
Making Lemonade: Reimagining the Target Audience for Local Continuing Education Programs

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Abstract: Long Island Library Resources Council (LILRC) is one of nine New York State regional library councils, which serves all types of libraries in Nassau and Suffolk Counties. Continuing education programs are LILRC’s mainstay offering, attracting a consistent audience of local librarians to in-person events and conferences. When COVID-19 restrictions compelled LILRC to transition its programming to an online environment, the opportunity arose to reach a new audience that had previously been unlikely to attend in-person events on Long Island. Through a revision of marketing strategies to reach a statewide audience, LILRC expanded its program attendance to include participation from other counties, and surprisingly, also found new attendance from participants outside of New York State.

Keywords: Continuing education, marketing, segmentation, professional development

Introduction

The American Library Association maintains that “continuous learning is critical to renewing the expertise and skills needed to assist patrons in this information age. Library workers must continually expand their knowledge in order to keep up with the rate of change” (2013, Sept 23, para.1). The goals of avoiding obsolescence in rapidly changing work environments and meeting shifting work responsibilities necessitate “continual training and development” for librarians and library support staff (Blakiston, 2011, p. 729). Just as libraries promote lifelong learning to patrons, librarians need to “apply this value to ourselves” (La Chapelle & Wark, 2014, p. 1).

However, the reality of access to continuing education (CE) is not without substantial obstacles. The literature on librarian professional development has identified a number of significant barriers. One major obstacle is program location, as “professionals from disperse geographic areas find it hard to attend the CE programs mainly organized in big cities” (Rafiq & Arif, 2017, p. 31). Academic librarians working in small and rural libraries were also found to be impacted by program location when they sought access to continuing professional development (Kendrick et al., 2013).

Kendrick et al. (2013) also identified institutional support as an important factor which “often determines a librarian's ability to participate in [continuing professional development]” (p. 47). However, library administration frequently approaches the value of professional development from a different perspective than the individual librarian:

The manager's focus is on the need to achieve the work of the library unit and the need to develop capability across all their staff to ensure that work can be done with the staff and resources available, as much as it is on the need to develop the skills and capabilities of each individual. Individuals focus on what they need to enhance and further their career, as well as what they need to do their existing jobs. (Cossham & Fields, 2007 p. 575)

Institutional support for librarian professional development may be expressed as funding and/or release time. With respect to the impact on time, “managers and their staff both expressed a preference for short, contact courses and presentations, with ‘workshops’ featuring as highly desirable, in contrast to conferences, online programmes, long-term study, and so on. Some acknowledged that staff working in remote geographical areas, sole charge librarians, and specialists often found it difficult to attend such courses because time away from work was impractical” (Cossham & Fields, 2007, p. 579).

The literature on the marketing of continuing education confirms these obstacles, noting that there has always been consideration of the 4 Ps: Price, Promotion, Place, and Product (Freeman & Wake, 1984). Recent marketing literature identifies Place as deeply impacted by two key influences: technology and the COVID-19 pandemic. Technology has played a role in realigning library

marketing strategies (Mozilla, 2019), and “digital marketers are now devising strategies to optimally use their cost to better reach their target groups” (Lal, 2018, p. 4). More recently, another equally important disruption to Place has been COVID-19. “How buyers physically engage with businesses and receive products and services has ... been dramatically affected” (Raymond, 2020, para. 3).

Due to the ongoing crisis and inherent delays in scholarship, literature specifically on the impact of COVID-19 on librarian professional development is not yet emergent. Parallels, however, can be drawn to the recent literature on the impact of librarian-provided instruction moving to an online environment, which notes that the shifts are no longer “nice to have” but rather the “new normal” (Sewell & Theobald, 2020, p. 20-22).

Methodology

This study undertook a quantitative examination of non-personally identifying data collected by the Long Island Library Resources Council (LILRC) as part of its standard practices of event registration, management, and assessment. The time periods examined were calendar years 2019 and 2020. All data is shared with permission of LILRC Executive Director, Tim Spindler.

