

Bright Spots Study:

in Manitoba's Public Library Sector

Introduction3

Overview4

 1. Building & Space 5

 2. Community Buy in..... 5

 3. Welcoming & Barrier Free 6

 4. Responsive Collection 6

Notes.....7

 Future Studies 7

 Population statistics..... 7

 Multiple branch systems..... 8

 Retiring Librarians 8

 Reliability of Statistics 8

 Multiple factors..... 8

 Revised Formula..... 9

Bibliography10

Introduction

This study began after reading the excellent book *Switch* by Dan and Chip Heath. In the book, the author suggests an alternative method for improving or solving problems. The method looks at finding successful examples of practice, known as 'Bright Spots'. Looking at the landscape of libraries in Manitoba, it is easy to focus on the 'squeaky' wheels. I wanted to avoid this same tendency when looking at library performance in the province. I wanted to find the Bright Spot libraries, the top performing libraries in the province. From there, I could then determine what makes them unique. Was there a correlation between what they were doing and their results? Would it be possible to distil best practices and then share it with the other libraries?

There are almost 60 library systems in Manitoba, with over 120 service locations. It would not be realistic to visit each library. I also wanted to avoid the bias that may occur by only visiting the libraries we thought were working. By studying the statistics, I was able to determine which libraries had high activity compared to their population. The process was not perfect, but it gave a starting point and means for comparison. I was able to create tailored statistical reports to determine the:

- **Number of items circulated by capita**
- **Number of visits (Gate count) by capita**
- **Turnover (circulation divided by the collection size)**

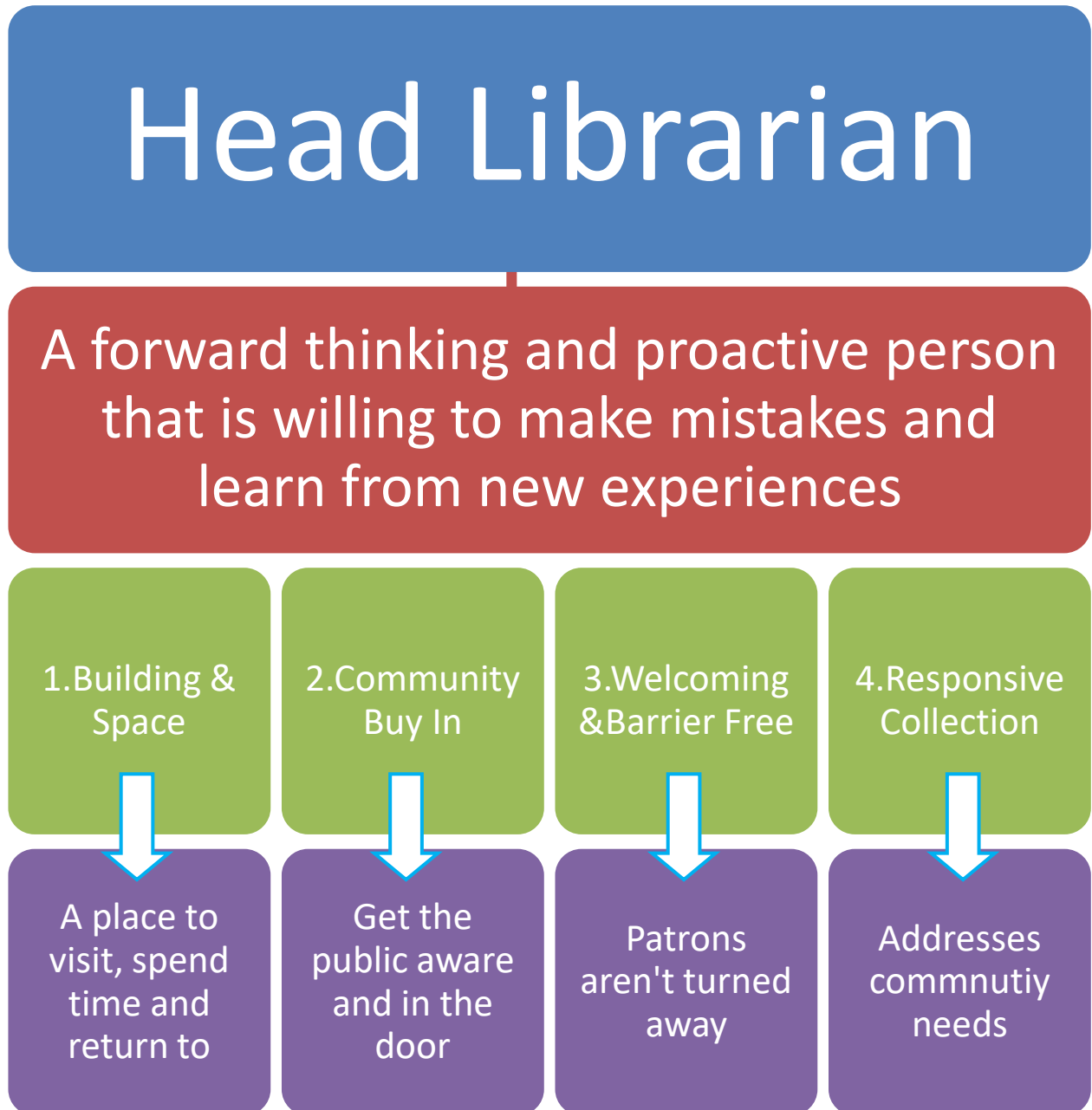
Each library was then ranked in relation to these metrics. The ranking in each of the three categories was totaled to gain an overall ranking. By looking at these numbers using the 2015 statistical data, I was able to identify approximately 10 libraries in Manitoba and then visit them to determine if they were doing anything differently.

