

## It's a small world after all!



Several weeks ago, I had the distinct pleasure of meeting a group of very passionate library leaders from northern Ontario. I was asked to speak about leadership and change, but I am sure that the reality is that I learned more from them than they learned from me! Over breakfast, lunch, dinner and snacks, they talked to me about the changing library customer, the economic realities they are all facing, and the challenges of serving isolated rural communities. It was a wonderful two days. Here's what I learned.

- Similar to other service industries, libraries are changing rapidly to keep up with their customers. As one animated library director said, “Just because summer reading was huge last year is no reason to assume it will be this year.”
- Two years ago, most public library customers in northern Ontario grabbed a book and ran back out the library door. Now, they are staying in the library longer and browsing from resource to resource. The new “grazing customer” may start reading a newspaper, peruse the magazine collection, and then access an OPAC. Once again, the library has become a place and a destination, not just a “grab and go” service point.
- More and more families are establishing a regular schedule, during the same time every week, to visit the public library together. They arrive as a group and then scatter to browse, search, compute, read, and play. I asked how long the average family now stays in the library. Consistently, the response was “about 30 to 45 minutes, with usually one family member not borrowing anything.” I find that interesting.
- The new library customer *really* wants to understand how their tax dollars are being spent, so all of the current discussions about transparency *are* important.
- Customers, especially those who come to the library electronically via the web, are looking for an experience, not just information.

As I flew home, it struck me that even though these librarians are 800 miles north of Peoria, they have the same concerns and challenges we do. We all worry about funding the library, empowering staff, and doing the very best job. It *is* a small world after all!

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