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Grab that user!: how can the public library service attract young people?

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Abstract

As is the case in other countries and societies in our cultural environment, the habit of reading in children undergoes a serious regression when they reach adolescence¹. Children read a great deal, while adolescents read very little and only when forced to.

Strategies to encourage reading aimed at adolescents and young adults² need to take into account the profound change in reading habits and cultural practices in general that take place in the transition from childhood to youth. There is a need for actions for promoting reading that are clearly differentiated according to the age group at which they are targeted. Reading is a practice that makes reference to different cultural products and means of communication. Encouraging reading should not be approached in isolation from other products or supports (paper, digital, etc.)

The availability of a point of reference capable of satisfying the demands for information, education and leisure/culture is a basic need in adolescence. Public libraries can provide that point of reference if they can embrace a wide-ranging and dynamic spectrum of products that combines traditional supports with new technologies, bringing together, in a single space, information, practical learning and the use of the tools necessary for full individual development.

¹ *Reading habits of children and young people in Catalonia: conclusions and recommendations.* Catalan Council for Children's and Young People's Books, 2005. [Online, www.cclij.org/descargas/word/HabitsIJ.doc. Date of reference, 19 April 2005].

² The target group of this strategy covers ages 12 to 25. We use the word "adolescent" to refer to the age group of 12 to 17, and "young people" or "young adults" to refer to people aged 18 to 25. This classification relates to the current social situation in Catalonia, as well as that of the public libraries of Barcelona.

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

Libraries of Barcelona is a network of 29 municipal amenities³ that cover a population of 1,578,000 inhabitants across ten districts. The management of the network is the responsibility of the *Barcelona Library Consortium*.

Made up of the Barcelona Provincial Council and the Barcelona City Council, the mission of the Barcelona Library Consortium is to implement the *Barcelona Library Plan 1998-2010*⁴, which not only envisages a significant increase in the number of centres (from the 18 initial ones to a final total of 40), but also a new approach to libraries.

The new library model sees libraries as neighbourhood cultural spaces that take on a socio-cultural and educational function as well as promoting the habit of reading, thus going beyond the image of simply being centres for reading and access to books.

The design, impetus and implementation of common library policies has resulted in an amazing increase in users, going from 1,362,840 visitors in 1998 to 4,126,308 in 2004.

The new social and cultural scenario in which we are immersed at the beginning of the new century has represented a challenge for libraries in adapting to the new forms of accessing and using information and culture. It has been necessary to define the new strategies for bringing the library closer to the general public and vice versa.

Thus the Library is conceived as a centre of information on the road to knowledge which, open to the general public, is equipped with the material, technological and human resources to facilitate democratisation and dissemination of information, the transmission of knowledge, academic education, lifelong learning, self-education and leisure.

Highlighted below are the four main areas of action of the Libraries of Barcelona and the activities these encompass:

∂ **Libraries as centres of INFORMATION**

Based on the concepts promoted by the *UNESCO Public Library Manifesto*⁵, access to information represents the final objective of the *Libraries of Barcelona*.

The main lines of action place an emphasis on: the growth and diversification of collections, the acquisition and availability of new documentary supports, the specialisation of collections, the optimum use of collections by means of secondary information products and services, Internet access, access to the media via different channels (written press, connections to foreign media via satellite, the Internet, etc.) and the definition and strengthening of local collections.

∂ **Libraries as centres of EDUCATION**

As well as collaborating with the educational fabric of their environments – in terms of

³ *Law 4/1993, of 18 March 1993, on the public library system in Catalonia*. Official Gazette of the Generalitat of Catalonia. 29 March 1993.

⁴ *Barcelona Library Plan 1998-2010: libraries of the 21st century: from information to knowledge*. [Barcelona]: Barcelona City Council. Barcelona Institute of Culture, Cultural Cooperation Service, DL 1998.

