

# Forever young

The library in a post-modernistic reality. Experiences from knowledge-exchange network project in library services for the young.

Annette Waterstradt  
Greve Library, Denmark

## **Abstract**

In Denmark we are concerned as well about how the public libraries can attract and keep their young clientele. Therefore four libraries in the suburb of Copenhagen in 2004 formed a network with the sole purpose of finding ways to communicate and establish contact with young people in the age group 14-20 years. The initial intention was to meet them on their own terms, offering them activities matching their reality, and more importantly, including them as active participants in the development of libraries in the future.

This resulted in the project "Forever Young".

At first we held a workshop with a group of young adults, where they brainstormed upon the 5 following subjects: The physical library, materials / media, projects / arrangements, crazy ideas and "how do you want the grown-ups to be".

Then with "youth involvement" as a central and dominant theme, each of the four libraries worked on their own sub-project.

## **Introduction**

I am delighted to participate in this Satellite Meeting, and I want to thank you for the opportunity to talk about an issue which is important to me.

In my presentation I first will tell about the purpose of the project Forever Young. Then I will talk about what we did. And at last what we learned.

I come from Denmark, where we have some well-developed libraries which are being used by many citizens. The Danes are conscious of the existence of the libraries, and to some extent people know

how to use the facilities.

The libraries have a lot to offer: Knowledge - experience - social promotion - culture.

The library I come from is situated in the suburb of Copenhagen, the capital of Denmark. In this area there is a large percentage of newcomers. They use the library to play computer games and other activities.

However, there has been a decline in the use of the libraries in recent years, and in particular, we find it hard to attract and retain young adults at libraries. This applies not only to teenagers; young people far up in the twenties are rejecting the offer as well. The prevailing view has been that young people do not find the library of particular interest during this period, but that they usually return when they become parents, and want to borrow books and other items for their children. The question is whether this view is still relevant?

We live in a postmodern era in which mainly young people have many identities, cultures and opportunities which they can make use of and relate to. The information society has also created numerous (especially digital) options which are constantly changing and developing – these are conditions affecting the young people now and in the future.

The question is how the library deals with this reality. Young people ought to use the libraries now and in the future, but if the library does not understand to explore, exploit and involve the habits and needs of the young users, the question is whether the library can last as a modern cultural institution?

4 libraries in the suburb of Copenhagen decided to do something about this. We wanted to find out how to get into dialogue with young people from 14-20 years, so we can meet them with offers that match their reality and involve them as active players in the formation of the future library.

The goals we wanted to achieve was:

## Forever young - goals

- develop methods to come into dialogue with the target group, and give them ownership to the library
- give priority to act together with the young, and build on their behaviour, and the activities they are passionate about
- equip libraries, so that young people want to use them
- buy materials demanded by the young

## Forever young - goals

- target the marketing, so it is adapted to the young people's behaviour
- start projects and events that are demanded by the young
- be adult professionals who the young people want to come into dialogue with
- meet the young at the places they are
- hand-pick the young with resources as role models

During all this the key word is participation. To ask young people about what they want. It has been the important thing throughout the project: to give young people say.

### **How do we involve the young?**

How do we involve the young? And are they interested at all to engage in the future of the libraries?

It was not easy at all.

We held a workshop, where a group of young adults from each of the 4 libraries during an afternoon participated in an intense brainstorming session. A lot of ideas and demands were presented. Five different subjects were involved: the physical library - materials / media - projects / arrangements - crazy ideas - how do you want the adults to be?

## Workshop – 5 subjects

- The psysical library
- Materials/medias
- Projects/arrangements
- Crazy ideas
- "How do you want the grown-ups to be?"

First the workshop intended, to collect the visions of the young adults, second to form a network among them to the further project work on the individual libraries. Approximately 20 young adults attended. We payed them by a gift certificate for CDs. It was necessary to get them to come. At the end of the day each group formed their own library-vision . The method was very productive and fun for those involved. The result was also very useful, since the ideas were used later in the project. Some of the participants continued to cooperate with the libraries.

### **How are young adults' vision for the library:**

Some statements from the day:

## How are young adults' vision for the library:

**Wishes to the adult:** Humour - enthusiasm - friendly - respect for others - open to new ideas - helpful - not tired of living - can put themselves in someone else's place

**Crazy ideas:** Most hits: Open 24/7 - Quizshows - Pokertournament – fashion shows - skiing - dancenights

**Projects / arrangements:** Most hits: Pokertournaments - Lectures - Travel - Beerfestival - Debate on the world's problems - cinema on a giant screen

## How are young adults' vision for the library:

**The physical library:** Funny designs - vibrant colors - no adults and small children - sofas – rooms for studying – qualified help to do the homework - computercafe - help from the librarians - a stage for performing – cosy corner for the young

**Materials / medias:** Books - the Internet - music - magazines - movies - games

## What did we do then?

The four participating libraries chose their areas of focus in working to get into dialogue with the young users. Common to all the projects were, however, the desire to give the young adults a great degree of influence on what action should be undertaken.

### Subprojects of the libraries

- **Greve: Arranged and held Friday night cafés in collaboration with a young user-panel**
- **Stevns: Arranged and held events targeted towards a young audience**
- **Koege: Established special library services for young people studying for Technical High School Examinations, as well as offering their services to a Youth Center called Tapperiet.**
- **Solroed: Employed young people on a part-time basis to participate in their material selection.**

In Greve we chose to establish arrangements for the young each Friday afternoon. A group was established with 18-19 years old high school students. Later younger girls at the age of 13-16 years participated. With the input from this group a long series of "Friday Night Cafees" was established. There were events with changing content and themes. A total of 23 events in 2006-07 from "making your own jewellery and salsa dance to pokernights and lectures about travelling. Greve Library has in the whole process tried to use different methods of marketing the "Friday Nights", including "cool" flyers and SMS services.

