Geek the Library: Why it Works

The Geek the Library public awareness campaign does much more than change ‘geek’ to a verb! This campaign helps public libraries start important community-wide funding discussions that impact library support when it counts.

Background
The concept evolved from a theory that a community-centered public awareness campaign—one that uses similar strategies to many ‘super’ brands—could be an effective approach for libraries to make an impact locally. Comprehensive quantitative and qualitative research followed with two goals:

- To understand the factors that both drive, and limit, local library funding support.
- To ascertain whether a national library support campaign could be effective at increasing and sustaining funding for U.S. public libraries by reaching and influencing the segments of the voting population that have the most potential to become committed library supporters.

Like other brands, public libraries are also challenged to create an effective message, identify the appropriate audience, and change perceptions in a way that will impact current and future behavior. The research in From Awareness to Funding: A study of library support in America found distinct groups of citizens who held the highest potential to be impacted and deliver improved support, and provided insight into attitudes and marketing triggers. Understanding, leveraging and delivering the appropriate message to these segments is vital.

The research also found that people’s perceptions of the role the library plays in their lives and in their communities are more important determinants of their willingness to increase funding than their age, gender, race, political affiliation, life stage or income level.

These findings provide the foundation for the strategy and the structure of the Geek the Library awareness campaign.

Campaign Goals
Based on the research, the key to increasing awareness about funding support for public libraries is to change the library conversation, and the library perception, from services and information to a discussion about how the library provides transformational opportunities for each resident and the community. (No matter what you geek, the public library supports it all!) To make an impact, library leaders need to ignite a local movement that sparks community-wide interest and participation—and inspires a very personal connection to the library. Geek the Library delivers!
The Proof
OCLC conducted a full-scale pilot campaign with a selection of libraries and library systems in Georgia and central Iowa, as well as Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Shelbyville, Indiana; and Zion, Illinois. Campaign efforts launched in summer 2009, and official field support and tracking ended in April 2010. Even with a short time in market and many diverse communities, the Geek the Library campaign was proven as an effective communications concept.

Pilot libraries used the campaign to:

- Elevate the library as a valuable community asset.
- Position the library as transformational.
- Wake latent love for the library that could encourage support when it counts.
- Bring new light to people’s perceptions of the library and librarians.
- Shift public library perceptions.

Additionally:

- The campaign is appealing to the public and makes a strong impression. Consumers noted that it was ‘unique’ and ‘eye-catching.’
- Paid advertising played an important role in building campaign awareness—people noticed the ads, engaged online at geekthelibrary.org and participated at local events.
- The campaign requires resources for both ‘air’ and ‘ground’ campaign activities including advertising, consistent presence at local events and engagement by library champions with influential members of the community, including funding decision makers and library supporters.

Commitment and Return on Investment
Dedicated time and budgetary resources are essential. This is not a typical library campaign—it should be launched and maintained in the community. To build awareness, library staff should spend considerable time at local events and partnering with community organizations, schools, businesses, etc. Additionally, making an impact means ensuring consistent exposure through multiple and diverse touch-points—including paid advertising such as newspapers and magazines.

There are many free resources! In addition to field support and initial campaign materials, such as posters, stickers and bookmarks, participating libraries receive access to a Campaign Management Center. Using this online resource, library staff can download hundreds of art files and helpful documents, find detailed guidance for every phase of the campaign and share ideas.

It is important to note that the return on investment will not be immediate, but based on all of the data obtained from the pilot campaign—including qualitative and quantitative consumer research—Geek the Library has the potential to increase long-term library funding by positively impacting public perceptions of libraries and library funding.

To download From Awareness to Funding: A study of library support in America, please visit: http://www.oclc.org/reports/funding/