Title: Beach Book Buddies and the Process of Innovation

Before we start, I would like you all to list at least one expectation that you have for this session. If you are here with more than one expectation, please jot those down as well (give time to do this). A portion of this presentation will be interactive, so it might be a good idea to keep pens and paper out.

In the summer of 2015, Sylvan Lake Municipal Library devised an innovative means of reaching a previously untapped audience: we brought the Library to the beach. We'll talk about how we developed an idea that met a need and worked as a service and as an advocacy/marketing strategy. This session will explore how to brainstorm for new ideas and the steps required to bring those ideas to fruition, using our example of Beach Book Buddies.

Tammy will begin our presentation by talking about the Beach Book Buddy project itself.

- Learn about the program developed by Sylvan Lake Municipal Library - Tammy
- Gain ideas on brainstorming new library projects
- Follow the process of coming up with ideas to seeing them to fruition

Me:

Last year's Alberta Library conference **inspired** me. I went back to Sylvan Lake wanting very much to create something new, something that we hadn't tried before. Our building renovations of the previous year were complete, so that challenge was now missing from my daily work life. The renovations had given the library a facelift, opening and brightening the space. Things had been completely moved around and reorganized, sometimes more than once, much to my staff's frustration. Now I wanted something new for us. Something to raise our profile in the community. I thought and thought And I came up with….nothing. I thought some more, and during one of my 3 o'clock in the morning epiphanies I came up with something absolutely brilliant - I'd make my staff come up with the idea.

But what if I **had** come up with an idea on my own? Imagine that you are a staff member and I told you about a new idea that we were going to incorporate into our daily workflow. Say, clowns. I told you what you had to do and how. It would mean changing how you were currently doing things. What would your reaction be?

I wanted to have staff buy in. The best way to do this is to have the ideas come from them. If they could create their own projects, they be more inclined to slip moments of work on the project into their regular shifts, without resentment.

We have staff meetings on the third Monday of the month from 5-8. We get a substitute employee to work the desk and we all gather together to discuss set topics, review process and procedure, or do staff development of some kind or another. For that May staff meeting, I set aside a block of time to focus on brainstorming new projects.

I gave my staff time, which is essential for creativity.   Why didn't that work for me? I gave myself time? I came up with nothing. My most creative moments are waking up in the middle of a deep sleep, or in the shower - neither practice should be encouraged in the workplace. The problem with me trying to come up with

something with no time frame - defined end point - made me a little lazy. Finding the balance between allowing time for innovation while enforcing deadlines is a fine line. Harvard Business Review has several articles online about why forced creativity is NOT a good thing, which kind of blew my hypothesis, but the fine print was that forced creativity was not a good thing sustained over a long period of time, with the added pressure of constantly creating. While necessity may be the mother of invention, time to focus on creating something new, rather than on current work patterns set the stage for creativity. The period allotted was brief and the process broken down into stages. This is the "Brainstorming" that Tammy referred to.

That staff meeting was a set time for creativity with mini-goals throughout. However it was not a free-for-all. I structured the session very carefully to try to make the most of the time and the brains that were assembled there. We started small, with no restrictions, and then began to expand.

Let's try a bit of brainstorming here and now. I want you all to come up with something that you would like to try in your own libraries, without concern about budget and it doesn't have to be original. I'll give you a few minutes, but I'm hoping that your subconscious will yell out to you that one project you heard about and would like to try for yourself. Or maybe something in a previous line of work. Or a tv show you watched. Just the idea - not the detail, not how you will implement it, market it or finance it. (Give about 3-5 min.) Raise your hand if you've written down and idea. If we continue the brainstorming process here, I'd tell you to get into groups of 4 and share these ideas with each other. Now, as a group, how many ideas are you working with? (4) Suppose I started by assigning you into groups of 4, how many ideas might you have? Why? What has happened? (Brief discussion on group dynamics)

Another element of the creativity process is removing barriers. Which barrier did I remove to help ideas flow? Budget. We could get creative about funding the project later, but at the outset I did not want money to be a factor.

As a group, I would now task you with fleshing out the ideas, perhaps focusing on only two of them. Budget is still not to be a concern at this point. I would give the groups between 10 and 15 minutes. Why might I limit time this way? (Brings focus, things take as little or as much time as you give them).

After this group work, you would then be asked to exchange ideas with another group. Read through the ideas that the other group has given you. Focus on just one or two if they give you more than that. Now this group further fleshes out the idea for about 10 to 15 minutes. What does this add to the process?

Then the ideas are shared with the entire group. We narrowed the possible project to 3, and each staff member chose which project to work on 1) mobile library to the beach, 2) improved signage for the outside of the library and 3) partnering with the fairly new teen centre to draw more youth into the library.

By choosing the projects they wanted to work on, there was a lot more enthusiasm and drive to get things going. Our #3 is ongoing. Our programmer has developed a relationship with the staff of the youth centre and a few joint projects have occurred. Our #2 project kept hitting snags, such as permission from the town, placement, criteria for the sign, getting responses to our RFPs, astronomical costs, and reworking ideas when things fell through. I consider this an on-going project.

The mobile library project took off running. Quite often we'd hear that town residents had no idea where the library is. We get over ¾ of a million tourists every year. That's a lot of people that we needed to reach out to, because they weren't coming to us. And we'd be offering a service: how often do you get to the beach and discover you forgot to pack something to read. Or you didn't pack something for fear of getting sand on it? Marketing the library, filling a need, and providing service.