In addition to the examination of event data, this study also reviewed LILRC’s social media posts from March 2020 through December 2020 that promoted its continuing education events and the related platform analytics to collect information on engagement that might prove probative to understanding audience reach and engagement during COVID-19 restrictions. The combination of these data sets were examined holistically to identify meaningful changes and patterns of geographic enrollment and attendance numbers that could inform strategic planning for future marketing and outreach for all providers of continuing education to librarians.

Discussion

Long Island Library Resources Council

Long Island Library Resources Council (LILRC) is one of nine New York State-chartered Reference and Research Library Resources Councils (New York

State Library, 2019). LILRC and its eight sister councils in New York State serve all types of libraries in their respective geographic areas of service. The two counties in LILRC's area of service—Nassau and Suffolk—have a combined population of nearly 3 million people and contain 118 public libraries, as well as library systems, academic libraries, school libraries, archives, special libraries, and historical societies, all of which have divergent and diverse populations, needs, and expectations. LILRC offers a wide array of year-round continuing education programs to the Long Island library community, as well as member-based programs and services such as regional archival services, medical interlibrary loans, coordinated collection development aid to academic libraries, and a hospital library services program.

COVID-19 as a Catalyst

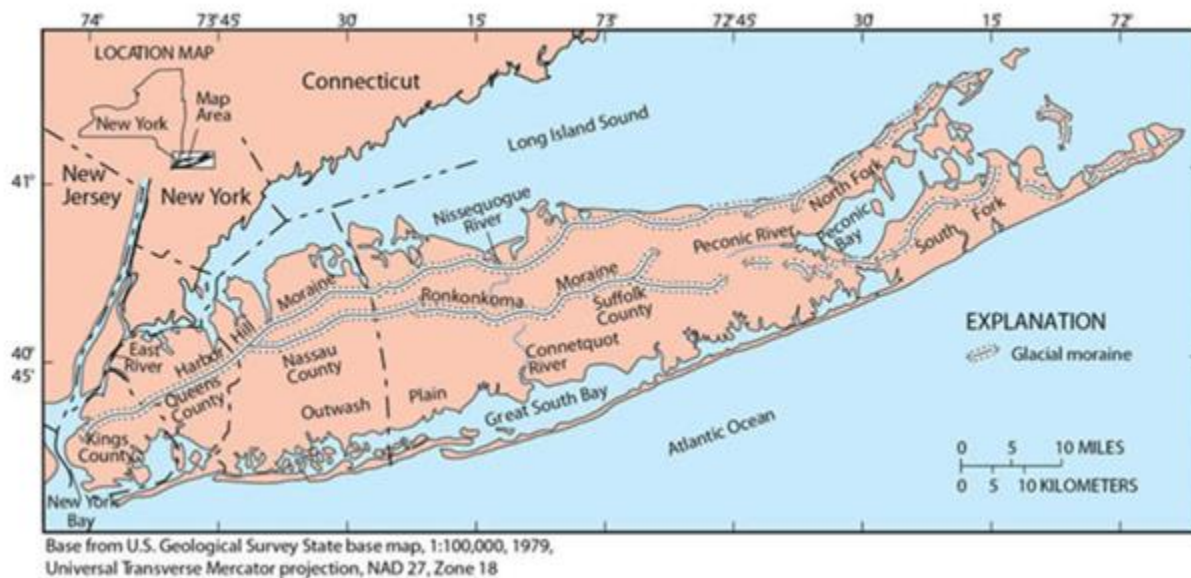
In March 2020, as New York State experienced a surge in COVID-19 related shutdowns, Long Island libraries underwent a significant change in day-to-day operations. LILRC, in response to both the unavailability of its usual in-person mode of offering its programs and its own COVID-19 operational responses, began a significant needs-driven transformation of its continuing education offerings and delivery modes, making metaphorical lemonade (a desired outcome) from the lemons (sour circumstances) on hand.

At the time, LILRC had internal questions about how their audience would receive these changes. Would librarians be interested, available, and able to participate in this new model? Would this model be sustainable? What followed was a surprise: Not only did participation continue in LILRC's continuing education programs, it grew steadily over the following nine months (March 2020 - December 2020) and expanded in geographic reach as well, beyond the two counties who traditionally attended.

