

Door-to-door Outreach Campaign in Florida, NY

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Florida Public Library

Abstract: Florida Public Library, a school district public library in a farming and bedroom community on the edge of metropolitan New York, serving a population of 4,991, engaged in a door-to-door outreach campaign in 2016–2017 to raise its profile in the community, reach non-users and increase the number of patrons from 56% to 60% of its service population. Through walking local streets and knocking on doors, library staff hoped to sign up 200 new patrons. The article describes the steps used to develop and conduct the campaign, using teams of staff, trustees and Friends of the Library. How prospective patrons and their home addresses were discovered and what databases and software was used, materials and methods employed and the chronology of the campaign are detailed by following the library's plans for summer, fall and spring activities. Mistakes made and lessons learned are shared from walking one community's streets and speaking face to face to residents about library services, offered and desired.

Keywords: door-to-door campaign, direct marketing, outreach, Library Card Sign-Up Month, non-users

In the spring of 2015, during the director's annual review, members of the Florida Public Library board of trustees asked that librarians make an effort "to raise the profile of FPL in the community." They did not offer any specific goals or direction and said only "We know you can figure it out." The director, serving in the job since 1998, also felt confident, but what could management and staff do that wasn't already being done? They believed that the library was already well-known and appreciated in the community and its annual budget votes, passed by 4:1 or better margins, seemed to bear this out. Yet, like sister libraries in the Ramapo Catskill Library System (RCLS), it *was* true that door counts and circulation figures had been on the decline in recent years. Reminding the public of the library's existence couldn't hurt.

Florida Public Library, founded in 1958, is located in the historic Black Dirt farming region of Orange County, NY and serves a school district population of 4,991 in the Village of Florida and the surrounding Towns of Warwick and Goshen. Since moving into its new building and first permanent home in 2000, FPL has had an extremely active schedule of programming for all ages. For example, outreach includes a monthly bilingual program at an agri-business Head Start serving the children of migrant farmworkers and a weekly story time at the village summer recreation program in conjunction with the five-week summer reading program. The library also

offers summer programs at the local farmers market, such as a Teen Chef Challenge in which students, under the supervision of a professional chef, compete to create dishes using regional produce available in the market. The library is small, but has gained a reputation for excellent customer service, innovative programs, securing grants and winning awards.

In 2015, FPL won the ALSC Baker & Taylor Summer Reading Program Grant for its Super Heroes program and in search of more visibility, installed a Little Free Library, custom built by the Tween Club, on the rocking chair porch of Roe Brothers, a hardware store/lumberyard a half mile away. Now, librarians needed to consider what else could be done.

In October 2015, the director signed up for an ALA webinar (*Using Door-to-door Marketing for Library Card Sign-Ups*) on direct marketing for libraries, modeled on political campaigns. A few libraries had managed such campaigns with good success and she was intrigued by this possibility: arriving on the doorsteps of local residents to raise the library's profile and identifying the elusive "non-user" who doesn't come to the library, doesn't vote and might be quietly supportive, indifferent, or even hostile to the library. Maybe, face to face encounters would let staff understand these missing customers. Also, as FPL moves toward developing a building expansion program, it seemed wise to get to know potential voters as early as possible.

The director showed the webinar to the staff a few months later and was chagrined that only a few of them thought venturing outside the library was a good idea. Their resistance was puzzling, given Florida's small size and well-worn saying that "Everyone knows everyone here." Local children safely walk downtown to school and the library along village sidewalks and the community is well-known for its cohesiveness and Main Street USA vibe. At the same time, Florida's relative affordability has produced notable diversity among residents and attracts families where parents make the daily commute to New York City, sixty miles away, so their kids can grow up in the country. There were also many lifelong residents in Florida who rarely, if ever, set foot in the library, but who were fiercely proud that their community had this sturdy red brick symbol of culture and learning in its midst.

The next step was to ask library trustees to view the webinar and their reaction was gratifying. They enthusiastically backed the idea of a door-to-door campaign and wanted it to be a joint staff, trustee and Friends of the Library effort. Knowing that trustees would also be out walking and knocking on doors with them, persuaded dubious staff members of the merits of the project and several part-time employees were assigned the job of support staff and keeping the library up and running while others walked during the campaign. The director decided to start the campaign after the close of the summer reading program in 2016. August is a quiet, planning month and this would give the staff time for a slow start before a big push for September's Library Card Sign-Up Month, a traditional time for FPL to recruit new patrons through additional outreach.

