

BookBins

The “Waiting Room in a Box” of Outreach

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In fall 2015, the Bloomingdale (IL) Public Library was increasing community outreach at an incredible rate, Little Free Libraries were all the buzz, both in library circles and among community activists and beautifiers, and I happened to be in a cell phone store . . . watching a small child do everything in her three year old power to alleviate her boredom.

She was running circles around the desk, pulling packaged accessories off displays, and patting at mom’s leg for attention . . . all to no avail. I eventually left the store without having my needs met—much like that little girl—and as I drove back to the library, a solution presented itself.

What if we took some withdrawn materials, packaged them up, and used them to serve our patrons where there was a demonstrated need? A small mobile library would be like a waiting room in a box and be free marketing for the library! Every year, there are library materials that can be repurposed. It would be community outreach, passive programming, recycling, serving the patrons—so many birds with this one stone!

I scoured the Internet for sturdy, practical containers of an unobtrusive size that would still hold a nice selection of (mainly) picturebooks, maybe a puppet or puzzle or two. Then I drafted a proposal for my department head to pass along to the library director and library board.

Our board loves community outreach and partnerships, so they were eager to begin, as were all involved.

I purchased the bins, created sturdy labels, collected materials, and began entering everything into spreadsheets. The materials that were in each bin, which locations to solicit as hosts, and

rotation schedules were all created and color coded. I mapped out a few routes to maximize how many locations I could visit at a time and incorporated them into my commutes back to the library after outreach storytimes.

I selected VESSLA storage crates (\$6 each) from IKEA, since they were sturdy, had convenient casters, and an upper curved lip that made transport easy. All of the materials in each bin were curated from our biannual weeding, and a concurrent picturebook reorganization project meant I had lots of quality materials. The puzzles and puppets were chosen from retired materials as well. The laminated labels were designed and installed in-house, using materials we had on hand. We began with ten crates, and our initial cost of \$60 came from the Youth Services programming budget.

I began canvassing local businesses and locations like the post office. The standard approach was a friendly explanation that the program was absolutely free of cost and risk; it was simply the library’s way of filling a need and being a good community partner. Some locations were shown a prepared bin, others weren’t, depending on the atmosphere.



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Locations were selected based on anticipated need, space allocations, village boundaries, and absence of competition. In the interest of being good neighbors, I did not offer bins to retail locations that sold children's items.

Initial pitches were received with expected levels of enthusiasm, and of the businesses that refused, more than half were due to strict corporate control over franchise environments. Every location indicated support for the program and wished the library success.

As of July 2016, twenty-seven locations had been visited, with eight choosing to participate. All have been given a rotation (or two) of materials, and they indicated that they both used and liked having the bins.

None of the items in the bins has been damaged or gone missing; in fact, at our very first location—the cell phone store that

inspired the program—our bin had somehow acquired an extra book! A juvenile novel from a local middle school library was with the rest of the materials, so I dropped it off at the school with a note explaining the program and how the book was found. There have been other proofs of usage as well . . . a magazine here, a stray washable marker there . . . little clues that our patrons are being served, even when we aren't there in person.

There are only two bins left in our original purchase, so the plan is to find homes for them, then purchase more crates and begin making rounds again. I've also added juvenile magazines and small games as they are removed from the circulating collection.

During the first materials rotation, the local postmistress said, "That's been such a good idea! The kids love it!" while one of local bank branch managers added, "Yeah, the kids love it. And it keeps them busy, so it's great for us." ☺

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