

New Media Lab – New customers

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Abstract

Introduction

In July 2013 City of Gold Coast Libraries opened a Media Lab – a digital creation space for individual and collaborative group work or training sessions, in a new long anticipated very handsome library building that replaced an undersized facility. The community were eagerly watching the growth and development of the site but I think it is fair to say, the building exceeded expectations – and that was just the start. The Mayoral opening attracted much attention from existing customers and new and different audiences – the potential for the new and engaging ways to build cultural community capacity was launched!

Methods

Activating a new Media Lab was an exciting and adventurous project that has no end. We acknowledged our ambitions at the outset were to deliver on Council's new Culture Strategy which included a facilitator of digital media creation, a connector of software and hardware with customers and experts, within a capacity building framework. The reach would extend beyond our known customers and community and challenge us to step out of our comfort zone to continue to grow new connections in diverse environments.

By actively seeking skills and expertise outside our existing staffing, we continue to grow our own skills while at the same time allowing community members, new business start-ups, and other interested people of all ages to adopt some buy-in to the facility.

Relevance to theme

We have secured interest and support from previously non-users and non-user groups. Our contacts extend from small business operators needing 3D prints of proposed kitchens, teens 'pimping their ring tones', graduated digital media students wanting business and creative exposure, and tech heads sharing their coding and robotics not to mention the partnerships with other creative forces (e.g. series of short film production with the Gold Coast Film Festival). This will continue to evolve as our contacts grow and change and as they help mould the topics and knowledge shared and as our audience needs change. As facilitators not always teachers, community input is vital to the deliver a healthy, vibrant and creative digital media lab.

Paper

"Build it and they will come."

And we did.

City Libraries Media Lab is situated in Helensvale Branch Library at the northern area of the City of Gold Coast. We took down a small, homely library building and squeezed most of our collection, our staff and our customers into a temporary building – 17 de-mountables in fact, just down the road. From here it was 'business as usual', library programs included, for the next 18 months.



And we built, and built, through rain and delays and we ended up with a very large, modern, two storey library and community centre with Auditorium, music rooms, multi-purpose rooms and a Media Lab.



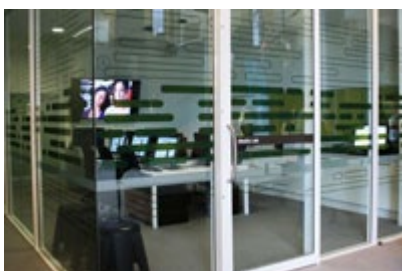
And they came.

The long-standing (or long-suffering) customers, our politicians and our curious community. They had been avidly watching the growth and development of the facility and the grand opening was their reward day. The transformation, as it certainly was, befitted the area which had originally been developed as a housing estate in the late 1970's – early 80's and had grown to support a major Shopping Centre – and now a large branch library and cultural centre. Over this time the population had exploded from 8 000 in 1993 when the original library opened, to 42 150 in 2009 when the redevelopment of the site was approved. All this was part of the Library's 10 year planning process.

The usage and visitor statistics, the favourable public response, the support from Council and especially the local Councillor has been magnificent (particularly by social media)– just what you would hope for. And looking at the images you can see why they came and why they keep coming.

There was a 40% increase in library attendance during the initial opening period, which, while it has eased and plateaued, has continued to attract customers.

Let me introduce you to the Media Lab.



The vision was to provide an environment that was conducive to collaboration across the range of cultural domains, and business. A shared working space that fostered and encouraged youth, entrepreneurs, new business initiatives and so much more that would take our customers into brave new worlds.

We purchased high spec computers and installed graphics software, Adobe Creative suite, music creation and editing software, filmmaking and CAD software and various other applications that would allow customers access to explore their digital creativity. To make, re-create and mash. To design and to print – in 2D and 3D. We chose to install a commercial quality 3D printer that is used by universities' architecture and 'built environment' studies. And this is available to members of the public on a cost-recovery basis in the Media Lab.

We separated the internet network from the library's to alleviate concerns raised about potential negative impact on general library customer activity. None of the lab's computers are on Council's ICT network. After their assistance with the initial purchase, as they willingly washed their hands of this uncontrolled environment, and we shook ours. They gave us the freedom to manage the room and its contents, including all the installation, set-up and downloading, free from the usual rigors of a corporate environment. We promised to engage an outside IT contractor should (or in their opinion, when) we needed IT support or troubleshooting – 18 months on, this has yet to be called upon.

The Media Lab is one specific area of the library and our services, where we are actively seeking new customers – or perhaps I should say, we are targeting a different audience. So let's have a look at why. With all that high-end 'new-fangled' technologies available we want to do more than run generic computer training sessions and IT instruction. In fact we would be quite happy for library staff not to run any sessions in there at all – well, maybe not many anyway. Our aim is to facilitate. We want to be the mediator between the session convenor, the facilities and the customers; between their ideas and the software and hardware that can realise them.