The Friends of the Library were asked to sponsor the cost of supplies for the campaign, about \$1,500. These included T-shirts, baseball caps and cloth drawstring backpacks imprinted with the library logo. The directors hoped that these royal blue items, with red and white highlights, would make FPL teams visible and distinctive. The library also ordered red and white

magnets imprinted with library hours and neon pencils imprinted with FPL's URL to hand out to prospective patrons. Staff members created I.D. badges to be attached to imprinted lanyards and colorful business cards for all participants. They also ordered twenty lawn signs with the library's URL along the top, reading "I'm a Library Champion and I (blank space) @ FPL." The idea for the lawn signs, which was featured in the ALA webinar, was to encourage library supporters to customize the signs and display the various ways in which they use the library.

The library devoted an August evening session from 6-8 p.m. to training staff, trustees and Friends for the door-to-door campaign. Topics for discussion included where teams would go, what they would wear, what supplies they would carry, what they would say to residents, how to handle difficult people and how their experiences would be documented. Then, the director announced the two-person teams comprised of one staff member (the talker) and one trustee or Friend (the helper). These teams were matched, based on personality, knowledge of the library, walking ability and familiarity with the targeted neighborhoods. The library also decided that teams would work opposite sides of the same street, keeping in view of each other.

The director resisted requests to create a "script" for conversations with residents. Instead, she trusted her staff who were already skilled at handling customers, knowledgeable about library policies, programs, and services and adept at explaining them. The director anticipated that staff members would be able to think on their feet and be flexible, just as they were every day in the library and those expectations were more than met.

Upon request, the trustees of the Village of Florida approved a proclamation naming September Library Card Sign-Up Month and urging all residents to obtain a library card. This beautiful document, embossed with gold and signed by the mayor, was posted prominently in the library. The library also used a photo shoot of the board president, Friends president and director, wearing their campaign gear for publicity. In addition, they submitted press releases of upcoming walking schedules to daily, weekly and monthly local newspapers and also posted information on the library website about their planned outreach activity. Staff identified where to start the campaign, focusing on village streets closest to the library with the largest numbers of clustered residences. The director's assistant printed out patron records using SirsiDynix's Web Reporter and Blue Cloud Analytics to produce lists of names, addresses, birthdates, and the dates that cards were created and last used. Staff was able to find the names and addresses of non-users for the targeted streets by relying on the Image Mate database, which contains Orange County's property tax records and a list of all village water customers.

The first events in the outreach campaign were two Friday afternoon visits to the community pool located in a townhouse development with numerous residents. The goal for this first program was to recruit new patrons by using the mobile circulation unit, borrowed from RCLS, consisting of a scanner and tablet. The tablet, which had Wi-Fi access, enabled library staff to access patron records remotely as well as sign up patrons and issue new cards on the spot. For four hours each day, the two-person teams worked in two-hour shifts, sat in shade by the pool and talked to swimmers as they arrived. While the teams did not sign up any new patrons on either day because they discovered that everyone they encountered at the pool already had a card, they were still able to use this experience to share information on upcoming programs and hand out library-branded magnets and pencils. Upon reflection, staff realized that

they perhaps should not have expected the swimmers to carry papers and handouts, but staff and trustees were nonetheless able to profit from the experience by hanging out by the pool and getting to know each other.

The next effort was attending back to school nights at the two schools in Florida during the second week in September. Staff members displayed library information, magnets and pencils and approached parents as they rushed from classroom to classroom. Although a few new patrons were signed up using the mobile circulation unit, the team's most productive achievement was greeting familiar and long-lost patrons and new faces alike, and talking with them to emphasize FPL's convenient location within walking distance of the middle school/high school and its many free services. The library handed out many library-branded pencils and magnets with confidence that they would be good reminders of the library's hours and web address.

