At the Public Library of Gouda, customer service gets personal

The Public Library of Gouda has transformed itself into a lively cultural center at the heart of the local community by using data to make the connection between the collection and the library’s programming.
Planning for the community

Gouda, the Dutch city known for cheese, waffles (stroopwafels), and tobacco pipes, will celebrate its 750th anniversary in 2022. The Public Library of Gouda and the area’s archives will organize an international symposium in celebration of this event. “It is impossible to pull that off within just one year,” says Erna Staal, Director of the Public Library of Gouda. “That is why I already devised the Librarian in Residence program. It takes careful planning and building a network.”

Just a few years ago, the library faced large cutbacks. The organization then transformed into one centrally located city library, with four children’s libraries and two service points across the city.

The city library is located in a former chocolate factory (Chocoladefabriek), which also houses other organizations such as a printing workshop, the archives for the Mid Holland area, and an eatery. This combination makes it an attractive place for the community of Gouda and led to the library’s election as the best library of the Netherlands in 2015/2016. The jury described the Chocoladefabriek concept as a “truly new definition of the library” and “an ideal place for the inhabitants of Gouda as well as for other libraries to get inspired.”

“Colleagues from other countries often come to visit us at the Chocoladefabriek,” Erna said. “But we never have enough time during those visits. Our new Librarian in Residence program gives us more time to share ideas. And it makes me see our own library in a different light.”

Many elements have gone into transforming the Public Library of Gouda from a book warehouse into a cultural center that can host visitors from other countries and play a major role in community celebrations. Wise has helped the library achieve this transformation.

Connecting collections to programs

Erna thinks Wise is indispensable for making a real connection with her local library users. “When Wise’s reports indicate that a certain genre is very popular, it speaks for itself that we use that information to our benefit,” she said.

Because Wise provides information about activity in a specific library, this data helps library staff members understand the interests and needs of their unique community. “A neighboring city like Delft, with lots of students, will see totally different loan
behavior than we do. Over there, other materials will be in high demand,” she added. “To me, a library is a very local institution. We can learn from each other’s use of systems and the way we provide information, but the real content varies per locality.”

In addition to reviewing data about loans, Erna uses Wise to make connections between the collection and programming. “Before, the collection and the library programs seemed like two separate worlds,” she said. “But the data from Wise really contributes to how we connect these two nowadays. When people read a lot of Karin Slaughter, it makes sense that we do something with that information.” As a result, the library scheduled an in-person event with Karin Slaughter.

Reaching the right people

The Public Library of Gouda also uses Wise’s data and marketing tools to communicate with library users. “The Wise marketing tool makes it much easier to send a newsletter, so we use it to communicate in a more focused way,” Erna said. “We have several newsletters with targeted information for our sponsors, for regular library users, for youth.” She continued, “Wise allows us to create very specific target groups, so we can send them very specific information.” And the library is able to collect and use this data through Wise without compromising the user’s privacy.

Erna is careful not to allow the interests of the majority to eclipse services for a minority of library users. “It is not my intention to let the offering become more impoverished because of this data,” she said. “Data patterns provide insights that a library can use to its benefit. Yet, at the same time, we should never underestimate our guidance function. And that requires a human touch.”

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Erna Staal
Director of the Public Library of Gouda

Wise has helped the library transform into a cultural center.
Redirecting resources to serve library priorities

Another way Wise helps the library serve the Gouda community is by allowing more of the library’s budget to be available for customer service activities. Because the library decided to outsource Wise hosting with OCLC, the staff no longer needs to invest time or money in expensive servers. “This led to cost savings for our library,” explains Erna. Now, the library can focus more on customer service. “Without a library system like Wise,” she said, “it would definitely take us much longer to achieve the same result.”

Developing connections within the community

The Public Library of Gouda remains open seven days a week from 9:00 am to 9:00 pm, although library staff is not always present onsite when the library is open. This is possible only because of library partnerships and Wise’s self-service options.

Although the collection has a more modest footprint in the Chocoladefabriek, the way the collection is presented makes it more attractive. “The number of loans has risen because the library has better availability for the users,” Erna said.

The library works closely with the other organizations in the Chocoladefabriek to support users. “It is important both that people come to the library and that they can turn to real people with their questions,” Erna continued. The library also reaches out to local groups and businesses, such as cultural organizations and bookstores. Recently, it hosted a pop-up bookstore. “Contrary to popular belief, libraries and bookstores can easily coexist,” she said. “People often sample a book in the library, but then decide they really want it for themselves. In that case, they will purchase it rather than checking it out again and again.”

Wise allows the library to stay in touch with its users and their needs. “We do our best to align programs to the interests of the Gouda community,” Erna explained. “We always seek to connect with our visitors. We also believe in a personal approach.”
Wise has allowed the Public Library of Gouda to engage with the community on a personal level. Wise’s combination of cost savings, in-depth data reporting, and marketing communication tools puts the library in the center of the community.

“We use the data in Wise to analyze the behavior of our library users, which forms the basis for all of our decisions. For instance, when a particular genre is very popular, we use that information and do something with it. With Wise, we rely on facts, not assumptions.”

Erna Staal
Director of the Public Library of Gouda

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