The Federal Documents Depository #0337, A Success Story: Lessons We Learned

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Good afternoon. Thank you for inviting me again this year.

Among the many questions that depository libraries are facing today, the issue of connectivity is one of the most important and still waiting to be resolved. Connectivity simply means access. In the age of electronic document delivery, and with the growing number of documents available via the Internet, it is inconceivable for a depository to function without the connection.

I touched on that issue last year, and those of you who attended the conference and my presentation might remember the alarming statistics. According to a study done by ALA of 9,000 public libraries, only one in five had Internet access. With the increased number of community networks, however (according to the National Civic Review, spring 1996 issue, there are currently over 300 community networks operating nationally) the odds for the public library to be connected improved significantly.

This is a follow-up to my last year's presentation and an assessment of our depository performance, lessons we have learned, and conclusions that may be helpful to other depositories.

Another Depository? Are We Needed?

The St. Charles City-County Library District, the Middendorf-Kredell Library Branch, is one of four depositories serving the 9th U.S. Congressional District (CD). The closest 9th CD depository, the Westminster College Library, in Fulton, Missouri, is 85 miles west of us. Our Regional is 100 miles away. On day to day operations, when a document is needed and is not found in our collection, we rely heavily on our two neighbors serving the 1st CD: the University of Missouri-St. Louis, 25 miles away, and the St. Louis Public Library, about 45 miles from us.

Who Are We?

The #0337 Federal depository was established in 1990. We are a small depository collecting below 20%. The staff consists only of myself and my assistant, a part-time (20 hrs/wk) para-professional whose duties are limited to the technical part of the operation.

The library has eight branches, all of which have a minimum of 12 public access PCs. By definition, we are a large library with over 600,000 volumes and still growing.

Who Are Our Clients?

Although officially designated for the 9th CD with a population of over 350,000 residents, in actuality, our depository serves the entire St. Charles County, which is divided between the 2nd CD and the 9th CD. As of 1994, the county population was estimated to be over 240,000. (The Bureau of the Census estimate puts the St. Charles County population by 2005 in the neighborhood of over 309,000.) The total number of residents that come to us seeking Federal information is estimated to be over 500,000.

St. Charles County - Demographics

St. Charles County is a dynamic community growing at the rate of over 18% per year. This is a community of young, educated professionals with two-income families.

Here is a snapshot of the demographics:

32% are under 20

36% are between 20-39

96.6% are white

87.2% are married with children

38% with income of $35,000-$74,999

Median family income: $48,040

Labor force - women: 44.7%

Over 50% with college education

The library is one of the original sponsors of the community information system: WIN, or the Westplex Information Network. In early January 1995, LYNX, the textual browser, was used in the basic development stage of the network. In April 1995, Netscape was installed in most of the branches. As of now, all branches provide access to the World Wide Web.

Among other benefits, WIN offers free access to the Internet to all county residents, and for a nominal fee of $6.00 per month, a SLIP connection. At the present time there are approximately 11,000 passwords issued by WIN. Most of them are SLIP accounts.

Consequently, our clients are computer literate, hungry for information, and eager and willing to learn. The number of requests for Federal information is very high. My unofficial survey revealed that one out of every 10 reference questions was document related. Out of these, approximately 65% were answered with the help of the online sources.

Even those rough statistics confirm what is happening in the world at large. The changes in document delivery are overwhelming and encompassing all aspects of society.

For the first time in history, the local library is no longer the only place where information can be found. A library has to compete for clients with other information providers. To survive, libraries have to justify their existence. They have to prove that the money spent on them is money spent wisely. Libraries have to become proactive in their activities... they have to promote and market their services and materials.

This is a new environment for all of us. Although our mission remains the same, our role has changed. We still collect and disseminate information. We provide answers to questions. Now, we must teach, educate ourselves, market and promote, network with others, provide the access and teach how to use the access. We must proactively seek potential clients. We must justify our existence by making sure that our services are viewed as indispensable. As documents librarians we have to actively engage in promoting and marketing our services.