Then, the library planned the fall door-to-door effort was planned for the third week in September, after school schedules had settled down, and based on the recommendation in the ALA webinar, director chose two weekday evenings (and a rain date) from 4-7 p.m. and the following Saturday from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. On both of the weekday evenings, the two-person teams posed for pictures on the library front steps and then set off walking. Within each team, the staff member carried the printout of addresses (and confidential patron information) on a clipboard, a highlighted street map and the mobile circulation unit. The trustee/Friend carried supplies such as barcoded library cards paperclipped to application forms for new patrons, markers, comment cards asking existing patrons to "describe the library in three words," doorhangers announcing a prize drawing for new patrons for houses with no answer and paper goodie bags filled with brochures, flyers, pencils and magnets. Each team quickly discovered that they had to develop a rhythm of knocking on doors, speaking to the residents who came to the door about signing up for a library card, answering their questions about library services, and handing out markers, pens, clipboards and goodie bags

Once back at the library, each team reported on their success and the library was about to total the counts for the number of houses visited, goodie bags and doorhangers left, new cards issued, comment cards collected and the very few individuals who neither had library cards nor any interest in acquiring one. Over cold lemonade and homemade pie, walkers swapped stories about the people they had met and the comments they had collected. One big surprise was the discovery that about 90% of homes that the teams had visited owned a dog, and so staff resolved to plan more programs about pet care and to carry dog treats they next time they knocked on doors. Staff were pleased that some requests for programs, e.g. genealogy, could be answered by saying "We have that scheduled next month!" while others were noted as future priorities. Staff were also happy to inform a few residents that the library does offer many programs for adults and not just for kids.

Over all, the two evening walkabouts were positive bonding experiences for staff and trustees. It was enlightening for trustees to hear staff members speak confidently about library services and encouraging for staff members to feel that trustees were on their team, dealing with the public in all its variety. Campaigners shared the experience of walking in the sun and rain together, knocking on doors and wondering who would answer. They learned that it was

very helpful to have a participant campaigning in his or her own neighborhood as residents were comfortable opening the door to a familiar face. They discovered that the mobile circulation unit, while useful in a stationary situation outside the library, was not really suited to a walking campaign as Wi-Fi was not always available. They also found that it was most efficient to hand over all new patron application cards to a single staff member to be entered into the system, even if this didn't happen until the following day.

The Saturday campaign centered on one cluster of streets within walking distance of the library and two new developments on the north and south outskirts of the village. Staff discovered that homeowners were more likely to be in and out during the morning—many of them zoomed out of their driveways as teams approached—and more likely to be home around lunchtime and in the early afternoon. Staff conjecture that this schedule is due to the very active youth sports scene in Florida and the shopping habits of busy commuters. In contrast to the older housing located nearer the library in which retirees and stay-at-home moms predominated, in the newer upscale developments, teams were more likely to encounter residents new to the area and not familiar with the library. Campaigners were complimented profusely for showing up on doorsteps to provide personal service. And although it was not staff's intention to collect donations, one longtime patron insisted on writing out a hefty check during Saturday's visit.

In general, the teams noticed that elderly residents were eager to see library representatives and wanted to visit the library, that new residents, especially minorities, were delighted to be welcomed to the community in person, that existing patrons were well aware of library services and felt stymied when asked to describe the library "in three words," as they wanted to say more, and that the patrons (and prospective patrons) were especially excited by several items in the goodie bags. These items included a handout on how to access e-content through Overdrive, a bookmark on how to use the RCLS Mobile App to search the library catalog from a smartphone or other electronic device, and a coupon from Copper Bottom, a popular local restaurant, which would benefit the library with a donation of 10% of the diner's bill. Due to the generosity of the restaurant owner, residents found they could "make a donation" to the library at no cost to themselves while also enjoying a good meal and supporting a local business.

Most of all, teams found that stating that FPL had a goal of recruiting 200 new patrons by the end of the fiscal year and directly asking for help in reaching the goal was an effective strategy. During those twelve hours of campaigning in September, the library succeeded in gaining over 100 patrons, including some walk-ins who came to the library to get cards after finding the doorhangers and goodie bags left at their homes. Staff entered the names of all new patrons into a drawing for a \$100 gift card for Werner's, a venerable general store on Main Street. The Friends of the Library sponsored this donation.