The study is not aiming to categorise libraries into good and bad, but rather try to identify libraries that have exceedingly high statistics and determine if there is a cause. If a cause or many contributing factors can be identified, it may be possible to apply some of the factors either immediately or in the future planning of the library. The findings contained in this report do not indicate the ultimate definition of what makes library service great, but rather common factors that were observed and appear to contribute to the libraries success.

To see the distilled version of my findings see '**Overview**'. To read further into what exactly I encountered at specific locations see, '**Detailed Aspects**'.

Overview

From the site visits and interviews, I have compiled a list of the common features I encountered. The most important factor being, the head librarian has a 'growth mindset' (Dweck, 2006). A librarian with a growth mindset is willing to experiment and try new things. They look for ways to improve and grow the service of the library. They are not afraid to make mistakes, learn, and move on.



Detailed Aspects

1. Building & Space

A library building needs to be highly recognisable and easy to access by all members of the community. It must be both relaxing and exciting.

- Purpose built; preferably relatively new or new looking
- Ample parking specifically for the library directly outside the building
- Next to a green space and or recreation space
- Clear signage outside indicating it's a library
- Ample natural light inside
- Space to spend time and relax
- Tidy and well organised
- Extensive and consistent opening hours (+45 per week on average)

2. Community Buy in

Get people aware and in the door! Library has close and ongoing ties with local community groups and business

- Requests specific sponsorship or donations from public, community groups, or business
- Community displays within library (Cross promotion)
 - Art displays
 - Local museum
 - Local business
- Regular ongoing visits
 - Child care and preschool groups
 - Literacy groups
 - Book clubs
 - School groups
 - Large annual events
- A good and ongoing relationship with local newspaper, radio station, or relevant local media for promotion
 - Regular contact, articles, weekly reviews, highlighting

3. Welcoming & Barrier Free

- Customer service is paramount
- Easy to sign up and renew card, e.g, no formal ID required
- Flexible and community tailored fine policies, e.g, small fines do not prevent borrowing, fines can be waived or ignored if for small amounts (3 libraries had no fines at all)
- Minimal and friendly signage (helpful not intimidating)
- Helpful staff who never turn people away

4. Responsive Collection

- Frequent and extensive weeding; sometimes helped in part by large annual book sales
- Extremely Responsive to patron requests
 - New purchases
 - fILL & eLM
- Smart and quick purchasing/acquisitions
 - Variety of sources
 - Public feedback
 - Purchasing committees
 - New donations
- Accessible and relevant collection
 - Not crowded
 - Visibly current
 - Face out displays throughout
 - Meets communities needs

“Bad libraries build collections. Good libraries build services (of which a collection is only one). Great libraries build communities.”(Lanke, 2012)

Without the hard-working staff and the proactive head librarian, best practices would not be possible. If there is any one secret that can be distilled it is the care and effort the staff put into making the library great.

The four sub categories are listed in order of importance. In this way, I see each factor is a potential barrier to the next.

If the '**Building & Space**' is not a desirable place to visit, then it is difficult to get '**Community buy in**'. Without '**Community buy in**', people are not aware of the library or reminded of its importance on a regular basis. If patrons are aware and enjoy using libraries, they will soon be discouraged from the lack of '**Welcoming and Barrier free**' policies. For a patron to enjoy a '**Responsive Collection**', they must pass through the previous three barriers. Although, a large part of a library's business is still the prompt and focused supply of relevant items. The collection appears to be the least important of the 4 factors in a library's success.