At the same time we tried to establish role-models, especially young newcomers who could get in touch with people of their own age. It was not instantly a success, but we have made some contacts to build on in the future.

Not every arrangement was a success. At the salsa dance only 3-4 people arrived. But at a hip-hop show about 100 turned up, and the poker tournament was full. The young told that they had seen the flyers and the sms, and they thought we had something very good to offer. But they only wanted to participate if their friends did.

Solroed Library wanted to involve the young in choosing and buying materials. There was established a group of four young high school students, who was paid a salary. They "assisted" the staff with the purchase of relevant books. The payment proved to be an effective strategy: All the

young people arrived each time, and the librarians got insight into young people's preferences. It proved to be a good way to get a qualified discussion of the materials. A key point in relation to the material in the libraries is that there should be greater focus on other medias than the literacy materials, if we want the target group to be interested in what the libraries have to offer. At the same time the library staff needs to know more of these medias, so they have to be educated.

Koege Library had chosen to focus on the more extroverted activities in the form of two initiatives: One was a collaboration with Koege's new Center for the Youth, Tapperiet, on a number of events. Here was used new and different ways to connect with young people. A rotating workshop was held, and SMS – votes were carried out. It all resulted in 4 major events in early 2007 within the themes Hip Hop, Extreme sports, Graffiti and Photo.

The second project consisted of an educational course at Koege Technical High School, where the librarian taught the students how to use the internet in schoolwork. The librarian was ongoing in e-mail contact with the students.

On StevnsBibliotekerne was held a number of events such as manga-course and make-up course, with nice support.

### **Education of the staff**

During all this we knew that we, the staff of the libraries had to know more about young people. One of the things young people focus on is committed, helpful and qualified staff at the library, that are interested in what concerns young people. It is also very important to have an open dialogue with the young, and to be aware of the medias and materials that concern them.

In order to involve and engage the 4 libraries' staff in our work with young people, we were given information. Focus has particularly been on the achievement of concrete knowledge about young people's communication and patterns of behaviour.

Additionally, we talked about the staff's own approach to communicate with young people. We worked specifically with how to use the language in all expressions in both professional and private context. This approach was selected in recognition of the fact that it is a great challenge to get into dialogue with young people. Further we talked about personal commitment: Why is it important for me that young people use the library? And how can I contribute to that it happens?

The conclusion is that it has been good for the staff to get concrete knowledge about young people's behaviour and how we can communicate with them. It was also good for the staff to reflect on our own contribution on how to engage the young. In this way every person had to be responsible and suggest action.

### **Communication/Public relation**

The young have embraced the new medias, and they communicate on the internet, in chatforums, myspace, facebook etc. ... They text each other and in this way they keep in touch with friends. They do not watch television as much as before nor read newspapers. Traditionally the library announces news through lokal newspapers, but this forum is not used by the young. So we have tried to make use of the way the young people communicate, and texting them when there is news to tell. In addition we have printed flyers with exiting layout for distribution in places where the young move about, for instance high schools, malls etc. Another method is to spread the word through local contacts among the young, and that might be the best way to do it, because they listen to each other. We haven't succeeded very much with this, because it is hard to establish local contacts.

**Image of the library**

The library is just another offer in young people's busy lives, and if we want to reverse the downward trend in young people's use of the library, we must define how the library can fulfil its tasks and think differently. According to the young people we have asked, the library has a large problem with its image. The mere word "library" is causing negative connotation, and it is this mental picture, the "Forever Young" project has had to fight. It is not cool to use the library no matter how good events we offer.

**What did we learn?**

With the Forever Young project, each library have obtained important knowledge about how to reach the young, but certainly also how not to.

The conclusion is that when it comes to involve and engage young adults, there are some important considerations to be taken. We must

## What did we learn?

- Capture the hot trends that appeal to the young
- Engage young people by giving them a responsibility
- Carry out the ideas here and now, as young people quickly lose interest if they fail to see their ideas will be put into practice

## What did we learn?

- Be outreach in relation to young people and meet them where they have their way
- Find the key figures among the young that can help in the actual execution of the idea. In other words, young people that will attract other young people
- Use their own channels of communication

Actually in the “Forever Young” project we have followed our own advices. But we have also learned that the librarys’ dusty image has prevented us from reaching the goals. There is nothing wrong with the activities; they are excellent. And if for example a youth festival had the same to offer it would be a success. The next step must be to change the image, so it will be cool to use the library.

There is no great optimism to track when young people are asked if they want to use the library more in the future.

To use the library in its limited opening hours is too impractical for many people in a busy day filled with homework, social obligations and easy solutions via the Internet.

Most young people have a relatively pragmatic relation to the library. They use it when they have to, which is primarily for literature in connection with homework.

With the above in mind, it is reasonable to ask whether the library is fighting a Sisyphus struggle to reach the young. For what can the library give them, that they can not get anywhere else? The answer is that the library offers a wide range of free offers at the same place. Judging by the statements of young people they know that, and their primary task is not to change the whole library content, but to deal with the form. And our job is to go on telling young people about the qualities and resources that the library already holds, and do it in a way that appeals to and attract them. And that is precisely what the Forever Young is about.