

The Librarian's Desk . . .

Generations X and Y are two young generation groups who have discovered libraries. The Pew Institute for the Internet and American Life released the findings of their nationwide survey at the end of 2007. Of all the generation groups responding to the survey, Gens X & Y attest to making the most use of libraries. Tech-loving Gen Y (ages 18 – 30) leads the pack, with 40% claiming that they use libraries for problem-solving information and all-purpose patronage. The study also discovered that 53% of all Americans used a library in the past year. Furthermore, those who did not use a library in a year's time assured the Institute that they have plans to use a library in the future.

Surprised? Not I. I've been people-watching here at the Library. Although, admittedly, in Sherborn, Gens X & Y residents are away at college, are building careers or are newlyweds who have not yet settled down in Sherborn. Still, I saw them in here when they were younger, as I now observe their younger siblings coming and going with armfuls of books, following in the footsteps of their older siblings. These "Millennials" demonstrate a tremendous appetite for books, blogs, and simply enjoy the culture of the library experience, an independent destination in their Sherborn sphere. Many Millennials have been Library volunteers to complete the community service component of their education, or have been members of our paid staff, who soon learned there is a lot more to libraries than the linear feet of books.

The Pew Institute findings contradict the presumption that libraries are losing relevance in the internet age. Rather, the infinite amount of information available on the internet does not apparently overshadow the biblioteque in favor of the nanotech for a generation that is entirely at ease with playing, working, studying, and socializing in a virtual world. In fact, a surprising correlation surfaced. The survey revealed that Americans of all ages, who have ready access to the internet at home, work, or at school, use libraries more often than those who do not have any access to the internet whatsoever. The survey results seem to suggest that the internet is bringing more people into the library, rather than replacing their library use. I'd like to take a shot at explaining why I believe this to be true.

I think the so-called information age has entailed the development of a large appetite for information, along with everything else that Americans are said to be large with. While the word 'appetite' typically connotes good health, there is also the run amok symptom of appetite. The run amok information appetite is one I have witnessed taking the form of an inability to concentrate unless there is distraction provided. I run into this craving for distraction from time to time when I try to disconnect workforce newbies from their Ipods, their email inboxes, and their cell phones. "But I can't concentrate unless I have background noise," is the plea. It is as if I am cutting off their lifeline. I think this concentration via distraction syndrome stems from having to force clear thoughts through a great deal of external stimulation always surrounding us, indeed, bombarding us. But that's OK; we are adapting and evolving, as we should, to a highly charged and often overcharged environment. I for one have noticed how loud silence has become. If I were not a Baby Boomer, I wouldn't begin to notice the difference, as I would have no recollection of a pre-tech world.

The reason why I think this information appetite leads to increased Library use by young people is that, while much of the information buzz around us is a random swarm, a significant portion of it is directed at the individual. Once we get caught up in an information swarm that is interesting, the global nature of the internet introduces us to concepts, words, phrases, metaphors, historical analogies, news and more that is not native to where we are brought up. A "polyglut," if you will. As this rapid-fire informational exchange is always "so five minutes ago," it is too late or perhaps un-cool

to revert to asking questions when new contributions to the virtual forum is a pile-up of responses and ideas to race with.

Curiosity and wonderment are surely struck when new subjects and ideas are constantly introduced at the speed of eDRAM (embedded dynamic random access memory.) To become a citizen in the alternate world, one must be smart, innovative, and quick. These young patrons' attraction to the library is for the acquisition of substance, for unscrambling information thumbnails and soundbytes into a cohesive base of knowledge.

Which is how and why I think this wave of young techies will change libraries for the better. There is reportedly so much information being consumed that it is only natural for that information to work its way out again. Libraries will become, and are already becoming, a place of public support for not only acquiring information, which has been our traditional role, but to provide a well-equipped center for the personal creation of information to be dispensed. And for that, I give Generations X & Y an A.

Elizabeth Johnston
Library Director