Although LILRC continuing education programs were previously open to attendees from beyond its two counties, in reality, attendance from non-Long Island based librarians had been rare. Even within the two counties, travel distances were a significant barrier to attendance for some librarians, particularly on the east end of Suffolk County. Nassau County is more densely populated and has an area of 29 square miles; by contrast, Suffolk County is more sparsely populated, particularly on its east end, and consists of 934 square miles (U.S. Geological Survey, n.d.). Prior to March 2020, LILRC's in-

person programming was held in a variety of Long Island library locations intended to be “central” but, in reality, was much more accessible for Nassau County and Western Suffolk librarians, as seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Location map of Long Island and the generalized glacial moraine



Note: Map is part of the public domain, courtesy of U.S. Geological Survey.

Thus, when COVID-19 restrictions compelled LILRC to transition its programming to an online environment, the opportunity arose to reach a new audience that had previously been unlikely to attend in-person events, both within LILRC’s service area and without. As LILRC’s ongoing data collection and assessment revealed a new expansion of reach and engagement in virtual programs, LILRC pivoted to revise marketing strategies to reach a geographically broader audience and consequently expanded its program attendance to include participation from other counties, states, and countries.

How Marketing Evolved for LILRC over 2020

Prior to Spring 2020, LILRC's continuing education service model had consistently offered in-person classes at central locations on Long Island through the cooperation of local libraries and library systems making their community meeting spaces available for the council's programming. Event attendance was driven both by the need for librarians in New York State to complete a set number of continuing education credits to maintain Public Librarian Certification (New York State Library, 2019) and by the professional community's interest in the merits of continuing library education in its own right. LILRC's in-person events also provided opportunities for networking and socialization in the library community. Virtual programs, such as webinars, although occasionally held, were not a significant part of LILRC's continuing education offerings. These were sometimes offered in a hybrid model that employed streaming an event into a meeting room for attendees to watch together. These virtual offerings consistently drew significantly smaller attendance than in-person programs.

With respect to Price, LILRC's programs both before and after the COVID-19 shutdown were largely free to its members and at no cost or low cost to non-members. Shortly after shutdown, due to the practical implications of coordinating event registration and processing event fees while working remotely, the council decided to waive all fees and make its programs available to all attendees at no cost, both as a temporary measure and as a gesture of goodwill to the library community. A few months later in July 2020, the standard fee structure for CE programs was reinstated with one significant change. LILRC and its eight New York State sister councils agreed to charge all council members, from whatever region, at member rates for all of their events going forward.

Looking historically at the attendance data, LILRC's reduction in fees from March 2020 through June 2020 clearly correlates with an increase in program attendance, but there is uncertainty about causation as attendance did not diminish from July 2020 through December 2020, when most fees were reinstated. For consideration, there is the possibility that the period of fee-free programming acted as an introduction of the Product to a new audience that found it valuable enough to continue after fees were reinstated. Another possibility is that the statewide fee agreement amongst the library councils supported continued broad participation from non-Long Island librarians.

However, this would not have impacted attendance from outside New York State, which remained robust through December 2020.

With respect to its Product of continuing education programs, the range of topics LILRC offered remained largely unchanged as LILRC migrated from in-person to online offerings. However, Product did evolve due to the new availability of online presenters from diverse geographical locations. Thus, the council was able to pivot to an even stronger Product with speakers that were unlikely to be available or were prohibitively costly to bring to Long Island for in-person events.

