



Executive Summary

Geek the Library makes an impact

Geek the Library gets people talking about libraries and library funding.

Geek the Library's bold look attracts attention and its simple message helps make a very personal connection to the library. This community awareness campaign provides a light-hearted approach to a very serious message. The campaign focuses on educating the public about the value of the library and the critical funding challenges many libraries face while asking the public what they “geek”—what they are passionate about.

Created by OCLC with research partner Leo Burnett USA and funded by a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Geek the Library illustrates the fact that everyone is passionate about something—everyone “geeks” something—and that the public library supports it all. The campaign includes advertising, marketing, public relations, community events, a campaign Web site, social media and other online tools.

The campaign was piloted from June 2009 to April 2010 with nearly 100 public libraries in southern Georgia and central Iowa, as well as additional communities in Georgia, Illinois, Indiana and Wisconsin. Geek the Library helped participants educate the public about the value of the library and library funding, and start important local conversations about the library. The campaign encouraged residents to think differently about the library—not only as relevant and necessary, but also hip and cool, and transformational.

The Geek the Library pilot campaign was a success! Qualitative and quantitative research before and after the pilot, as well as stories from participating libraries, provide proof that the campaign can help library leaders and staff make a positive impact on changing public perceptions about the library and library funding.

The Geek the Library story

In 2005, the library community recognized a troubling, downward public library funding trend occurring across the United States. Overall, funding was not keeping pace with growing circulation and library visits, and increasing demand for resources. Federal and state funding had flattened or declined, and many libraries reported difficulty raising funds from local sources. Other locally funded services also faced economic challenges and competition for local resources.

Many libraries understood the need to put effort into advocacy programs to increase awareness of the issue, but with so many demands on their resources, it was often difficult to create and implement such a program. OCLC developed a theory that a community-centered public awareness campaign—one that uses strategies similar to those of many successful brands and focuses on funding awareness, not usage—could be implemented on a broad scale and make an impact locally. But what groups of people would the campaign need to reach and what would the campaign message include?

With a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, OCLC partnered with Leo Burnett USA and conducted an extensive consumer study in 2007. The goal of the research was twofold: first, to understand the factors that drive, and limit, local library funding support; and second, to ascertain whether a large-scale library support campaign could be effective at increasing and sustaining funding for U.S. public libraries by reaching and influencing the segments of the voting population that have the most potential to become committed library supporters.



Quantitative research identified specific segments of the population more apt to support library funding. The segmentation analysis identified four categories, with two being vital to the success of any community awareness campaign:

- **Probable Supporters:** These voters are likely to support library funding initiatives, but are not fully committed. Since their vote is not a given, Probable Supporters are the primary target of the Geek the Library campaign.
- **Super Supporters:** These are people who are most firmly committed to supporting a library funding initiative. Super Supporters are not the primary target for the campaign, but are important to mobilize to help spread the message and improve campaign impact.

Further analysis of the qualitative study findings helped produce a deeper understanding of factors influencing library support and perceptions. Some important findings:

- Most people claim that they would support the library at the ballot box—fewer are firmly committed to doing so.
- There is a lot that people don't know about their public libraries.
- Library support is only marginally related to visitation.
- Perceptions of the librarian are highly related to support.
- The library occupies a very clear position in people's minds as a provider of practical answers and information.
- Belief that the library is a transformational force in people's lives is directly related to their level of funding support.
- Increasing support for libraries may not necessarily mean a trade-off with financial support for other public services.

Additional qualitative research tested possible awareness campaign messages that were developed based on these findings. The results—documented in *From Awareness to Funding: A study of library support in America*—were clear: it could work.

Public libraries pilot the campaign

The research findings informed development of the Geek the Library community awareness campaign. The pilot campaign's objectives were to reposition the library as vital and relevant, and bring new life to its community standing. The personal message helped break through the marketing clutter and got people talking. Feedback from pilot libraries confirmed that the concept, while simple, had the potential to make considerable impact. The campaign's core message—everyone has something they are passionate about, something they geek and the library supports it all—resonated with a large percentage of the public in pilot communities.

Two regional areas, central Iowa and southern Georgia, were selected as pilot markets in June 2009, including 80 participating libraries. A small number of additional libraries were added at the end of 2009: Milwaukee Public Library in Wisconsin; Piedmont Regional Library System in Georgia (covering Banks, Barrow and Jackson Counties); Shelbyville-Shelby County Public Library in Shelbyville, Indiana; and Zion-Benton Public Library in Zion, Illinois. The official pilot campaign concluded in April 2010.

Even with increasing demands on their resources, participating library directors, managers and staff found time to effectively promote the awareness campaign to their local communities. Continuous feedback from these passionate advocates helped refine the program, and their creativity and enthusiasm provided many ideas to make the campaign stronger.

A combination of pilot library tracking components, feedback from the field, and online and offline tracking of specific campaign elements—as well as quantitative research that tracked statistical changes in public awareness and perceptions—form the results of the pilot campaign. The goal was to evaluate the effectiveness of the campaign to:

- **Raise awareness** about the campaign and the need for library support
- **Change attitudes and perceptions** about the library, the librarian and the need for increased library funding
- **Drive behavior** that relates to increasing support for the local library.

Outstanding results

The collective data provides many positive impact indicators. Geek the Library:

- **Got people's attention:** After five months, 64 percent of residents in central Iowa and 49 percent of residents in southern Georgia were familiar with the campaign.
- **Raised awareness:** Perceptions and attitudes around the library's importance and value in the community improved in southern Georgia, and more people said they were willing to fund the library.
- **Encouraged action:** More than two-thirds of residents in both southern Georgia and central Iowa had responded or intended to respond to the campaign in one or more ways, such as visiting the campaign Web site or telling a friend.

Positive results in all pilot markets can be attributed, in part, to a multipronged marketing approach that included advertising, public relations activities, community events, educational efforts and engagement with influential members of the community, such as public officials and the media.

The public was encouraged to interact with the campaign on the official Web site (geekthelibrary.org) where they could learn more about the campaign and funding, share what they geek, take part in a poll and sign up for e-mail updates. Over the course of the pilot campaign, hundreds of people shared what they geeked. People also embraced the social networking element of the campaign, showing particular interest on the Geek the Library Facebook page, which grew by over 13,000 fans during the campaign period and continues to add new fans.

Pilot library leaders and staff successfully initiated important funding conversations—a key objective of the campaign—by taking Geek the Library out into the community. Local events were an important element, and pilot library participants found creative ways to educate and engage the public. Library participants localized their campaigns using relevant local information in displays and handouts, and actively encouraged the public to take part by making personalized posters, connecting with Geek the Library online and spreading the word. Libraries also partnered with local schools, businesses and organizations to ensure as much of the community as possible participated in the campaign.

Available for U.S. public libraries

Pilot library leaders and staff went above and beyond program expectations and became vocal community advocates, and OCLC is extremely thankful for their efforts and support.

What began as a theory was proved to have impact in local communities and has reached far beyond the campaign's pilot markets. The campaign found a consumer and library following that represents people all over the United States. Interest in Geek the Library came from all over the world, including libraries in Australia, Sweden and Zimbabwe.

It is our hope that the experiences and learnings described in this report inspire other U.S. public libraries to adopt the awareness campaign and ask their communities to “geek” their library. Geek the Library is now open to all U.S. public libraries. Free materials, training and ongoing support are available. Interested libraries can visit get.geekthelibrary.org for more information.