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Columbus Metropolitan Library Creates Customer Loyalty Serving Somali Community

By Kristin Anderson, Youth/Information Services Team Leader
Columbus Metropolitan Library, Northern Lights Branch

Columbus Metropolitan Library (CML) was founded on one phrase that rings as true today as it did a hundred years ago – *open to all*. While we can't be all things to all people, we've worked to create spaces where people from various backgrounds and cultures feel welcome.

Take our Northern Lights Branch. While all CML branches serve diverse populations, Northern Lights serves a large Somali population. When CML recently surveyed its Homework Help Center customers to find out what language they commonly speak at home, Somali was ranked second behind English. Several years ago, it became clear that the population of the Northern Lights community had shifted and were acted.

Over time, we were able to hire staff with expertise in Somali culture to meet the growing and changing needs of our customers. We hired a Somali security officer and a Homework Help Center Coordinator who is semi-fluent in Arabic.

We look for ways to reach out to our Somali community. One successful event was a community meeting to explain the rules and resources of the library. Our Somali security officer translated the meeting and answered specific questions. For example, Somali customers didn't understand why our Somali security officer allowed boys and girls to interact with each other in a manner that wouldn't be appropriate in their homes. He explained that library policy doesn't give him the authority to restrict communication that doesn't violate our Code of Conduct.

Serving a diverse community is often a culture shift and education process for both Somali families and CML. We learned what simple gestures and comments are offensive to Somali and we educate our staff so that we can avoid using them. We work diligently to enforce the same rules for all customers. While we accommodate Muslims who pray in our building, we do have follow-up conversations with those who remove their shoes when they pray. We explain after they've finished that our rules require all customers to wear shoes. We make sure we are consistent—teens can't kick off their flip-flops while they're on a computer either. The same rules apply to everyone.

Serving Somali children also provides a unique challenge. Often, Somali children who come into our branch were born in the United States and are more Americanized than their parents. This can be challenging to balance while serving both parent and child. Also, because the Somali language wasn't a written language until the 1970s, the Somali culture has historically relied more heavily on the oral tradition to convey stories. Our staff members are experts in sharing the importance of reading and loving books to parents who are surrounded by literacy messages in our culture. By hiring staff who are able to communicate with Somali parents in their own language, we are making inroads into communicating the importance of kindergarten readiness.

Our Homework Help Center (HHC), one of the busiest system-wide, has helped us bridge the cultural gap. We assist approximately 50 students a day during the school year, and about 80 percent of those students are Somali. Students from kindergarten to high school come to our HHC seeking help mainly with English, reading and math.

Even a seemingly simple kindergarten assignment can be a challenge to a parent who is not yet fluent in written and spoken English. A parent might find it difficult to help their child complete an assignment successfully that asks the student to color in everything that starts with the letter “k.” The assignment might include a picture of a kettle, and the parent or child might think it’s a pot. Or there is a picture of a cat – a parent with limited English language knowledge might think “cat” starts with a “k.” These are basic concepts that our staff helps all children understand, but our HHC is able to help Somali children because our staff has an awareness of the challenges faced by those who are in the process of learning English.

Our focus, sensitivity and commitment to serving everyone greatly impact the community and our customers. Whether it’s with a child in our Homework Help Center or a parent researching citizenship requirements, we’re providing exceptional services for the greater good. Northern Lights Branch is now known within central Ohio as a place with staff who understands and respects the Somali community. In fact, some Somali customers travel to Northern Lights even though there is another location closer to their homes. We are a meeting place for this community and are proud of what we’ve done to receive their trust.

Serving customers with different cultural backgrounds can be challenging, but accepting their needs, focusing on education and above all being respectful creates lasting customer relationships.