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Green to Green: How a Sustainable Model for Library Sales Generates more than Cash

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Librarianship is my second career. After two decades in the corporate world, I decided to go to library school and “Get paid to read!” I quickly learned the myth of that notion. Librarians are so busy with day to day operations that there is scant time for reading. Technology in libraries was still in its infancy in the 1990s, or so it seemed to someone who had just exited the high-tech community; innovation was a relatively new concept. As Austin Public Library continued to find ways to be relevant to the community, the more traditional librarians scoffed at the trend of referring to our users as “customers” instead of “patrons.”ⁱⁱⁱ They were appalled by the notion of the library initiating marketing campaigns or branding programs and services.

What I observed is that librarians and paraprofessionals see themselves as service providers in an environment more akin to nonprofit organizations (rather than public servants in a government department), and as such, are skeptical of corporate practices driven by the bottom line. The irony is that those same corporate deriders see no conflict when it comes to accepting funds raised by Friends’ Organizations from those same business scalawags or applying for grants from major corporate funders.

I am not an apologist for Corporate America. I understand that libraries have always had conflicted relationships with robber barons—most famously Andrew Carnegie—and in the age of the Citizens United ruling, it is understandable as a profession that supports social activism, librarians need to be cautious about funding sources and be aware of public perceptions of those sources.

After almost two decades in both corporate and library professional worlds, I see a synergy, especially when it comes to customer service and best practices. Maybe that is why the latest trend in library user identification is “member,”ⁱⁱⁱ a term American Express has used for decades. My other observation is that what makes most library staff uncomfortable is not the actual practice of entrepreneurship, but the associated terminology. It is difficult to think of ourselves as entrepreneurs when we self-identify as public servants. But as the recent American Library Association Annual Conference in Las Vegas demonstrated, from maker spaces to seed libraries, local author digital publishing to community collaboration, librarians are in fact adept entrepreneurs with an understanding of how to create/develop their product (programming) and engage their audience (marketing).

In FY2014, the Austin Public Library was awarded an IMLS Sparks! Ignition Grant for Libraries based on our innovative (entrepreneurial) retail and recycling program: Recycled Reads. The final product of



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the grant is a web-based training, a series of videosⁱⁱⁱ with accompanying documents developed to inspire libraries to make innovative choices (R&D) in the handling of library discards.

The Austin Public Library, for years, like many public library systems, made weeded material available to the Friends of the Austin Public Library. They were responsible for the Annual Monster Book Sale. This effort of sorting and storing materials for almost a year; renting a large location, tables and fixtures; putting tens of thousands of books out for a weekend sale; and then gathering up all of the unsold books to dispose of then; then starting the process over for the next year. It seemed like a lot of effort compared to the gain. The bold, new and risky idea born from the effort of the Annual Monster Book Sale: Why not open a year round retail bookstore? The first hurdle was overcoming the implied barrier of existing as a non-enterprise, governmental department. Library administration had heard a lot of “no” over the years, which made them timid about “fighting” City Hall.

As a former Director of Purchasing for a major Austin corporation I had learned the golden rule of negotiation: Get to Yes! I knew this operation could be a win/win/win for Austin Public Library, the City of Austin, and the Austin community (library users and non-library users alike). I just needed to speak with the decision makers in the various City departments. Austin Public Library’s director and assistant directors were willing to deputize me to reach out to those above my pay grade. It took time, but my communications with City of Austin offices such as Materials Management and Purchasing and Solid Waste Services bore fruit. We had a shared vision in ensuring that City-owned, taxpayer-funded salvage property be decommissioned or sold according to City policies and ordinances. Once I knew the rules, I was able to draw up process—a business plan. The other departments also had to learn the important lesson that books have a shelf life and that the City could not maximize demand on investment by keeping them sequestered for a year. When they finally understood this they shifted in full support of our initiative.

On February 28, 2009, the Austin Public Library opened Recycled Reads. Having a storefront with ever-changing inventory was automatically viewed as a benefit by Austin and surrounding communities. However, it became apparent to us in a matter of months that if Austin Public Library did not have a way of handling the material that did not sell, Recycled Reads would grind to a halt.

Austin is a community of an estimated 843,000 people and the surrounding county metropolitan area is 1.9 million people,^{iv} utilizing the Faulk Central Library, the Austin History Center and twenty branches across the city. Tens of thousands of books are weeded from APL’s collection every month. Recycled Reads handles sixty- to seventy-five thousand weeded items every month in addition to donations from the public. Less than 20% of that material is deemed sellable, even at our prices: two dollars for hardcovers; one dollar for paperbacks; fifty cents for all children’s books and clearance carts with even deeper discounts. We needed a way to handle the salvage part of our operation as successfully as we were handling the retail aspect. The City of Austin has aggressive Zero Landfill goals^v, because Austin Public Library shares those goals, we needed to find partners as committed to the environment and sustainability as the Austin Public Library in particular, and the City of Austin at large.