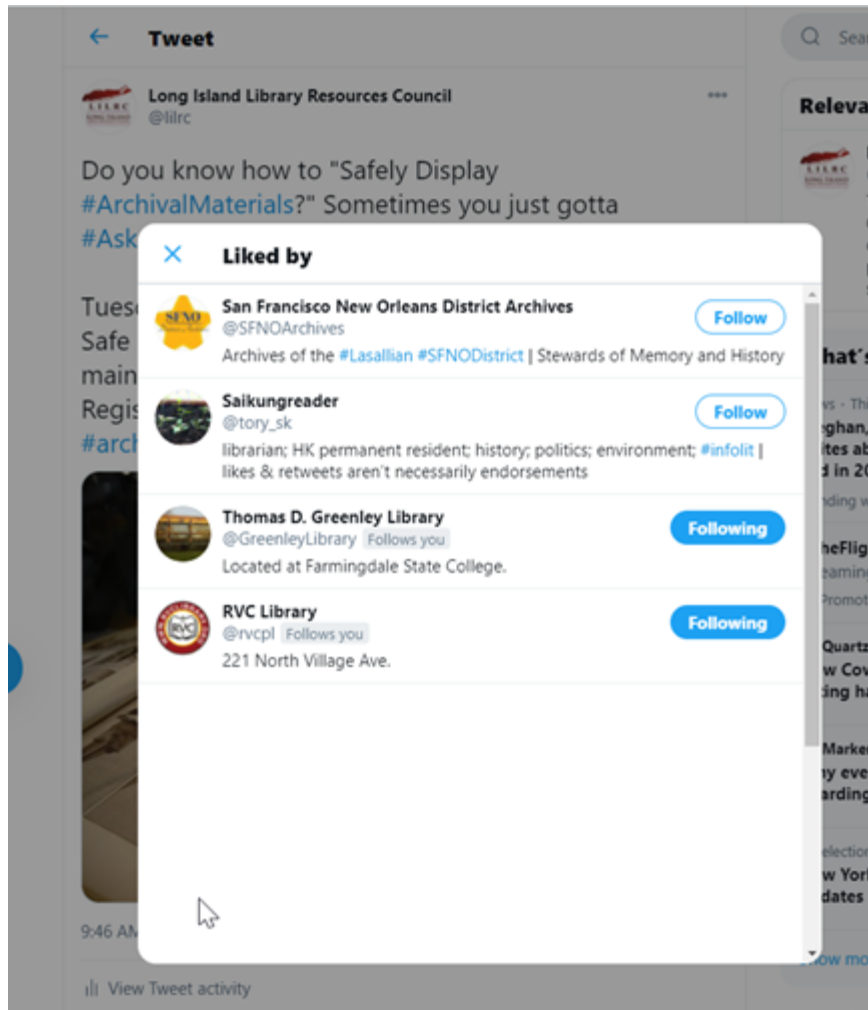
The increase in audience for virtual programs notably impacted the council's technology requirements to deliver these programs to a larger capacity audience; the cost of Product delivery thus increased as well. LILRC's initial Zoom license from March 2020 supported a single Zoom program at a time with a 100-seat capacity. Recognizing the need to grow in capacity, the council responded quickly by upgrading to a more flexible and expansive Zoom license with multiple simultaneous Zoom events supported, each with 300 seats per program capacity. Similarly, LILRC's membership management program, which was originally capped at 2,000 contacts and operating with 1,400 contacts, was expanded to allow up to 5,000 contacts. The need for this expansion became clear after the original database capacity proved insufficient to support the expanded marketing reach. Specifically in early April 2020, contact records began to increase and required staff to "clean up" the database to make room for the most active records without exceeding the number allowable by the license. This became a regular and burdensome task. By late May 2020, the goal for the database clean-up was to keep it at 1,950 contacts. At that point, there were 135 active out-of-region contacts. It was clear that the council needed the expanded license to support the increase in LILRC's contact records, and the software was upgraded not long afterwards, relieving the staff of the ongoing chore of keeping the numbers of contacts beneath a cap of 2,000 contacts.

Prior to March 2020, LILRC regularly used the following promotions to market its programs: bimonthly digital newsletters, weekly emails about CE offerings to database contacts, social media promotion, and Long Island library listservs. Once it became clear that attendance would be possible and likely from non-local librarians, the council began to employ and prioritize

statewide listservs and other statewide promotional platforms. At the same time, promotion on local listservs was decreased in order to reduce a “spamming” effect from cross-posting. As LILRC’s contact database grew, so did the impact of the weekly email blasts, which reached a larger audience. The council also monitored times of event registration as correlated with the times of the marketing emails. Noticing a connection between the email and a spike in registration, a trial was created for a second “Today’s Event(s)” email. LILRC found the second email to be significantly impactful in registration as well and afterwards implemented it as an additional and regular promotion.