Notes

Future Studies

After completing this study we have a much better picture of the libraries in the province by simply by having seen more locations first hand and speaking with staff about the services they offer. By undertaking this study, I saw how PLSB could work with libraries to improve statistical collection and ways to understand the local community better. PLS could be using the statistics more to further direct PLS activities.

Areas to improve in statistics

- Investigate what further statistical input may be needed and what cleanup of the counting opinions database is needed
- Encourage more library to use electronic counters for accuracy
- Investigate practices around the inclusion of Interlibrary loans (ILL) in circulation stats, to confirm ILL are not being counted as more than one circulation
- Further encourage the timely and accurate reporting of library statistics as early in the year as possible

Areas for future study

- Study the range of fine policies across the province and how it affects circulation, late items, lost items etc
- Examine the location and influence of Hutterite, Mennonite and other similar immigrant/religious populations across the province; As libraries have pointed to these groups as high users of their specific libraries
- Look at libraries who meet some of the above criteria but still have low statistics as potential red flags or further study
- Further statistical comparisons to look for differences between high and lower performing libraries to determine true causation
- Devise more ways for all libraries to share best practices

Population statistics

It is important to acknowledge there are possible flaws in the way the per capita figures get calculated. Comparing statistics to a per capita figure helps even the field. Yet, this does not always factor in the economies of scale large library systems have. That being said, some larger systems do not automatically show high activity per population.

We are also working with census data is a few years old and may not represent what the 2015 population.

Multiple branch systems

I spoke with the head librarian/director at the main branch and did not visit the other locations in the system; if there were any. This could be problematic, relative to the number of branches a system manages. For example, the main library could be undertaking best practices and the other branches may not be and visa versa.

It could also be interesting to note the total amount of branches per system. This could illustrate if larger population areas need more than one location.

Retiring Librarians

A high percentage of the head librarians I spoke with were new to the position. Although capable and progressive, their appointment was so recent it would have little effect on the 2015 statistics. This would suggest that other factors were at play. The previous librarian, support staff, community or the building itself must have played a larger role.

Reliability of Statistics

In relation to my research, I based a library's activity on circulation and gate counts. It is hard to say how accurate they are. Circulation should be accurate as the numbers are from the library's ILS. There may be a difference in how different libraries count ILL. There is a possibility that some systems could be counting an ILL loan as both a local statistic and an ILL. Therefore a single item loan could generate 2 circulations; in addition the borrowing library also counts the loan as a statistic.

Gate counts for the most part were counted with a variety of technologies. One location counted manually, another believed it was counted electronically, but was unsure how. Manual counting of the door/gate count has the potential to be less accurate in either direction. During my research, I discovered some libraries did not have electronic door counters. Potentially making the tally of statistics unreliable in some respects.

Multiple factors

For the study, I was looking at three separate factors and combining them to achieve a single ranking. It may have been better to separate each factor and undertake two reports based on each factor. I could have tallied up the top performing libraries in gate count and the top performing libraries in circulation. Then undertake two separate studies, each looking at the contributing factors and best practices.

Another difficulty is each library and service community are different. What makes one library have higher than average results, might be completely different from another. I have tried to compile the best practices, even though they are not 100% representative for each library.

Unusual Results

As mentioned in the introduction, the study was not meant to determine winners and losers. Many libraries may be implementing all the correct practices but are operating under reduced budgets, located in an inappropriate space or location, or have shrinking or disinterested communities. The list that that statistics determined included libraries that may not have incorporated all the best practices and did not include other libraries that appeared to be implementing the observed best practices. Further study into the accuracy of the underlying statistics and testing of the best practices will need to be undertaken.

Need for focus

After completing this report, I came to realise that the scope of the study was perhaps too broad and unfocused. As demonstrated in this report there is no one single attribute that creates a great library service. In a future study, it may be more helpful to pick one target area and focus on libraries that display high statistics or positive feedback in that area. For example, what are the libraries with the best turnover; turnover often being a good indication of collection relevancy and use. Further refinement could be achieved by only focusing on the true outliers, and ask specific and consistent questions targeted on turnover.

Revised Formula

See here for a live report that includes these metrics for 2015:

<http://www.countingopinions.com/pireports/report.php?199d2b82ad4182089fbc00913396276d&live>

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