



# Partnerships for *Your* Library

▶ JULIE SCORDATO

**D**ear Readers, I've been thinking about partnerships lately. It began when I was talking with professionals in smaller libraries about finding good mentors, when the home organization is too small. One option beyond finding a mentor at another library is to look around at other youth advocates in the community. From educators to after-school/youth group facilitators, from the Boys and Girls club to 4-H, there are other people in your community who are passionate about helping teens grow into healthy, productive adults. This is where I made the shift from thinking about mentoring to organizational partnerships. As I wrote about this idea, I discovered I had more information to share than could be covered in one column. In this first installment, I'll be talking about how a partnership can fit many different definitions, and how to determine what partnerships may be best for your library. I'll summarize why a library would seek out partnerships and wrap up with ideas on what the library has to offer in a partnership. In the next column, I will cover how to field partnership requests that aren't the best fit for your library and reminders on the best ways to initiate a partnership.

What is a partnership? Begin defining what this means to you and your library by studying the values and strategy of your library. For example, one library may be eager to be seen as a community "third place" and want as many open-to-the-public events hosted as possible, including events supplied by outside agencies. For this library, maybe a partnership is as simple as hosting a program/event with or without library staff involvement, but attaching the library name to the outside group to bring people through the door, creating cooperation with other organizations. Another library may want all partnerships to closely align with specific pieces of the strategic plan, and when looking at a potential partnership, the first thing power holders may say is, "Yes, but how does this support X, Y, or Z?" If you can't make a case for how the partnership supports the strategic plan, the partnership isn't adopted. Other libraries may focus on a concrete ROI (return on investment), wanting to make sure a partnership creates certain outputs and outcomes that show a "payoff" for staff resources used in the partnership. All three of these examples rarely stand alone and you may find any combination of these motivations in your organization.

Look at your own organization to help you define what a good potential partnership might look like. What kind of partners does your library currently have? What is considered a partnership in your library? You may have to network and talk to people to get a clearer picture of what kind of partnerships would be supported. This is important preparation work when you have the great idea or vision, so you aren't pitching the idea cold. Beware of laying too much groundwork with a potential partner out of excitement for the vision of what could be. Use the best communication

channels to plant seeds and get input from decision makers so there are no surprises or risk of a partnership idea getting shot down because you get burned with the "Why am I just hearing about this now?" conversation.

Remember that partnerships can be very short term, like a single event, or it can be ongoing, like an after-school tutoring program. Be clear about what kind of partnership you are engaging in and what the shared goals are; focus on the present. Before trying to expand and enhance new partnerships, stay in the present and start slowly. Appreciate what you are doing for the good that it does, rather than focusing on it as only a lever to do even greater things. This will help avoid disappointment and keep partners from feeling like there is an agenda.

Why do we seek out partnerships? So the library can leverage and maximize resources. This can be anything from splitting the cost of an author visit with a school and hosting the author at both places, or marketing services to a wider audience with another organization, like a museum or through a community event. In this time of diminishing budgets, organization leaders, local government, and the average tax-payer are all noting who can work well with others in the community.

What does the library have to offer a partner? What are your library's strengths, both in physical features and services? How can that be expanded and refined in a new partnership role? For starters, libraries have a rich history of being a great social equalizer. We are open to all and are founded and funded on the philosophy of sharing resources for the good of everyone, to better themselves both through education and recreation. We are a non-profit with a diverse range of programs and services, and sometimes, most appealingly, we can be a neutral third space, year round. Depending on the physical layout of your library, there may be a meeting space and sometimes this can include a lovely outdoor space, like a courtyard or green space. Savvy management of your library space, programs, and services can reflect your organization as a hub in the community, a hive of activity where positive things happen for users of all ages.

This topic of partnerships will continue in the next installment of *When the Rubber Hits the Road*. ■

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