Buoyed by the success of the first phase of the campaign in the summer and fall of 2016, staff turned the collected comments into a word cloud display and began to talk about a spring campaign to cover the remaining streets in FPL's service area that could be safely walked. In May 2017, staff resumed outreach by attending all three days of kindergarten round up at Florida's sole elementary school and signed up entering students along with parents and siblings who did

not already have cards. Staff used the mobile circulation unit on these days, as well as at a Saturday craft fair at the school a few days later. At this point, through their active recruiting, staff had signed up over 150 new patrons and hoped to reach their goal of 200 new patrons by completing another door-to-door campaign during the third week in May, which was scheduled for just after the conclusion of spring programs and before the hectic debut of the annual summer reading program in late June.

Staff decided to confine the May campaign to 4–7 p.m. on Monday and Tuesday and planned to tackle a clustered townhouse development of 183 addresses one day and three winding and hilly streets of more than fifty single-family homes on the west edge of the village the second day. Being veterans of this type of outreach, the teams initially thought they were campaigning experts, but they were quickly reminded about the nuance required to initiate a successful campaign. As they knocked on the doors of the adjacent townhouses, they found fewer residents home than they had during the same time of day in September. They belatedly realized that this type of housing was inhabited by people who were more likely to be younger workers and city commuters who arrived home later in the day. Doorhangers and goodie bags were left at these addresses, including at homes for sale, with the hope that realtors or prospective buyers would find them of interest. Although walkers encountered fewer residents during this final effort, they once again had pleasant and informative conversations with several newcomers who were excited by the personal outreach and who signed up for cards. Staff were also able to persuade several newly returned college students to renew the library cards that had been issued in their youth and collected comment cards from cooperative patrons.

The weather was unseasonably warm and the last day of campaigning was in brutal heat. Many of the people who came to the door in late afternoon or early evening were in pajamas with the air conditioning blasting. As the tired teams wound up their walking campaign back at the library over cold drinks and cookies, they reflected on how much of a difference the weather, the season, the neighborhood and community activities had made on their attempts to reach prospective patrons where they live. Nevertheless, it was possible to make some generalizations. Over all, campaigners found mostly warm welcomes by both patrons new and old, and even non-users were generally attentive listener as staff spoke of the importance of the library and its many free services. On that last day of outreach, only one taker was found for the voter registration forms, but the organic dog treats were a hit, if a bit sticky in the heat.

The door-to-door campaign added a valuable and vital element to FPL's outreach and staff learned that a lack of knowledge about the library's location and hours was not the reason that non-users stayed away. Instead, teams mostly heard comments about busy work schedules that kept residents far from the library despite it being open seven days a week. Staff found that patrons most valued the library website, access to e-content and the mobile app for smartphones. The teams collected many written comments in support of the library and renewed contact with numerous residents, once active patrons with young children, but who had drifted away as the kids left home. Now, patrons were invited to come back to sample our full adult program schedule. Walkers had the honor of being the first to welcome new residents to the community and offer them a taste of the kind of personalized customer service the library prides itself on. Campaigners added to the ongoing story of the FPL by carrying through on a

vision that promoted staff, trustees and Friends working together to increase the number of library supporters, using real data, direct persuasive appeals and shoe leather (really, sneakers.)

Overall, FPL's Door-to-door Outreach Campaign involved eleven staff members, six trustees and two Friends of the Library members. They formed 23 two-person teams which covered 38 village streets, walked 99 miles and knocked on 770 doors over five days in fall and spring. Teams collected 85 comment cards from current patrons and left 421 doorhangers advertising a grand prize for new patrons. They visited two back-to-school nights, three kindergarten screenings, one craft fair and spent two afternoons by a community pool. The library's goal was to raise the number of patrons from 56% to 60% of our school district population and the total reached 61.25%. Teams signed up 256 new patrons in a campaign that covered almost eleven months of the year. The library celebrated the end of the fiscal year on June 30th by selecting a name from the pile of new patrons as the spring grand prize winner. That's the kind of call to a patron that staff love to make. And, in perusing the end of year statistics, it was pleasant to see that all of them were up, except for adult circulation, which gave staff a goal for the next year.

Wondering how to reach out to your taxpayers, users and non-users and find out who they are and what they want from their public library? Try a door-to-door campaign. Like the Florida Public Library, you will gain the best knowledge of your community by walking its streets and will discover new, current and lapsed library customers by meeting them on their home ground and inviting them into their home library—where everyone is welcome and every customer counts. Sometimes, the director, staff, board members and Friends must leave the library to find out what actually compels community members to walk through its doors.

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