⁵ *UNESCO Public Library Manifesto*. The Hague: IFLANET Section of Public Libraries, 1998. [Online. <http://www.ifla.org/VII/s8/unesco/span.htm>. Date of reference, 19 April 2005]

both regulated and non-regulated education – *Libraries of Barcelona* see themselves as the instigators and drivers of educational actions⁶ aimed at the general public, addressing and anticipating the needs of actual and potential users.

The fields of action, amongst others, are ongoing training, efficient use of information available on the Internet (Information Literacy), management and publication of information through the instruments and channels offered by information and communication technologies (ICT), etc.

ð **Libraries as centres of SOCIO-CULTURAL INTEGRATION**

Socio-cultural integration relates to two spheres: on the one hand, the integration of the library itself in the social, cultural and educational dynamics of the territory. In this respect, every centre establishes its own network of relationships in the local sphere with the aim of carrying out actions that facilitate social cohesion and, at the same time, a “*crossover*” of users.

Secondly, due to its services and resources, the library has an unquestionable role as an integrator of the more disadvantaged sectors of the population. The Libraries of Barcelona offer the lending and home-reading services, reading experience with mentally disabled collectives⁷, collections of special interest to the immigrant population, etc.

ð **Libraries as centres of CULTURAL DISSEMINATION**

Libraries of Barcelona aims to implement *active accessory systems*, i.e. activities and actions of cultural dissemination that enable passive information to be translated into active knowledge. In all these, the reader is the protagonist, not just from the intimate perspective of reading in itself, but in the relationships he or she establishes with writers, critics, other readers and even the library itself.

Both centrally –through the Consortium’s Central Services – and territorially – through each of the libraries that make up the network – reading and cultural dissemination programmes are being designed⁸ in line with the different age groups and characteristics of the territory concerned.

Following the principles of quality, creativity, diversification of media and interaction with the general public, activities are grouped as follows:

a) Activities within the network. Series of activities managed by Central Services which are programmed in the 29 libraries in the city. There are two main programmes: one aimed at children and families (*Small Print*) and another at adolescents and adults (*The Adventure of Reading*).

b) Special activities unique to each centre relating to the cultural life in that

⁶ Arranz, Juan José ; Carmen Galve. “The Libraries of Barcelona: Centres of Education for the General Public. The example of the Vila de Gràcia Library.” in **The Public Library: commitment to the future. II National Public Library Congress** . Madrid: Sub-directorate General for Library Coordination, 2004. Pages 232-240

⁷ Altamirado, Antonia, [et al.]. **Activities for mentally disabled people in public libraries** in *Ítem*. No. 36. January-March 2004. Pages 79-86. ISSN 0214-0349

⁸ Arranz Martín, Juan José. **A distinctive trait of the Libraries of Barcelona: reading and cultural dissemination programmes** in *BID: university texts on library science and documentation*. No. 12. June 2004. [Online. Date of reference, 19 April 2005]. ISSN 1575-5886

territory, local events, etc.

c) Activities reflecting the cultural activities in the city as a whole (Carnival, GREC Theatre Festival, Kosmópolis, Comic Book Exhibition, Manga Exhibition, etc.)

Finally, it is worth highlighting in this section the promotion of the *Library Card*, not just as an access to the library services of the network but also as a cultural card of the city, offering discounts and special offers to library users thanks to agreements and collaborations with cultural agents in the territory (museums, bookshops, cinemas, theatres, etc).

READING HABITS IN CHILDHOOD/ADOLESCENCE

As is the case in other countries and societies in our cultural environment, the habit of reading in children experiences a sudden regression when they reach adolescence. Children read a great deal but adolescents read very little, and only when forced to do so. In the transition from childhood to youth there is a change in expectations in terms of the usefulness of reading; it is a cultural practice that enjoys a high level of “symbolic” prestige with adults, but it is not regarded as being really “effective”⁹.

The decline in reading habits between childhood and adolescence is framed in a broader context of changes in the interests and motivations of children/teenagers. A preference for being with friends and listening to music is indicative of young people’s value systems and tastes at this stage of their lives: the search for their own identity and achieving their own framework of social relations.