What we don't want is a 'makerspace' in the sense that many libraries are establishing. We already run very popular craft-type activities and perhaps there is scope to broaden these to encompass more of the 'hammer and nails' type of 'making' but that isn't the brief for the Media Lab. We are part of the City's vision for a strong cultural economy and future workforce

With all due respect to the ongoing upskilling of our library staff, the equipment in the Media Lab has the potential to create content in ways that we can't actually teach. It's the creativity that each individual brings to the software that we are trying to encourage. The Media Lab is a place where library staff foster and support the digital artist, the budding coder or would-be architect as well as support the local business person to design and create their logo and website, and the kitchen manufacturer to create a 3D model of his kitchen prior to construction.



So who do we want to attract, who are these people?

They are existing library members and/or their partners and friends, those who already know of our library and its services, but importantly the Media Lab customers are also currently non-library users. Identifying non-users is one thing, but attracting them to your library is the challenge.

How do we go about this?

Did they just come? After all – we built it...

This is where our existing library and non-library networks come into play. It was time for the geeks and techies in the service to step up, announce their presence and invite their friends to come and 'play'.

We have shared news of the Media Lab with our cultural network, our festival directors, our local school teachers, TAFE teachers, university lecturers, Tech Start Up co-ordinators, our existing customers (of course), CoderDojo, local Tech groups, we have held teen events, attended MakerSpace demos and university 3D forums and at every other opportunity we spruik the free facilities available for the public.

It's a bit like making new friends – not always entirely comfortable at first. But our new friends have different contacts and they introduce you to their friends and so it grows.

Who is using the Media Lab then and what are they doing?

Early on we were successful in attracting a sculptor who wanted to create in 3D – a very nice coup and another who is developing an augmented reality museum. More regularly with the help of volunteers and individuals from small businesses we present:

CoderDojo – coding for children every Saturday

Photoshop - teaching introduction to Photoshop for small business operators so they can design their own business cards, logos etc.

Create your own zine

Create an app

Pimp your (phone) ringtone – a teen favourite

Meme making – upload to Instagram

Create your own video, edit and upload it

Tinkercad – basic CAD designing

Introduction to 3D printing – design and print your model. Local Studies Library staff ran a session ‘Print your own Pint – pub stories meet the 3D printer’.

Untethered from Council network we have the opportunity to upload, download and install as we see it meets our needs. We can Dropbox, YouTube and collaborate online in ways that support our customers beyond our previous limitations.

What are the gaps in our current customer base?

We would like more digital artists.

We see opportunity for former TAFE and university students to use the facilities to continue their own work, promote new business ventures, to make connections with others that need their skill set in a free, public environment where they can benefit from the exposure.

There is a range of music creation and editing software available for local musical talent to explore with a recording studio in the next room.

There is definitely scope for mashups – our historical image content with audio, for creating recordings to accompany family images that capture local memories – for their collection or the library’s.

The really exciting thing about the Media Lab is what we don’t know, what we can’t plan or schedule, and that is what the customer wants to create – that’s the imaginative use that we can’t teach, but we can foster.

We are seeking not only existing library customers, but also non-users and that’s not an easy ask. How to attract those who may never have been attracted to the more traditional library? We need to put them in our story, let them know ‘what’s in it for them’ and that leads us back to -

Why would they come?

How would they know about these wonderful facilities and opportunity?

The only answer is that we have to reach out to them, because of course, they don’t know about us. They don’t yet know how we can support their dreams.

How do we measure success in such a different landscape?

Would we ever be satisfied or feel that we had succeeded?

Does this project have a long-tail before ‘results’ by whatever we measure them, are seen?

These are not simple questions. Qualitative rather than quantitative measurement in library usage is often only captured by feedback forms. But it is the significant moments when customers of any age or interest achieve their own ‘success’, develop their business card, master the drawing tablet, or draws and prints a 3D image of their pet dog. It’s about embedding coding skills in our younger children that will benefit their understanding and interaction with the digital world; and that reward may be years in the future. That’s the long-tail aspect of the program. These children will grow up knowing that the library had cool techie equipment that they ‘cut their teeth on’, and for them, the library will always be a special place.

Like all library programs the Media Lab is about life-long learning, community capacity building, community connectivity and these are not always easy to measure statistically. From a business and economic perspective it's also about networking and providing exposure and resources for budding businesses and recently graduated IT media students. It's about sustainability and keeping economic resources in our locality and growing these resources. It will be about the Key Performance Indicators that will be developed around the activity across the cultural domains. Our success will also be measured by the number of partnership we will develop

Where to from here?

Our next step is to dedicate a staff member to the Media Lab with the lab their primary responsibility and focus. Our expectation of that role is to manage and schedule workshops and partnerships, manage artists-in-residence, introduce new topics into the program, coordinate presenters, maintain our Media Lab blog, continue outreach activities by liaising and networking with local schools and interest groups and generally drive activity in the Media Lab. With an eye on the changing technology landscape, some IT skills and a passion for creativity and customers – we are not asking for much... We see that support for the Media Lab is not a single person's responsibility, but that having a main person in this facility, working, demonstrating, advocating, exploring its potential and being generally available, will give it an increase in prominence.

Is this a good news story or not?

Absolutely! We have wonderful facilities both in the library and in the Media Lab that we are very proud of and that the community has fully embraced. The Media Lab is a journey that has just begun, that is constantly evolving and has no defined path, so it's a very exciting journey for those that like change. It's a journey that doesn't really have an end – just a beginning.