Another area of interest was LILRC’s social media. Although it was not quantitatively significant for program enrollment, it became notable for its reach as measured by geographical distance rather than quantity. As illustrated in Figure 2, a Twitter post dated April 10, 2020, that promoted a CE event received 4 “likes.” What was significant was that two of the likes were from the local library community, one from an archive in Louisiana, and one from a librarian in Hong Kong. These were the first indications in LILRC’s ongoing marketing assessment that its promotional reach had expanded.

Figure 2. *Likes on an @lilrc Tweet Dated April 10, 2020*



Twitter’s own platform analytics reflected this growth in reach as well. For example, profile visits pre-pandemic numbered 110 in January 2020 and 200 in February 2020. Then, profile visits jumped to 512 in March 2020 and 383 in April 2020, a clear indicator of new interest in LILRC during the earliest days of the pandemic, from an audience unfamiliar with the council.

Looking at LILRC’s program enrollment numbers historically also revealed the impact of the transition to virtual programs. The final LILRC CE program to be held in person in March 2020 (“How to Publish in LIS: An Introduction to Scholarly and Professional Writing by Librarians”) was considered a successful event with 21 attendees, all of whom were from Long Island. The following LILRC CE event (“Ask an Archivist: Do’s and Don’ts for Oral History Interviews”) held virtually on Zoom on April 3, 2020, drew an

audience of 56 attendees, a significantly higher number especially in light of the narrow professional topic. Of those 56 attendees, 23 were non-Long Island New Yorkers and 3 were from other states.

The event enrollment data LILRC collected throughout 2020 showed this disparity was not an anomaly. As seen in Figures 3-5, attendance at LILRC events during 2020 reached participants across the United States and even in other countries, in sharp contrast with its 2019 and pre-COVID 2020 reach.

LILRC's 2020 attendees represented a large swath of New York State librarians, rather than being drawn mainly from the two counties, Nassau and Suffolk, that were previously the mainstay of LILRC's CE program participants. They also represented the new addition of CE program attendees from throughout the nation and the world.

The number of CE events offered by LILRC over 2020 was also a significant area of growth. Although there was a clear drop in March 2020 when COVID-19 created a shutdown across the state, this was followed by a very quick recovery in CE offerings and then by an increase in numbers as it became apparent that there was a substantial audience for LILRC's virtual CE programming. In 2019, LILRC had 1,444 attendees at 87 CE programs, whereas in 2020, there were 5,626 attendees at 143 programs, representing an upward change in attendance of 289.61%. This change was not simply a reflection of the increase in the number of programs; the average number of attendees per program also grew, from 16.6 per program in 2019 to 39.3 in 2020.

Figure 3. *LILRC 2019 Continuing Education Participants by Location (Long Island)*