Compulsory schooling in Spain ends at the age of 16 and this is the point when young people cease to have a single, clear benchmark from an educational, social and cultural perspective. The youth population is difficult by definition: they are in a phase of building their personality and their interests are very varied and changeable. However, this is also a crucial phase from the perspective of the needs that society needs to fulfil to achieve their full development as individuals and citizens.

“Adolescents need special attention as many of them voluntarily stop reading at this stage of their lives. Librarians and professionals who understand the psychological and emotional growth of adolescents need to introduce them to reading through a wide range of books that are compatible with their changing interests”¹⁰.

Each public library serves different communities with different priorities and needs, but adolescents and young people need library services of the same quality as those aimed at other age groups.

As described in the *Guidelines for library services for young adults*¹¹, libraries can be of enormous help in successfully implementing the transition from childhood to adulthood. They can offer a gateway to accessing information resources and an environment that encourages intellectual, emotional and social development, providing a positive avenue

⁹*Reading habits in the children and young people of Catalonia: conclusions and recommendations*. Catalan Council for Children’s and Young People’s Books, 2005. [Online, www.cclij.org/descargas/word/HabitsIJ.doc. Date of reference, 19 April 2005].

¹⁰ *Readers’ Charter*. International Book and Publishing Association Committee, 1992

¹¹ *Guidelines for library services for young adults*. Prepared by the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA). Section on libraries for children and young adults, 2002. [Online: www.cclij.org/descargas/word/HabitsIJ.doc. Date of reference, 19 April 2005].

for social insertion problems.

Services for adolescents should:

- ∂ Facilitate the transition from children's to adults' services.
- ∂ Stimulate lifelong learning through reading and libraries.
- ∂ Encourage the habit of reading for information and pleasure.
- ∂ Provide instruments and skills for using information.
- ∂ Provide collections and services for all the young adults in the community with the aim of addressing their educational, information, cultural and leisure needs.

The strategies for encouraging reading aimed at adolescents and young adults should take into account the huge change in reading habits and cultural practices that they undergo in the transition from childhood to young adulthood. There is a need to implement actions for encouraging reading that are clearly differentiated according to the age group at which they are targeted. Reading is a practice that refers to different cultural products and media of communication. The promotion of reading should not be approached as a separate issue from other products or supports (paper, digital, etc.)

THE EXPERIENCE OF THE LIBRARIES OF BARCELONA

The availability of a place of reference capable of satisfying the demands for information, education and leisure/culture is fundamental in adolescence. Public libraries can provide that benchmark if they embrace a wide-ranging, dynamic spectrum of products that brings together traditional supports with new technologies, uniting in a single space access to information, practical learning and the use of the necessary tools for full individual development.

The Libraries of Barcelona wish to provide this place of reference through:

- ∂ **Specialised, attractive, updated and wide-ranging collections, in terms of both subject matter and supports, which address the needs and interests of young people.**
- ∂ **A regular programme of activities for disseminating culture and encouraging the habit of reading.**

SPECIALISED COLLECTIONS AND CENTRES OF INTEREST

The Libraries of Barcelona network should be viewed as a huge library with different sections. In this respect, the specialisation of part of the library collections makes sense: complementarity, relevance to different types of users... are some of the objectives that are being sought by specialisation or centres of interest. In the case of specialisations, there is the territorial dimension of the city, and in the case of centres of interest, the aim is to cover the most immediate territory of the neighbourhood or district.

However extensive the documentary archive of a library may be, it cannot in all probability satisfy all the demands of young people. The Libraries of Barcelona aims to respond to these demands through the centres of interest (themed collections that address the needs of adolescents and young adults) and specialised subject matter in

district libraries: the circus at the Nou Barris Library, comics at the Ignasi Iglésias-Can Fabra Library, urban music at the Vapor Vell Library, cinema at the Xavier Benguerel library and sports and games at the Les Corts – Miquel Llongueras Library.

