

The virtual mobile library: reaching your community

I'd like to talk to you today about our Library, a public library that provides library services to the blind and print disabled community, and how we build and maintain relationships with our clients. The Vision Australia Information Library Service provides library and related services to around 16,000 library members nationally and covers a range of formats and services to bring the world of information and reading for pleasure to a community across Australia that otherwise would not have equitable access to books, newspapers and magazines.

The clients of our Library service don't travel to the library as many of our members live in rural and remote areas, are house bound, in care or find the challenges of public transport daunting, as you or I might if we lost or began to lose our sight or just simply enjoy the convenience of a library service that comes to them. The library provides services to our borrowers with the philosophy of choices in delivery of information, access to as much information as we can make accessible, a dynamic and progressive collection of recreational reading and varying ways and means of staying in touch over the post ways and the airways.

We are a virtual library in that our borrowers do not access our services with walk in visits but by access via phone, email, internet and book notes. We do have an access centre as we are a public library and borrowers can come in, return books, pick up new ones, use the internet and check out the latest in playback devices and learn how to download newspapers and magazines, and a busy day for us in the Access Centre is when we get a dozen clients come through the door! The majority of our contact with clients is by other means where the library effectively comes into the living room of the client. This is why I characterize the library as a virtual mobile library, we come to you, not by bus but anywhere Australia post delivers to, there is a phone line or internet connection and you send your books and communicate with us using post, e-mail and phone.

The Vision Australia library is part of the oldest and newest blindness organization in Australia and we are a culmination of numerous organizations, Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind, Vision Australia Foundation and the Royal Blind Society NSW, and very recently the Royal Federation for the Blind Queensland, these organizations have many years of experience providing services to people who are blind or have low vision have come together to form a national organization.

Our vision is for a living partnership between people who are blind, vision impaired and sighted and we foster these relationships with the community through creating partnerships of knowledge and expertise with other libraries such as ours around the world to ultimately provide better services. Our organization has strong links with government, business and most importantly with the hearts and minds of our clients and the sighted community.

The library eligibility covers

- A person without sight
- A person whose sight is severely impaired
- A person unable to hold or manipulate books or to focus or move his or her eyes
- A person with a perceptual disability, such as dyslexia

Not only do we purchase stock and circulate library materials but we also produce our own titles in Braille and Daisy formats. DAISY stands for digital accessible information systems and is an internationally recognized standard of format and has the ability to give the Braille and audio user the same access to page numbers, book marks and chapters as does a print book, one of the other major advantages of the DAISY format is the delivery of books, one book averages one disk which eliminates the frustration many people experience managing multiple cassettes and discs, the possibilities that our borrowers have via the daisy format are only beginning to become understood. The library is currently developing burn on demand services, which will improve our delivery of DAISY books. Over the last year we have added over 3,500 DAISY titles, adding to our circulating collection of around 180,000 items, and loaned over 5000 DAISY playback devices.

Material is available in a variety of formats including audiotapes (which we are phasing out), DAISY CD's, Braille, Print Braille children's books and audio described videos. The library also provides audio magazines on cassette and DAISY CDs. Local newspapers are produced via a network of volunteers at local libraries. National daily news, some magazines and the full library catalogue are also available via the telephone. Library members are also able to download national newspapers and available magazines using our NOTG service and a Book Port, a small portable digital device supplied by the library which is in addition to the DAISY CD players provided to library members free of charge. To the best of our knowledge VAILS is the only library in the world providing a range of playback devices to all clients free of any charges, this includes postal charges.

The average number of loans per annum by a client is approximately 62 and this includes books and magazines. Over 8,000 online periodicals are also available via a consortia arrangement with other Victorian public libraries. These cover a wide range of academic and professional publications as well as magazines; these can be accessed via the library's web page. Other library and information services include an alternative format reference service to clients and staff of Vision Australia, a Reader Services telephone service and personal support services for the production of alternative format information such as instruction books and personal documents. A large amount of work is also produced for primary, secondary and tertiary student members that belong to registered educational institutions.

