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How Clarence Valley Regional Libraries use analytics to increase community engagement and confirm collection cost/benefits

Two years ago the Clarence Regional network of libraries turned to analytics technology to become more informed about its collection of books, CDs, Videos and e-offerings.

Using the SpydusCollections solution, the library service analyses borrowing patterns over the lifetimes of collection items, and identifies community demand by geography, item, author and topic. The information is helping these libraries manage their collections more efficiently, plan acquisitions based on maximising value of each item, automate tasks and communicate more effectively with their communities.

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Martyn Williams
Team Leader (Collection and Reference),
Clarence Valley Council.

The Clarence Regional Libraries is a network of seven council-operated libraries and one mobile library, jointly operated by the Clarence Valley and Bellingen Councils. The network sits within the Northern Rivers region of NSW, an area encompassing coastal and valley-based villages and townships, and the city of Grafton.

The network provides the region's citizens with access to a vast collection of books, magazines, CDs, DVDs and more. In 2017 the libraries were visited in person more than 345,000 times, fielded over 52,000 requests and facilitated 345,694 loans. They also hosted 634 events, attracting a total of 7,803 people.

When Martyn Williams joined Clarence Valley Council as Team Leader (Collection and Reference) almost six years ago, the libraries all relied on the sophisticated Spydus integrated library management system from Civica to help manage many aspects of their operations. However, the primary collection management tools for staff were gut feel and manually prepared frequency-of-borrowing statistics.

Every year the librarians would assess their collections, identify items that were no longer in demand or were damaged. These would be retired to provide shelf space for the 11,000 new items acquired annually. Known as "weeding", it was a process that consumed many hours and relied heavily on intuition.

The Solution

Since that time, the network has introduced big changes to their processes to improve collection management across all eight branches.

The libraries began by centralising collection records and "floating" fiction books across librariess. This has made it easier to track and circulate books among the libraries, and has improved borrower access to the collection. It is also helping to keep the fiction offerings fresh for library users.

Next, they introduced a third party collection management software package to help with weeding. The software extracted data from the library management system and provided reports on borrowing patterns. It did help but Williams says it came with limitations.

"There was quite a bit of work involved in setting up the data extraction and we found it wasn't particularly easy to customise reports," he notes. In addition there was no ability to obtain current information. The reports always related to the previous month's activity.

Finally, processes took a giant leap forward two years ago when Civica released SpydusCollections, powered by **Yellowfin BI**, acollection management module fully integrated with the Spydus library management system. Clarence Regional Libraries soon adopted the solution.

"Integration with the rest of the Spydus software means we can avoid some of the issues we were previously dealing with. The software is live and connected to the system so data is extracted and reports are generated in real time," Williams states. The intuitive software has also given branches the ability to create customised reports and ad-hoc queries.

This wealth of analytics data is helping to fine-tune collection maintenance, enabling staff to make more informed decisions, particularly in the areas of weeding and stock rotation.

Williams explains, "Once we identify what's not being borrowed, our job as librarians is to start drilling into why these items are no longer in demand. Across eight libraries, it may just be a matter of the books being in the wrong place. If so, we can set up a monthly rotation around the branches. Or it may be that we purchased multiple items of a newly released, high-demand item and now, six months on, we don't need that many copies."

While non-fiction books do not "float" across the network, library members can reserve and borrow books from anywhere in the network. Libraries use localised Spydus reports to analyse non-fiction borrowing patterns based on Dewey areas, explore trending topics by library location, and can even drill down to specify titles that are recent arrivals but have not been borrowed.

Benefits

At a time when NSW state funding of libraries is being cut by 18 per cent – from $28.8 million in 2017-18 to $23.5 million in 2018-19 – the Clarence Regional Libraries are understandably focused on collection costs and community benefits.

Williams notes, "Libraries have limited budgets and we need to make sure we get maximum benefit from our collections. We measure per copy of each book to see whether we are getting value for money. We look at borrowing costs versus the number of times an item is borrowed. We have to make sure that whatever we do put on the shelves, whatever events we run, it all gives value to the community."

The information obtained from SpydusCollections is an essential part of these cost/benefit calculations.

The libraries will soon start generating weekly reports analysing demand for heavily reserved titles. These will help to identify whether additional copies of new releases are likely to be needed, or whether existing orders for soon-to-be-published books should be revised.

Williams notes that automation is another area of potential savings using Spydus. "We're looking to start using the system to automatically generate key reports, such as the annual statewide statistical report that we have to send to the State Library." He estimates that action alone will save a couple of days of staff time per library every year.

One unexpected benefit of SpydusCollections is an improved ability to frame discussions with the Clarence Valley communities. Insights into borrowing profiles are enabling more targeted, relevant promotions. For example, the arrival of new books by popular authors, or books on trending non-fiction topics are promoted on social media, with photos going up on Facebook and Instagram. Using social channels and the findings from SpydusCollections, the libraries can not only give people the information they know they want, but they can also put out information about related topics and offerings that members may not yet be aware of.

Many of the promotions are tied in to events such as author visits, children's story time, book clubs and genealogy workshops, all designed to entice readers in to their local library.

Williams admits thus far, the libraries are only scratching the surface of the available functionality for SpydusCollections. There's a lot more to do, including automation of current manual analyses and reporting.

Overall however, he believes the biggest benefits of SpydusCollections lie in the ability to customise and create reports. "Library staff can brainstorm, come up with a concept and build a report that provides hard evidence that hopefully supports that concept – something that is increasingly important when dealing with governing or funding organisations."