Budget

We wanted to get the mobile library going by the time tourists started arriving for the season. Remember that I had told staff not to worry about cost. They were to come up with the ideas, and I, as the administrator, was to come up with the funds. My possible sources were to be local banks, many of which have community funds to give away. We also have some generous retailers and tradesmen in our area. We could offer some publicity for them in exchange for a monetary donation. Another go-to is the online database: Grant connect. I dislike writing grant proposals, but quite often that's how we can afford added extras. Being registered as a charitable organization helps. That application was a little time-consuming, but not as difficult as I had been led to believe it was going to be. People are more willing to give if you can offer a tax receipt in return.

Getting the funding for our project was so much easier than I thought it was going to be. My staff surprised me with how motivated they were to make this project work. I came to the Library on a Saturday, shortly after opening and was told how they had been on the phone with local businesses and had already raised $250. I was floored. Not that I didn't think my staff capable of fund raising, but that they took the initiative.

What exactly did we need a budget for? It's best to outline this at the outset, so as not to have any ugly surprises pop up later on. Here's what we needed: **1)** The wagon. I envisioned a child's wagon, but my staff had set their sights on something bigger. They chose the Garden Cart from Canadian Tire and it worked beautifully. **2)** Books. The books we stocked the wagon with were donations, and therefore didn't cost us a thing**. 3)** T-shirts. Tammy came up with the idea for T-shirts. Great idea, but this pushed us well past what was left of the $250 after buying the cart. This is where the power of the administrator comes into play: Creative budgeting? Clever spending reporting? Call it what you want, but I was able to justify using my marketing budget on this, as well as some funds from staff appreciation.

Naming the project

When we were preparing the signs for the cart we had a minor hiccough: what were we going to call it? Up until that point we had been calling it the Beach Book Wagon. Straight forward, if unimaginative, it identified the cart. I pushed for something alliterative. We mulled over it for a bit until someone came up with Beach Book Buddies. Where, what, who. I was not totally sold on it as the word Buddies seemed vague, not really letting people know what the service was. But it was alliterative, and buddies is such a friendly word that I agreed to it.

I hold a lot of importance to the naming of things. It's like that first impression that people base their initial interactions on. I pushed for alliteration because I thought it would make people remember it better – we were trying to raise our profile in the community, after all. A name needs to be something you can trust. Throw Away Car Repair wouldn't bring me to their doors with my car. Naming needs careful consideration.

Staffing

The next major consideration was scheduling staff. If your project will require extra staff, this will affect your budget. This is a make or break consideration for getting a project off the ground. If you don't have a person or volunteers to run the project, you really can't commit to it. We get fairly busy in the summer and have a 2 in the building policy. This meant that we had to schedule around staffing overlaps, van run, and programming. It was tricky. I filled in a couple of times and found that I really enjoyed it. We started getting volunteers who also enjoyed the experience. Some days we couldn't make it work at all – but we did manage to get out quite a bit! If you can't afford to staff the project, look into having volunteers do it. It doesn't have to be a Friends group volunteer. High school student might enjoy your project, or active seniors.

Safety/SWOT

Who here does a SWOT analysis for every program or project? I don't. I like it when my staff come to me with ideas and I can simply say, "Make it so." But impulse decisions can be costly and/or dangerous. If you're a lazy thinker, like me, SWOT can be reduced to positives and negatives. Our project had a lot of positives going for it: staff enthusiasm, funding, ease of implementation, etc. The negatives were mostly possible dangers to staff.

Staff safety was my biggest concern. I can dream up all sorts of nasty scenarios. Sunstroke actually became a huge worry. While staff were told to dress appropriately and bring water, but heat affects individuals differently. While 30 degrees (our cut-off temperature) is feeling pleasantly warm for me, others over-heated fairly quickly. Hats were part of the recommended wear for a shift with the wagon. If staff didn't have water bottles, we provided them with water. Personal safety was not an issue as the area where we took the cart was well-populated, along main streets and crossing at traffic light, but I insisted that everyone take her cell phone along. While the intent behind that requirement was so that they could call for help, or a pick-up if something went wrong, it never occurred to me that we would need to call the wagon puller. Until one day we did. A volunteer had gone out with the wagon on a bright sunny day. After two hours she hadn't returned. When, after three hours she still wasn't back and we had no number to reach her at, we sent a staff member out to find her. The volunteer was found at the ice cream shop, holding an impromptu book club. She hadn't even made it a quarter of the way through the route!

Another safety concern is the physical ability. Are the people you are asking to perform the job physically able to do so? Loaded full of books, even if they were all paperbacks, our wagon could be a chore to pull. In going for a larger cart to fit more books in, we also then had to deal with its weight. The cart has a capacity of 800 pounds. For me, the wagon handle was not long enough, so that when I had finished the loop, my back was aching. We found out quickly that the person on wagon duty needed to be relatively fit, able to handle the heat, and not have any previous back or knee injuries.

Air quality became an issue towards the end of summer. There were several days when smoke from BC forest fires made any exertion outside difficult.

It has been suggested that the best time to take the wagon out would be on weekends, when the beach was packed with people. This could raise problems of maneuverability for the person handling the wagon. We wanted attention, but not negative attention of getting in people's way.

Recording and tracking for future considerations. Make notes. My mind is a sieve; I get up to do something and by the time I'm at my office door I've already forgotten what I got up for. Make notes of what went wrong, suggestions for how to improve. What works for timing and/or scheduling? Do you continue to go back to your original funders, or do you look for additional sources?

We definitely intend to continue with the project next summer, but with some changes based on experience. We will start earlier in the summer, as the beach begins to get busy in June already. We will recruit more volunteers in order to solve staff shortage issues. We have already started storing donated children's books as those were our hottest commodity. We will keep back more book donations from our annual book sale, in order to stock the wagon with more diversity. Next year we will probably have a kick-off event, and appear in the local parade in June, so as to increase visibility even more.

So that was our process: Brainstorm time, naming the project, staffing, SWOT (or positives and negatives) which also includes safety considerations, and recording future considerations. Any questions?