of a library such as self-borrowing, item return, sorting, stock control, administration, and customer service and theft detection, to be fully integrated and automated. Users can return books by simply dropping them down a chute, allowing them to be immediately borrowed again. It enables members to return their items and borrow new items immediately without having to wait (before the implementation of this system, users used to wait as long as 45 minutes to have their loans cancelled).

The partnership with Singapore Technologies LogiTrack Pte Ltd in implementing this innovative system benefited NLB in several ways. For the library user, RFID applications have eliminated precious time in queues. For libraries, it has helped in achieving better service levels, greater productivity and cost savings. NLB regards RFID as the key technology to free precious manpower for high quality services. Checkout is faster as alignment of books is not necessary. Shorter checkout time means less queuing time and fewer checkout machines required. Return of library materials is now a breeze. Transaction time is close to zero seconds. Also, stocktaking of whole collections of libraries, totaling from 150,000 to 400,000 items, can be done overnight.

The RFID innovation has enabled NLB to save larger sums of money in manpower cost. User time is also saved in a significant way. Many more staff would have been required to manage loans, returns, and shelving of materials at the service standards set by NLB. An estimated cost saving of Sing dollars 50 million a year was achieved through the implementation of RFID in NLB Libraries. The RFID project shows that strategic partnership can result in innovative processes that not only result in substantial savings but also in repositioning of libraries for future financial gains.

**Aspiration Pathfinder**

As part of its exploration strategy, NLB identified special grants at the Ministry of Finance that could be used to develop programs aimed at initiating activities to encourage
citizens to look into new occupations and possibilities. It solicited funding under The Enterprise Challenge (TEC) initiative in 2002 to prototype a service called Aspiration Pathfinder. This project aimed at carrying out a series of activities to allow people who were keen to explore new possibilities in careers or to explore new aspirations, such as becoming a dancer, a writer, a cook, etc, and to attend programs specially designed to discover what it is like to be a writer, a dancer or a cook. After the experience with the various resource people, the participants are given a navigation path via information resources made available to them to explore further on their own.

*The Aspiration Pathfinder* program makes use of two key elements in library service provisions: programming and information packaging. This is an interactive program, with participants taking part in activities, which could take place in the library or outside, such as a nature reserve park or a cooking school. The first series ran for a period of two months for about 30 persons. Feedback from participants was very positive. TEC has now given the team more money to extend the program to a larger group of participants in Phase 2 of the project. NLB is now looking at how to integrate this program into the mainstream of programs and services run by public libraries in Singapore.

The significance of this project is that it has helped participants experience new things, not generally done in libraries, and encourage them to step into new territories and explore new possibilities. At the same time, it has provided an opportunity to libraries to develop new products and offer innovative services. Though the grant obtained from the Ministry of Finance for the Aspiration Pathfinder was modest, the impact was great. It is expected to open up new avenues of programming and value-added information services opportunities in an exciting manner. NLB expects this program to open doors of possible partnerships with other Ministries and Statutory Boards, making it possible for public libraries to utilize funding from sources which are normally considered outside the jurisdiction of libraries.

**CONCLUSION**

A review of the above-mentioned three strategic partnership initiatives indicates that innovative strategies and collaboration can assist libraries in several ways. These three projects were chosen as examples to highlight such potential. There are numerous other strategies that have helped NLB to strengthen its ties with public and corporate sectors institutions. For example, collaboration with the Ministry of Education allowed NLB to contribute effectively toward the development of school libraries, and at the same time indirectly enhanced financial support for NLB’s core services. Collaboration with the Ministry of Community Development and Sports, hospitals, and private sector the NLB’s “Born to Read’ Read to Bond” program brought about a sponsorship of over 1.2 million Singapore dollars in 2001. Participation in the cooperative training program of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs helped take advantage of special grants for professional development activities. In addition to these projects, NLB also undertook projects of providing library services to other agencies through outsourcing. Two such examples are services to the Singapore Management University and the SAFTI Military Library.
No attempt was made to analyze how much in financial terms each partnership project contributed. Instead, we focused on the specific details and examined the overall impact and potential. While most of these strategies were not specifically deployed for improvement of budget, they did indirectly help in improving the level of financial support.

NLB’s partnership initiatives also helped expand the library markets, allowed access to non-traditional sources of funding, and reduced operational costs through economies of scale. Through innovative strategies and partnerships, NLB was able to maintain a balance in fulfilling its social responsibilities as a public library authority (where it is expected to develop and maintain free public library services for Singapore Citizenry) and to demonstrate to the Government that as an information agency, libraries are capable of making contribution towards effective information delivery and better learning lifestyles on a competitive basis by showing appropriate Returns on Investment and Net Economic Value of the seed money it received through grants from public funds. NLB’s initiatives provide good examples how libraries can leverage on their competencies in generating funds for their own services.

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