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How We Are Raising Funds at a Small, Rural Library

By Ann Riegler-Coursey, Director

New Madison Public Library

I was asked to write this article because of a fundraising program in place at my small, rural library. We call the program "Fill Our Shelves," and its main purpose is to bring in additional funds for books and other library materials. In these days of dwindling budgets, this is one small way to supplement that fund. You can learn more about the program by visiting our website at www.newmadisonpubliclibrary.org. Click on the link for the "Fill Our Shelves" fundraiser at the top of the page. Feel free to borrow the idea. A library colleague shared her similar program years ago. Now I will share with you. You can even use the brochure as a prototype to start your own program.

This is an effective fundraiser for us, which brings in about \$1,000 each year. With an annual book budget (these days) of around \$15,000, bringing in an additional \$1,000 is significant.



While this is a neat program, it is just one of the successful fundraising efforts at New Madison Public Library. We also raised more than \$6,000 in the fall of 2009 to buy a book drop. Every summer, local businesses and individual donors give more than \$500 to cover the cost of our summer reading program. I have a pile of acknowledgement letters waiting to go in the mail for various "end of the year" donations made in the past few weeks. Just the other day, I received \$50 cash in an unmarked envelope from someone who isn't even a library patron.

I don't share all these things with you because they are unique or to brag about my fundraising expertise. These examples show you that fundraising can be done successfully in a small, rural library, even in these trying economic times, even when businesses are failing, even when people are down on their luck. They will still give because they LOVE libraries. We're warm and welcoming, especially in small town libraries, and people support what they appreciate and love. They are more than willing to help, as they are able, if you follow a few simple principles:

1. Share a need: You must let people know WHY you need money. Explain how budget cuts and the economy are impacting your library. Share with your potential donors how their gifts will make a difference. Realize that people will give to areas that are important to them. Some will buy books, some will help with programming expenses, and some will renovate rooms, so keep your wish list varied. Always be ready to share a need – we have a newly renovated meeting room with wonderful modular furniture and plush conference chairs because I was able to share a need with a family who wanted to give in memory of a past board member.

2. Ask them to give in a creative way: I admit it, I like a gimmick. When we raised \$6,000 to buy a book drop, we set an initial goal of finding 75 people who would give at least \$75 in 75 days in honor of our 75th library anniversary. We didn't quite make it in 75 days, but we surpassed our total goal and brought in 82 gifts of \$75 instead. Now we're in the midst of raising funds for a May levy campaign, seeking 25 donors to each give \$25. People respond to creative appeals. They want to be part of that elite group of \$75 donors. They want to be one of the first 25 people you ask to help with the levy campaign. They like the idea of shelves overflowing with books, thanks to their generous gifts. Think about a neat, catchy way to ask for funds the next time you have a project that needs some assistance.
3. Make fundraising a joint effort: I'm not the only one who raises funds at New Madison Public Library. My staff members all know about "Fill Our Shelves," and they know how to sell it. Our trustees lead the giving when there is a need, and they seek gifts when we have a big project like our book drop fund or our levy campaign. I understand that not everyone is comfortable asking people for money, so I always provide a script others can follow when asking for donations. And I am more than willing to make the "ask" if someone gives me a list of potential donors to contact. If the staff member or trustee can at least "warm up" the donor, my job is much easier when I actually ask for the gift. Helping with fundraising gives staff members and trustees more ownership in the project and in the library, and that's a very good thing.
4. Always acknowledge the gift and then foster the relationship: I make it a practice to thank each donor three times. I thank them when they give me the gift. I send a written thank you shortly after receiving the gift. And I thank them in a newsletter and/ or a visual display (whichever is most appropriate for their gift) at the end of the year or end of the project. Then I stay in touch with the donor. When I have exciting news to share, I include them in my mailing list. When I have a new "need," I contact previous donors and share this new opportunity to help the library. Previous donors are very likely to make additional gifts if they are asked to help. I also ask my financial donors to give other gifts, such as volunteer time, when the library has needs beyond financial support. Stay in touch and keep them informed, fostering the relationship.

"Fill Our Shelves" is a great fundraising program for our library. It may work at your library as well, but I don't think it works because it is particularly unique or special. It works because it allows us to show a need, it is a creative way to ask for help, it can be used by any staff member or library trustee and it gives us an opportunity to connect with donors, now and in the future. In the end, that is what makes it a successful fundraiser for us. I wish you the best of luck in your own fundraising endeavors. Feel free to email me at coursean@oplin.org with any questions or comments.