Creating the B-Zone – the new Teen experience at Bellville Public Library

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ABSTRACT

One of the projects that Bellville Public library undertook during 2012 was to redevelop our Teenage Section. What started out as a supporting tool for our young people developed into a large-scale project that eventually involved the entire staff. The librarians approached the development by conducting online research into the science of creating a specific space to meet the reading habits of teenagers and young adults. A few teenagers were asked for their ideas. Inspiration was drawn from the most unlikely places, such as an active beehive outside one of the windows. All the parties agreed that the area must be environmentally friendly to enhance the theme of our community. They also agreed on a spectacular launch for the teenagers of the community. The sustainability of the service was thoroughly investigated before the project began.

The project action plan included the design of the space, the budget, sponsorship, upgrading of services, programming and allocating a dedicated staff member to this service. The new space included a combination of different and updated library material in one space together with colourful posters, display areas and “green” seating. The launch took the form of an Air Guitar Contest which was a huge success.

Valuable lessons learned during the planning of the event included how to approach sponsors, how to network on a teenager’s level and how to make a library “cool to hang out”.

Since completing this redevelopment we have noticed a clear pattern in the behaviour and reading habits of our “new” patrons. Our challenge is to maintain the momentum through continuous programming, vigorous collection development and new communication methods.

One of the projects that Bellville Public Library undertook during 2012 was to redevelop the teenage section to encourage teenagers to use their library more often. As with most libraries, the Bellville Library’s teenage section’s biggest threat was that it was often misused by non-teens. Teenagers have to compete with other reading groups for space in a library and because they are usually in the minority,
smaller spaces are usually allocated to them, if at all. The more adults that are gathered in the allocated space, the fewer teenagers will be found there.

Teenagers are social creatures who need a special space where they can be themselves without experiencing judgment and expectations from adults and where they are not treated like children. They like to “hang out” and will gladly stay and read or socialise in the library if they feel welcome and at home.

Initial thoughts were that it would be a quick change, after all, how difficult could it be? A few trendy posters, new books and a reading competition… and the teenagers would be back. A mini survey was conducted by asking our regular teenager users what they felt was wrong with the section. Most of them could barely restrain themselves from rolling their eyeballs, the rest just shrugged – a shrug from a teenager should never be underestimated. An initial meeting was conducted among the staff to plan the project. During this planning exercise, it was clear that librarians should literally think like teenagers in the planning of this section and not like librarians where everything fits into a box. The question was also asked “why there are only books found in this corner when teenagers so clearly prefer other technology as well?” Even the system used to file the books was reconsidered in the planning session. What started out as a supporting tool for our young people developed into a large-scale project that eventually involved the entire staff component.

Over a period of 8 weeks different teenager groups visiting the library were asked for their ideas on what a teenage section should look like. Ideas were stimulated by issuing them with pens, paper and a MacDonald’s meal while they were left to “find inspiration”. The teenagers saw this opportunity as a home improvement project and a chance to create a place to socialise. By involving different teenager groups in the planning session, we tried to encourage a sense of their ownership of the section itself. Regular brainstorming session among the library staff were also encouraged by issued pens and paper (minus the MacDonald’s) with the added benefit to scientifically assess and translate the results into a practical, functional but teen-desirable teenage section.
Sources for the background research included browsing different online library\textsuperscript{(1,2,3,4)} sites with the American Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA)\textsuperscript{(5)} and Screencast\textsuperscript{(6)} proving to be particularly helpful with designing and planning of a teenage section by using existing library space, programming and support for teenagers.

One of our first practical challenges experienced was where to place the teen-corner. It was found that most librarians would try to blend all the sections into the basic colours of the library and use trendy posters to highlight the teenage section. According to the American national teen space guidelines (YALSA)\textsuperscript{(5)}, “The teen space is intended for use by customers aged 12-18 years old, and its purpose is to centralize the information and recreation resources of this age group while offering teens a safe, supportive, and positive space that is uniquely their own”. Questions asked when options to where to place the teenager-corner were explored included: Is it supposed to be an extension of the children’s section that illustrates a natural progression from childhood to adulthood, or should it be in the adult section where teenagers can have their own unique identity and privacy? If the adult section is chosen, which corner will be most suited? Should it be squeezed in between the magazine and romance section in the adult section, or placed totally out of sight in the furthest corner? Bellville Library’s teenage-corner was born in the most secluded corner in the adult section, with the most light and a view.