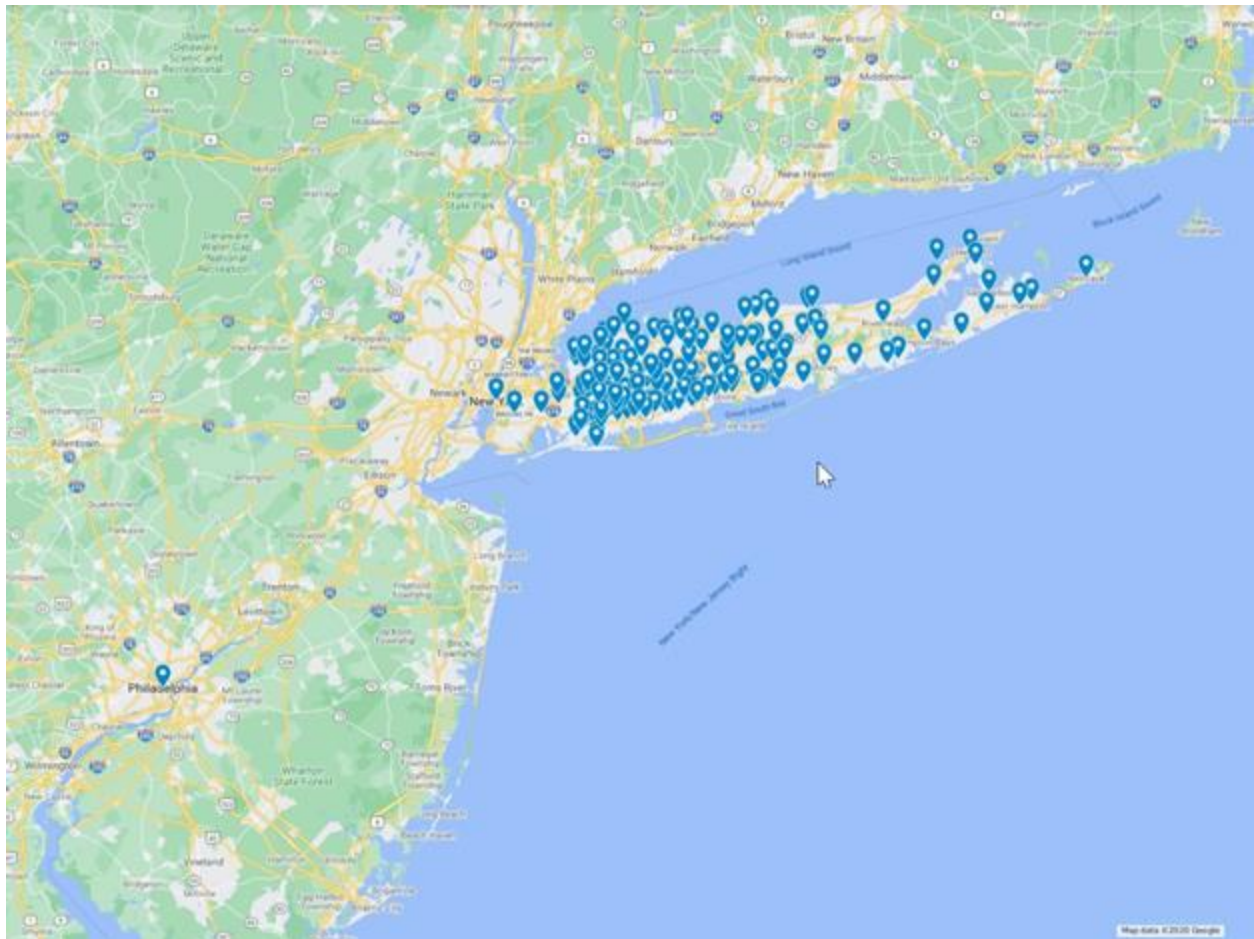
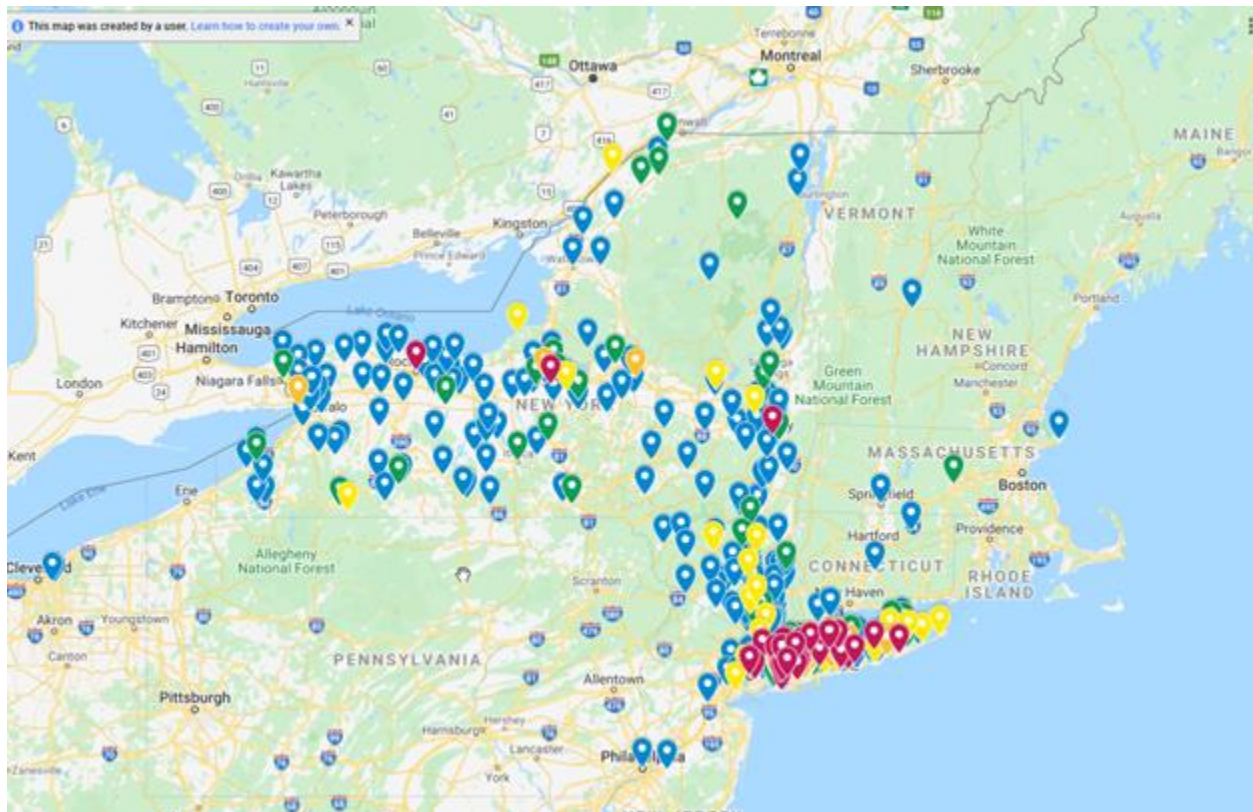