I never thought that as a Government documents librarian I would have to learn the skills of a successful businessman. I realized, however, that this is exactly who I am: a businesswoman who seeks partners, develops networks, makes sure her services are always dependable, develops a clientele who relies on her information, gets referrals from people who have established a solid business relationship with her.

I publish home pages, I select the sources, I teach classes for the general public and for other librarians, promote new products, collaborate with various institutions, organizations, colleges or other depositories, and local agencies. I cannot sit and wait for the patrons to come to me. I **have to seek my audience!**

The proactive behavior is particularly important in the case of Federal documents. Historically, the documents have been misunderstood and underused and in need of marketing and promoting.

I consider myself very fortunate to work for a visionary director who sought the Internet connection before building home pages became fashionable. He was not afraid to take risks. He is supportive of his staff and encourages initiative and creativity. In my activities as Government documents librarian, he gives me a complete "carte blanche."

Here in a nutshell is what we do in our depository:

Access to Documents

Cataloging/Shelving

Equipment

      Providing access - Home Pages

            Bibliographic Instructions and training: staff and the public)

            Cooperation with the Regional and other depositories

            Networking within the community

            Promotion/Marketing

Cataloging

The project to catalog the entire document collection should be completed by the end of 1997. At the present time we are simultaneously cataloging retrospective and current documents. Many of you who responded to my question on GOVDOC-L (to catalog or not to catalog) indicated that the use of documents will increase visibly once they are available on the library catalog. I can already see the difference in items that are cataloged.

The collection is shelved separately from other reference materials. However, both the reference and circulating documents are shelved together. Most of our items circulate. The non-circulating, reference materials (laws, regulations, current statistical sources) are marked with a symbol "R" on the spine.

Prominent signage is used throughout the library to direct patrons to the documents. Signage for the document shelves display the SuDocs numbers, the names of agencies, and names of bureaus or offices operating within an agency.

Selective titles of frequently used serials are shelved on prominently situated shelves visible from many areas of the library.

Equipment

How much is enough? The guidelines for minimum technical requirements are changing constantly and what is appropriate today may be outdated tomorrow. Driven by the information technology industry and the World Wide Web's ever changing environment, the technical requirements set by the GPO are only reflections of what is happening "out there."

The laptop that was ordered just a year ago for me, specifically for GIS applications, is already outdated. Fortunately, I was able to request a new one with an active matrix screen with 48 Kb of RAM. How long will it last? I also have a color printer designated for GIS services and I already worry that the memory may not be enough.

As I mentioned, all of the branches provide access to the World Wide Web. Printing commands from the LAN stations are routed to several laser printers situated near the reference desk.

The depository CD-ROM products are available on a PC equipped with two 12-slot towers. Printing from this station is done independently from other LANs, to a single laser printer.

The ten "most popular" CDs are installed permanently; other slots are used for "swapping." The list of the CD-ROM collection is available both at the station, and at reference desks of all branches. (The information includes the title, brief annotation, information about specific software, etc.).

Access

In order to facilitate access to electronically disseminated documents, I currently publish two home pages: GIS and Government Documents:

http://www.win.org/library/matls/govdocs/main.htm

http://www.win.org/services/gis/gishp.htm

Although I provide links to comprehensive sites, most of my links lead directly to full text documents or searchable documents. In order to do so, I cut most of the intermediary links and place a site directly on top of my home page. This has proven to be very useful in the public library environment where the level of search capabilities is very uneven and it is not uncommon to encounter patrons labeled as "mouse-impaired!" My documents home page is directed toward the general public to access Government information either from the library's PC or, even more importantly, from a remote place.

Statistics show that my home pages are used heavily both in the library by the reference staff and patrons that come in, and by remote users.

I am solely responsible for the contents, presentation and technical aspects (I also upload the pages onto the server which gives me control over timeliness of the information and streamlining of the entire operation).