All the parties agreed that the area must be environmentally friendly to enhance the theme of our community. Elements that were focused on included introducing brighter colours and new lighting. Inspiration was drawn from the most unlikely places, such as a busy, beehive outside one of the windows of the newly established teenage section. The “\textbf{B-Zone}” was born. The brainstorming session included the reason for the unique naming of the B-zone which included terms such as, “\textbf{Be} yourself”, “\textbf{Be} informed”, “\textbf{Be} alive”, “\textbf{Believe} in yourself”, “\textbf{Books}” and “\textbf{Bellville}”. The “clothes line” with T-shirts and denims hanging on it created a natural barrier between the adult and teen sections and the soft furniture and car-tyre pouffes made it more teenager-friendly. This resulted in adults users vacating the area, and returning to the spaces set apart specifically for their use. The colour scheme and furniture were chosen to be contemporary and interchangeable, to be revisited in future revamps of the area.
The space was just step one in creating a new teenager experience. The book collection development plan also had to be updated to include new books, audiovisual material and magazines specifically for teenagers. The shelving method was also changed with the books being rearranged alphabetically with unique colour-coding for different genres of teen literature. Our programming had to be revisited to ensure that the teenager’s programming is distinctly different from the adult and children’s services. To ensure the sustainability of the B-Zone, a dedicated staff member has been allocated to the section.

The budget available for the actual renovation as well as the “bang” that was needed to market the new space had to be carefully considered. The creative process is often blind to reality and the enthusiastic planners frequently had to be curbed. To ensure adherence to the plan, a storyboard was created to inspire the team as well as the “Friends of the Library”, who became a major sponsor in this endeavour. We found our inspiration from Bolan(7), who emphasized, “a truly teen-friendly space is comfortable, colorful, interactive, flexible in design, and filled with technology. It is important to keep in mind that “teen-friendly” is not synonymous with unruly, unreasonable, impractical, and tacky.”

The librarians and teenagers worked together on ways to launch the B-zone in a spectacular fashion. The first reactions when the idea of an Air Guitar Competition was pitched were “it won’t work” and “not in a library!” but once we were persuaded that it was, in reality, exactly what teenagers needed (neither a children’s nor adult event) librarians began to warm up to the idea.

The most difficult part was to launch a sponsorship drive to ensure that we had the three things that make for a great function: food, drinks and prizes. (A live band and loud music also helped). Hard work and dedication from the team secured great sponsors, building partnerships that continue to be beneficial for the teenagers of the community. In exchange for pizzas, cool drinks and a “Fender Squire” electric guitar we committed to continued advertising in the library, media coverage and more teenage programming.

Planning of the launch event was managed by breaking the project down into smaller manageable tasks and having regular meetings to measure progress. Each person knew exactly what his role was in the launch and recognition was given after the event to the whole team. Communication was crucial to reach
teenagers and the focus was on bright posters in surrounding schools, and use of the social media platform such as Facebook, Twitter, bbm and Whatsapp. The event was planned for a Friday night after the library closed for the day. It was decided to use the library itself and not one of the halls to enhance the “libraries are cool”–effect, therefore the stage was set up in the middle of the library. A live band and good sound equipment was a crucial necessity (very important when working with teens). Judging was the responsibility of two very proficient, independant judges. One off the judges competed in the world’s air guitar contest in Finland in 2011 and was clearly the person to impress for the night.

Thirty contestants registered and each received a FREE air guitar at registration. Music for each performance was decided by the contestants and they could provide their choice of music in MP3 format or from their cellphones. Although the teenagers took the competition seriously the audience thoroughly enjoyed themselves, evident in their loud response to each contestant. The winner’s noticeable delight and awe when he took hold of his guitar will be long remembered.

The sponsors were clearly represented during the show with banners all through the library, mentions on the stage and products clearly displayed. Advertising of the sponsors, the event and networking long after the event was continued and still reap the benefits of one night of chaos.

The Air Guitar Contest was a huge success. Some of the valuable lessons we learnt during the “opening” night include the following:

- Plan thoroughly but be flexible at the event. (Planning for 50 teenagers and having more than a 100 attend is a good thing….)
- Keep the buzz alive (even when the music stops)
- Make connections (and make a good impression)
- Don’t panic (and if you do, nobody else should know)
- Social media is important (before, during and after the event)
- Make the library “a cool place to hang out”.

The highlight was the commitment of the staff to work after hours and the pleasure the obviously received working with excited teenagers, parents and friends.
Since creating the B-zone, we have noticed a change in our teenager readership patterns, 620 more books was circulated the last six months, compared to the same period last year. The challenge faced now, is to maintain the momentum through continuous programming, vigorous collection development and maintaining new communication methods. Initiatives so far include: a teenage Drama Club that recites poetry, undertakes performance art and holds book discussions. Bellville Library was invaded by a “flash mob” in September and plans for a mini golf event to be held in the library in 2014 are underway. It has been suggested that the library is an ideal place for LAN games - this prospect will be pursued as soon as we find out what it is!

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REFERENCES