# From concept to reality

In 2007, we embarked on a national research project to test the hypothesis that the emerging U.S. public library funding crisis could be improved by implementing large-scale community awareness campaigns aimed at engaging and educating the public library's current and potential supporters. In the three years that our research has been underway, the funding crisis for U.S. public libraries has gone from an emerging issue to an emergency issue. The U.S. economic situation has created urgent, and growing, demand for library services. The 'What if?' library funding scenarios we explored with our focus group participants in 2007 have become reality. Libraries have been closed. Hours have been cut. Funding has declined. The 2007 'What if?' research questions have become the 2011 'What now?' or 'What next?' library management questions.

So, does our 2007 hypothesis still hold in the new, harsher U.S. economic environment? Is it possible to improve the potential for increased library funding through stronger library marketing, educational efforts and advocacy in this tough economy? Our recent field trial of the Geek the Library community awareness campaign suggests that the answer to that question is: "Yes!"

During 2009 and 2010, we piloted the campaign with nearly 100 libraries in test markets in southern Georgia and central Iowa, and in additional communities in Georgia, Illinois, Indiana and Wisconsin. Our goal was to test the validity of the three primary funding marketing imperatives identified in the 2007 quantitative research.

A successful community awareness campaign has to do three things:

1.  Wake up potential supporters to the fact that the library is relevant in the 21st century

2.  Put libraries squarely in the mix of important community infrastructure, alongside fire, police and schools

3.  Activate conversations about the vital and transformative role that the library plays, and its value to the community.

The research also told us that the potential supporters we need to wake up and activate with our awareness campaigns are not necessarily our library users. Changing the funding cycle for libraries requires new, bolder campaigns and conversations aimed squarely at the segment of our communities who see, or could see, the library as a source of transformation, not simply as a source of information. Our long-held marketing assumptions about understanding library user demographics or life stages, and crafting our message to match these users' needs, is just not sufficient.

Library support is an attitude, not a demographic. Therefore, a successful awareness campaign has to be a community-based educational effort, not an in-library initiative aimed at users. We have to take our message to the streets, to the parks, to city councils, to our schools, to our businesses, to our farmers markets, to our Rotary clubs, to our bus shelters, to our airports and beyond. If we want to wake up the potential supporters, we first have to get their attention.

I geek superheroes, I geek vampires, I geek composting and I geek jobs.

What do you geek?

This may not be a question you might expect from a community awareness campaign, but it is just the type of question needed to grab a potential library supporter's attention. It is also the type of question that can start a different type of library dialogue. Not a discussion of library programs, but rather a conversation about community passions, transformative actions and the ability of the public library to help transform lives—no matter what our residents need or what they "geek."

Geek the Library was crafted by our advertising partner Leo Burnett USA, but it was brought to life by the talented and terrific staffs of the pilot libraries. The campaign activities and ideas you will see and read about in the pilot results that follow are absolutely amazing. The staff embraced the challenge and took the message of the transformational value of the library into the community and to the potential supporters. And they saw results.

Market surveys conducted before and after the pilot campaigns, and the feedback from the participating library leaders and staff, provide strong evidence that an awareness campaign aimed at telling the library story can drive change. During the first months that the campaign pilot was in the test markets, the campaign reached over half of the more than one million residents in our pilot communities. Perceptions of the libraries as a source of importance support for the community increased, and more residents felt it was important to support their public library. Most importantly, the campaign generated action. Over two-thirds of the residents who saw the campaign took action or intended to take action. This included talking with family and friends, visiting the library or the geekthelibrary.org Web site, volunteering or donating time or money to the library.

The pilot libraries made the difference. I would like to thank the hundreds of librarians who "got their geek on" for the pilot campaign and tested dozens of ideas. They devoted weekends and evenings, and weathered the sun, rain and crowds to take the library message to the community—thank you all for the invaluable learning that you have provided!

A special thanks to the staff and leadership at our hub libraries, Live Oak Public Libraries and Des Moines Public Library, for their dedication to the project; and to Mary Wegner, State Librarian of Iowa, and Dr. Lamar Veatch, State Librarian of Georgia, for their continued support. And finally, a very special thanks to the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation—specifically Jill Nishi, Deputy Director of U. S. Libraries and Special Initiatives for the foundation—for its funding and support of this campaign, and for its ongoing dedication to helping libraries.

This pilot, of course, is just the start—a brief test of what could be possible from a long-term, wide-scale community awareness effort. So, we invite you to take the campaign and put it into action in your community. The program—the campaign materials, ideas and lessons learned—is free and available to any U.S. public library. Chapter 5 tells you more about how you can get started. Please visit get.geekthelibrary.org to learn more.

Sincerely,

**Cathy De Rosa**
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OCLC

I geek library funding.