Just recently I have created a documents home page designed specifically for children. I hope this document is balanced, properly offering solid information and a little bit of fun!

http://www.win.org/library/matls/govdocs/kids.htm

Bibliographic Instruction/Training

Electronic access doesn't necessarily mean that the information we are seeking is readily available. This is a common misconception among many. I remember many times my frustration while searching GPO Access. Like many others it is a powerful, comprehensive site, but remains difficult to navigate not only for the neophyte but also the expert.

The Documents Department at the St. Charles City-County Library District is participating in a very aggressive year-round program of bibliographic instruction for the general public. Realizing how difficult it is to master the Internet, the district has decided to offer regular search classes, on different levels, for people from our county.

Twice a month, with a limited seating of 12, lasting an hour and a half, a hands-on class, How To Access Government Documents, has been so successful that a new format is under consideration.

Similar training, although on a smaller scale and in an informal manner, is offered to the library staff at regular intervals.

Thanks to Friends of the Library, who donated over $15,000 to the district, we were able to buy several high quality LCD panels that were urgently needed for BI/training programs offered by the district.

Cooperation with the Regional and Other Libraries

Changes are inevitable. Changes are unsettling. Changes, however, can be viewed as opportunities for growth, for re-evaluation, for trying new approaches.

During those times of uncertainties, communication and cooperation with other institutions are vital.

Instead of "reinventing the wheel" each time we encounter a new situation, we should be able to plug into existing resources. This is the mechanism that works so well for all of us via GOVDOC-L.

Similarly, the Regional library should be the "safety net" for those with minimal or no Internet connection.

I would like to see the Regional:

> As a clearinghouse for depositories that do not have Internet access, or very limited access (i.e., text-based browser only)

> As a think tank, coordinator and initiator of training for documents librarians (i.e., training on GPO Access and other databases where proficiency is needed)

> Continue to be a support and resource center for other depositories.

Networking Within the Community

This goes to the heart of the issue of marketing, promoting and proactive activities of the depository.

I attend numerous meetings of local Chambers of Commerce, education groups, business groups, and others. I want them to know not only who I am, but what I can do for them as a Government documents librarian. I use specific examples using documents that were helpful in similar circumstances.

Promoting/Marketing

I try to stay visible!

News from the documents department that affects the district, the reference departments, the users, is transmitted by me via:

- Reftalk, our internal distribution list

- Local newspapers

- Handouts (published by our PR people)

- Signage within our library

- The Internet

- Word of mouth

I will use any form and opportunity to talk about the documents, our collection, the access we provide, and the training that we offer.

I maintain a close relationship with local colleges. The University of Missouri-St. Louis and the Social Sciences Department of the University of Missouri at Columbia are my major partners in document delivery.

Success ... How Was It Possible?

- Visionary leadership of your parent institution. The depository does not function in a vacuum. We are an integral part of a bigger organization and our performance reflects its activities.

- Seeking partnership with other organizations (i.e., community networks):

    Identify funding

    Identify the partners

    Identify common organizational goals

    Recognize the various organization cultures

    Be aware of what is happening in your region and your state

- Leadership that embraces and seeks technology (technology is viewed as an opportunity and challenge, not a hindrance).

- Financial commitment to technology. Your institution has to provide financial support for programs that require technical improvement.

- Community involvement is essential. Free access to the Internet creates a culture that allows people to experience new ways of document delivery. New possibilities go hand in hand with hunger for information and eagerness to learn.

- Community needs have to be identified and addressed on a daily basis. The collection and access to documents that the depository provides is only valuable when it is used in addressing the needs.

- Match the needs by offering services and creating opportunities for learning.

- Promote the depository activities within your institution and your community.

If you are interested in information on community networks, I have created an HTML document that you can access directly:

http://www.win.org/library/matls/govdocs/cnet.htm

or, from my home page:

http://www.win.org/librarymatls//govdocs/main.htm/Depository #0337/Information on Community Networks

I would like to thank my colleague from the St. Charles City-County Library District, Jim Brown, for sharing with me his thoughts on developing a community network. He was involved in developing WIN from its conception.