If libraries want to inspire loyalty in young people, they need to address their changing needs and tastes. The key to success lies in providing wide-ranging, attractive collections. All the Libraries of Barcelona (both neighbourhood and district) are working on dynamic centres of interest (small-scale specialisations) that target the habits, interests and needs of young people:

- ∂ **Novels of adventure, stories and discoveries.**
- ∂ **Modern music.**
- ∂ **Science fiction.**
- ∂ **Novels relating to situations typical in adolescence and people experiencing similar problems to young adults.**
- ∂ **Scientific and technical documents.**
- ∂ **Comics.**
- ∂ **Information about drugs.**
- ∂ **Videogames.**
- ∂ **Games and sports.**
- ∂ **Internet and new technologies.**
- ∂ **Musical scores.**
- ∂ **Getting a job.**
- ∂ **Sexuality.**
- ∂ **Languages and travel.**
- ∂ **Cinema.**
- ∂ **Fantasy games.**
- ∂ **Solidarity and cooperation.**
- ∂ **Other cultures.**

District libraries have specialised subject matter in their collections. Some of these specialisations have become key elements in attracting and inspiring the loyalty of the youngest users. These specialised collections are undoubtedly the best way of attracting adolescents and young adults:

∂ **Circus, Nou Barris Library.**

The circus is one of the cultural traits that characterises the Barcelona district of Nou Barris and is the main axis of its cultural programming.

The Library approaches the circus theme based on the specialisation of its bibliographic archive and the use of the circus as an instrument for cultural impetus. Its collections are available in different formats:

- ∂ Specialist books, encyclopaedias and technical dictionaries.
- ∂ Videos on circus techniques, circuses of the world and films set in the world of the circus.
- ∂ CDs of circus music.
- ∂ Magazines in different languages covering themes such as juggling, magic, etc.

This collection is differentiated from the other books in the library by identifying signage. The library provides services and activities that enliven the collection and the space set aside for it.

∂ **Urban music, Vapor Vell Library.**

The Vapor Vell Library serves the district of Sants-Montjuïc. In this district, the music centre La Bàscula acts as a support and platform for the dissemination of music created in the city of Barcelona. The Vapor Vell Library has embraced this tradition and specialises in urban music (rock, punk, electronic music, pop, rap, hip-hop, etc.), as well as housing an extensive collection of musical models and concert recordings.

This specialised area offers CDs, books, encyclopaedias, videos, CD-ROMs, DVDs... all the formats in which music has been recorded, studied and created.

The library also provides a space for cultural promotion and dissemination, regularly offering all kinds of activities in which urban music is the protagonist, such as commented music sessions, etc.

∂ **Games and sports, Corts-Miquel Llongueras Library**

The Les Corts-Miquel Llongueras Library offers a collection specialising in games and sports:

- ∂ General publications: sports psychology, nutrition, physiotherapy and sports medicine, legislation, sporting installations, history of sport, the Olympics, etc.
- ∂ Sports: specific material on basketball, football, tennis, handball, volleyball, golf, gymnastics, athletics, surfing, snowboarding, swimming, fishing, hunting, hiking, climbing, etc.
- ∂ Books on games: chess, magic, poker, dominoes, billiards, etc.
- ∂ A large collection of videogames.
- ∂ Specialist magazines.

∂ **Cinema, Xavier Benguerel Library**

The Xavier Benguerel Library specialises in the world of film: history, reference works, film scripts, actors' biographies, film critiques... with a sub-specialisation in shorts. This collection offers the best films in history in video and DVD format, the main magazines specialising in the cinema and music in film, a directory of electronic resources that can be consulted on the Internet, information on the main film festivals, etc.

The library also programmes all kinds of activities relating to the seventh art, such as a specialist reading club, and other activities connected with the film festivals that take place in the city.

∂ **Comics, Ignasi Iglésias-Can Fabra Library**

The Ignasi Iglésias-Can Fabra Library specialises in comics: works on the social aspect, history and technique of comic books. The collection also includes the most representative comic genres, artists and tendencies: American comics, European comics, Manga comics, Latin American, Spanish, etc.