Our staff at the library, which is our greatest asset, can guide a new borrower through the registration process either face to face or over the phone, this involves constructing a reader profile. This profile enables books to be sent out to borrowers by subject interest code or author, either automatically or our borrowers can make their own choices using the on line catalogue and requesting system or our phone catalogue, or I can simply ring the library and talk to the Reader Services Staff. Our Library Management System is specifically designed for this purpose and is used by other talking book and Braille libraries in Australia, New Zealand and South Africa.

Where our clients are and who are they and what are their communication needs?

Geographically our clients are predominantly from New South Wales, Australian Capital Territory, Victoria and Queensland and the Northern Territory, with some library services provided in South Australia and Tasmania under contract, and Braille services to Western Australia. Many clients are in regional and country areas, which highlights the importance of postal services and the delivery of the physical medium, just as you or I are familiar with the concept of borrowers interacting with their local library, our borrowers interact either over the phone or by email, which goes some way to fulfil the role that libraries play in peoples lives, whatever this role may be.

Our client demographics indicate that 70% of our clients are over the age of 70 years and that the balance is mainly adults over the age of 35. The number of children and young adults using the service is quite low. The living arrangements for these age groups can be quite varied ranging from independent living to living with families or to living in supported accommodation. Some clients are home bound or find it difficult to be mobile. In fact, of the total client base, 44% live alone or in supported care. It would be expected that those who live alone are less likely to have support, particularly for online service and are more likely to be financially disadvantaged.

The importance of the older demographic is that these clients are likely to be long-term clients who have social needs that the library fulfils over and above the loan of a book. For this client group the relationship established with the library can be critical to their well being and connection with community. The exchange of a physical item is affirmation of care and support. 69% of our clients are female; it is likely that a large number of these are widows living alone. According to internal research conducted in 2007, over 70% of the client base stated that they prefer to receive their loans on a physical media. If I may for you draw a correlation between the users of Home Library Services, many of our members use this library service, as it has certain similarities, contact, affirmation of care and the building of relationships.

Having this knowledge about our borrowers and what they want and how they want to communicate with us and how we communicate with them does not mean that we remain as we are, the library is committed to developing on line services to give those library members using these services more autonomy over their library services and to prepare for the future when we envisage a greater uptake of on line services and access, being able to register on line, make changes to their personal details and change their reading preferences and ultimately have on line delivery of books.

Yes we are committed to building on-line services, making material downloadable.

Yes we are delivering digital services to clients, digital players and books in digital medium, but a huge part of this journey involves our clients and we know that they want to speak to someone at the end of the phone, even to say I'm having problems with downloading! In the here and now, by far the most effective communication tool we have is the phone, they ring us and we ring them.

So how do we build relationships with our borrowers to meet our clients' library communication needs? The relationship begins when borrowers join the library and continues until they decide they don't require our library service any longer, we have several contact mechanisms in place such as phone, email and in person, but by far the most used communication tool we have is the phone, although we have approximately 20% of borrowers registered to use either our on line services or email lists, the most popular being the digital club with 450 members, the phone remains the most constant form of communication and in most instances the first point of contact. Every time a borrower calls us, we log the call in the client's record, what the call was in regards to and details of any actions taken as a result of the call, we receive on average over 3000 calls per month, a vast difference from a busy day in the access centre, an average call is around 4-5 minutes but it's not unknown for a call to last as long as a half hour if this is what's required, a curious mix of library and social discourse takes place. We may well be the only person the borrower has called or spoken to for the day, imagine for one moment you live on your own, are elderly and vision impaired and have a love of books and reading, who would you like to speak to – your local library, even if you are thousands of miles away, and in the middle of nowhere.

The reason why we do this is to create some continuity of service to borrowers, if I call the library to change my profile, and then a month later decide make further changes by adding or removing subject interest codes or authors, the person who I talk to has prior knowledge of previous changes and enable the staff member to assist with the reader's advisory conversation. This also assists us with discrepancies in service delivery, helping to establish a pattern of problems or difficulties with managing the library or postal service. This can also help to advise us if the borrower needs assistance with training, community assistance or a scaling down of their service if their circumstances change, an example of this is if we notice that a borrower is accumulating long term overdue items, this may be an indication that they are having difficulty returning books, again part of the Reader Services skill is to be able to have this conversation with people as there may be something we can do to help. This relationship deepens as the length of membership increases, and plays an important part in our borrower's life; our members have changed with us, have seen many changes to the library service over the years and continue to be part of our library community.