Austin Public Library faced a steep learning curve in this endeavor. We first reached out to Ecology Action of Texas, a local pioneer in Austin recycling and reuse. Within three months of operation, our volume of material overwhelmed them. We then partnered with Books Beyond Borders, a local nonprofit that sold and sent books to South America to help build schools. They had the equipment and processes in place to handle our ever-increasing volume, but in the end did not have the financial stability to endure and they had to close their doors.

We did not relish the idea of loading books onto trucks to be shipped half way across the country, as that felt contrary to our sustainability mission, but we needed a stable and committed partner. Because

we had the support of the City of Austin's Materials Management Department and our solid waste services department (Austin Resource Recovery), we were provided support in identifying a local partner. For the past three years, Goodwill Central Texas has been providing that service (and at no cost to the Library or City). Goodwill brings the collection containers (gaylords) and pallets to the bookstore, which we use in our operation to collect books that cannot be sold or repurposed. Twice a week Goodwill picks up the full gaylords and sets up empty ones so our volunteers can continue to sort without interruption.

Goodwill Central Texas can, if they choose, sell any of the books retrieved from Recycled Reads online or to their third-party vendor, Thrift Books. We have recently been in conversation with Thrift Books to ensure our zero waste goals are being fulfilled. We work with Goodwill Central Texas because they are local and share our commitment to the community, to the environment and to sustainability. The services they provide: from education, to job training, to serving disenfranchised communities throughout Central Texas, best illustrates the three tenants of *sustainability*:

- Community health, equity and cultural vitality
- Conservation and the environment
- Prosperity and jobs^{vi}

The collaboration means that Austin Public Library, through meaningful acquisition and weeding processes, can take proactive steps to promote quality of life through information accessibility, for the community now and in the future.

Our retail operation is now seen as a hub not only for book sales, but as Phil Doty, Associate Dean of the iSchool at the University of Texas at Austin noted as we prepared the grant application for IMLS: "Recycled Reads is a hybrid library." As well as sales, our retail store offers regular programming from puppet shows to certified therapy training dog reading time, films, live music, origami meet ups and book discussion groups. We are now in the process of trade marking our name and branding our logo within the state of Texas. Earlier this year, Recycled Reads passed that crucial small business milestone of five years of operation with loyal repeat customers.^{vii}

Recycled Reads is expanding. We now have an online bookstore through Alibris as an outlet to sell collectible books to a wider audience and we are planning a boutique in our new Central Library scheduled to open in Fall 2016, featuring not only our own upcycled items that we make from books, but merchandise from local artisans that are using recycled materials and philosophies.

By applying business practices, branding strategy, risk taking and entrepreneurial verve, Recycled Reads has been able to establish an ongoing operation that benefits Austin Public Library, in particular, and the Austin community overall. I encourage other library systems to tap into their creative nature, which is really at the heart of entrepreneurship. One definition I read stated: "The perception of opportunity in the absence of resources helps explain much of what differentiates entrepreneurial leadership from that of corporate administrators."^{viii} What better way to describe what most of us confront every day in the face of budget cuts and shrinking staff. We call ourselves librarians, but when you think about it, we really are entrepreneurs.

ⁱ Anthony Molaro. "Just Whom Do We Serve?" American Libraries, March 28, 2012, <http://www.americanlibrariesmagazine.org/article/just-whom-do-we-serve>

ⁱⁱ Aaron Schmidt, "Membership Has Its Benefits: The User Experience," Library Journal, April 9, 2012, <http://lj.libraryjournal.com/2012/04/opinion/aaron-schmidt/membership-has-its-benefits-the-user-experience/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://library.austintexas.gov/green-weeding>

^{iv} World Population Review, March 15, 2014, <http://worldpopulationreview.com/us-cities/austin-population/>

^v <http://austintexas.gov/zerowaste>

^{vi} Mary Priddy, Climate Protection Coordinator City of Austin's Office of Sustainability , June 18, 2014

^{vii} "Repeat Customers the No. 1 Milestone for Small-Business Owners," eMarketer, May 5, 2014, <http://www.emarketer.com/Article/Repeat-Customers-No-1-Milestone-Small-Business-Owners/1010813>

^{viii} Eric Schurenberg, "What's an Entrepreneur? The Best Answer Ever," *Inc.*, January 9, 2012, <http://www.inc.com/eric-schurenberg/the-best-definition-of-entrepreneurship.html>