The library is also a place for cultural promotion and dissemination, regularly offering all kinds of activities relating to the world of comics: exhibitions,

presentations of new products, round tables, conferences, workshops and a special comic reading club. It is worth noting that although the club is open to every age group, all the participants are adolescents and young adults.

PROGRAMME OF ACTIVITIES TO DISSEMINATE CULTURE AND ENCOURAGE THE HABIT OF READING

The Libraries of Barcelona, as neighbourhood cultural centres, have the challenge of designing activities that encourage adolescents and young people to use them. The versatility and capacity for adaptation of these cultural programmes has become an essential tool for achieving this aim.

The city's libraries are characterised by offering their users a broad spectrum of activities and actions to disseminate culture and encourage the habit of reading with the aim of facilitating the translation of information into knowledge.

Libraries' cultural programmes play a very important role, given that they are one of the most frequently-used tools for attracting new users and a formula for increasing knowledge and disseminating information about other library services.

The target group of this message is young adults, and the aim is to present the experience of the Libraries of Barcelona in attracting, inspiring loyalty and encouraging the habit of reading in this collective. The activities described below are not the only examples of activities carried out by the Libraries of Barcelona aimed at young people, but they do represent the best examples of programmes in which libraries, books and reading are the main themes of action and motivation:

Young reading clubs

The reading clubs are made up of a stable group of users aged between 12 and 16 who get together once a month and discuss their experience as readers, led by an expert. Their objectives are:

- ∂ To encourage the habit of reading and dialogue.
- ∂ To offer new options for free time.
- ∂ To promote the use of the library and publicise it as a cultural centre.
- ∂ To create a place for readers to get together.

“Grab the word” for adolescents

An oral story-telling workshop aimed at young people aged between 14 and 18, the objective of which is to disseminate and implement the appropriate techniques for selecting, preparing and telling stories. With this activity, the aim is to encourage the emergence of new storytellers trained in the libraries themselves.

Get caught up in the action

A workshop consisting of three adapted sessions based on reading a book. Through games, theatre, exploring feelings and manual work, an in-depth examination of the story's content is encouraged. This programme is aimed at a teenage audience.

“Young Protagonist” Prize

A literary prize organised by the Catalan Council of Children’s and Young People’s Books and the Catalan Association of Friends of Children’s and Young People’s Books. The aim of the Prize is to get the maximum possible number of young people to read a selection of books and choose the one they think is best. The young people themselves make up the jury of the prize.

CONCLUSIONS

Comics, film, music, the circus, games and sports form part of the leisure culture of young people. All these specialised areas attract young people. There is no doubt that they are one of the best ways of guaranteeing user loyalty and encouraging the adolescent collective to read. This is the ideal material for attracting young readers and also the ideal product to get the difficult adolescent user “hooked”.

Highly appealing collections that have an initial visual impact can prove very useful in encouraging the habit of reading in all its different facets and as a support for developing other facets of the public library:

- ∂ Attracting new readers of every age group and with different reading abilities: from those just starting out with books to people seeking new experiences.
- ∂ They are a good tool for people with reading difficulties to gain confidence in their reading skills. They offer new forms of narrative to the reader with their blend of text and pictures, enhancing reading and intellectual comprehension. And as a means of expression, they are the perfect vehicle for introducing and discussing the social, historical and mythological problems of present-day society.
- ∂ Inspiring greater loyalty in the occasional reader. They allow public libraries to attract irregular visitors, such as adolescents (both boys and girls).
- ∂ They offer visually attractive materials and can become the ideal bridge between the all-powerful culture of image (cinema, television and videogames) and the culture of the written word.
- ∂ They can provide a good support for learning languages. Documents in their original language (English, French, Japanese, etc.) can increase the comprehension and fluency of foreign language students as well as new arrivals to this country, giving them an introduction to and improving their knowledge of the official languages in Spain.
- ∂ They are very easily incorporated in libraries’ activities. By taking advantage of the enthusiasm these collections arouse in adolescents and young adults, we should not overlook the activities that can be organised around them: workshops, concerts, reading groups, recommendations, and attractive, eye-catching exhibitions.

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