Figure 4. *LILRC 2020 Continuing Education Participants by Location (Global)*



Key: Blue: 1-10 attendees; Green: 11-25 attendees; Yellow: 26-50 attendees; Orange: 51-100 attendees; Red: >100 attendees

Figure 5. LILRC 2020 Continuing Education Participants by Location (New York State/Northeast U.S.)



Key: Blue: 1-10 attendees; Green: 11-25 attendees; Yellow: 26-50 attendees; Orange: 51-100 attendees; Red: >100 attendees

Lessons Learned

1. Plan Responsively

Pre-pandemic continuing education program planning did not anticipate the possibility of a lockdown. However, the LILRC staff's flexibility in understanding delivery platforms, new audience potential, and adjustments to promotional communications, all in a short time, were all crucial to the success of its programs.

2. Realign Strategic Marketing Goals

Keeping a macro view of strategic marketing plans allowed staff to reimagine how to reach those goals despite the impetus to step away from

them in light of emergency situations. Maintaining overarching goals informed best practices for both short- and long-term planning that could be revised, rather than abandoned.

3. Collect and Evaluate Data Continuously

Data collection and assessment should be conducted on a regular basis and more often during times of change and/or crisis to discover insights into strengths and weaknesses of current marketing. While assessment is, and should be, a regular component of continuing education programs, the opportunity to examine data even more closely in times of change will deeply inform both short- and long-term marketing strategies. Do not skip assessment as an unnecessary step in emergencies. Rather, ensure data collection to analyze both in the process of crisis marketing and then again, historically, in the future.

4. Leverage New Opportunities

Don't let the goal of "keeping on track" obscure new opportunities. In LILRC's case, awareness of the reduction in barriers to its programming reach opened a significant new market for programs that will likely continue past the pandemic.

5. Turn an Obstacle into a Strength

The inability to offer local in-person programming could certainly have been seen as injurious to the council's plan of service. Instead, it strengthened the program offerings with new, virtually available speakers and by reaching previously untapped audiences.

6. Be Forward Thinking

It is key to strategize at least six months in advance, as much as that is possible. Once adapting to the new normal, LILRC staff consistently forecast possible future scenarios to allow a far-reaching vision of best practices.

7. Employ Nimble Marketing and Outreach

Although LILRC's audience and marketing are circular, each informing the other, a willingness to try new approaches, and even more important, to

abandon old approaches, was important. Keep in mind that what worked yesterday may not work today or tomorrow.

Conclusion

Through the strength of responsive planning, LILRC was able to harness the momentum of changes in Place, Product, and Price in a crisis to both maintain its current CE program audience and to grow another entirely new audience segment. The council harnessed the new audience, although unanticipated, to grow LILRC's value and visibility. The significant growth in market share has transformed LILRC from a local provider of continuing education to a statewide and national presence, a "lemonade" outcome for an otherwise often sour year for libraries.

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About the Author

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