How do we communicate with 16,000 library members?

Unlike a conventional public library, I can put up a sign, print a pamphlet alerting borrowers to changes to opening hours, additional services or changes to the collections. If we decide to make changes to our services we have to consider as any public library has, the impact on borrowers, it's a different set of circumstances when you rely on someone to manage your library service for you if you are unable to – and you'd better get it right! When we do make major changes, we record a newsletter, contract a mailing house to duplicate, pack and mail the newsletter – in 4 formats, cassette, daisy and Braille, borrowers can also have newsletters e-mailed to them.

We have other ways we keep in touch with our borrowers:

- The digital club, an email communication that includes author of the month, occasionally a quiz and library news.
- New titles on the phone – every fortnight we change the list of new titles recently added to the collection that can be accessed after hours with an option to leave your name and the title you would like, each morning these are picked up by staff and the reservations or requests are added to the borrower's record, this option is popular.
- After hours message option – I can leave messages about changes I'd like made to my library record or my reading choices, this option is available during the day as well, if people don't wish to speak to anyone.
- Reader Advisory segments on VA radio – each week a member of staff talks about new books in the library and library news.
- Tele link talks, these are phone linkups with people to talk about books and reading or an opportunity for people to ask questions about the library services.

- Library sessions with the day centre activities held at VA centers, demonstrating new equipment and talking about new books and library news.
- Project 3000 – Last year 3000 borrowers who had not had contact with the library for over 2 years were called to ask how they were going with their library service, if they wanted to update their reading preferences and did in fact still require our service, in fact we often call people if we come across a record that hasn't been used for a while.
- Visits to community – a large part of our lives at the library are spent visiting Vision Australia centers, adaptive technology expos, Libraries and library conferences to talk to clients and library community about our library and the services we offer, this takes planning and commitment from staff, along with tolerance of bad hotel rooms, camping equipment and forgiving partners, families and pets. If we get invited, we can get there, we go.

Communication also comes the other way, a large number of our borrowers like to write notes and place them in the return container, feedback about books, authors, comments about our service, notes of thanks, or suggestions on how we can improve our service. Each one of these notes is precious and the majority find their way to Reader Services where the content is recorded in the client's record.

Each month a member of staff compiles notes into a Reader's recommended newsletter which is used on radio and is a handy reader's advisory tool, notes are passed to other departments for comment and feedback and some notes just really touch your heart.

What is one of the most sensitive communications for us at the library? By the nature of our client base a lot of our clients pass away, we may hear of these via notes but mainly a spouse or relative will call to tell us, a skill of our Reader Services staff is to be able to take these calls and to handle them with sensitivity and care.

So what does the future hold for borrower communication? As long as our library members require the phone service, and someone on the end to answer their call, we will be there. It is expected that more members will use on line services but we know that this will be a gradual process and one we are committed to building.

I'd like to finish off by reading you a small selection of notes – these are a good representation of what we receive on a daily basis, and I have to admit that knowing that someone who cannot see all that well or not at all has taken the time to write a note either good or not, is touching, and it's an affirmation for us that our efforts are appreciated.

Many years ago before I lost my eyesight I read Barbara Taylor Bradford novels. It has given me so much pleasure to listen to these tapes. Thank you for sending it. If you have some more of her books would you send them to me to enjoy, thank you again.

Dear Library

I am still trying to become familiar with my daisy book machine; however I cannot say it is easy. I played a music disk with a singer and found the music sort of 'tinny', not as good as the tapes.

However I shall still continue to try as I do not want to give up without a good try. It is nice when you go back to a story and it starts immediately where it left off. It is not surprising I am slow as I am 96 years; my eyes are not the best. Thought I'd like to have a go at what all the young'uns are talking about, after having tapes for years, I have found tapes great, such a wonderful thing to hear a good book after having the joys of reading taken away. I thank you very much for that joy.