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**Tammy Ross:**

Welcome to Long Overdue: Libraries and Technology, a podcast for librarians in which we explore important trends and topics in the library industry. My name is Tammy Ross for EBSCO. You're listening to episode four in our series called Cultivating Your Library's Entrepreneurial Ecosystem, hosted by Duncan Smith, founder of NoveList and EBSCO's chief strategist for public libraries. In this episode, Duncan will be talking with Amy Fisher and Morgan Perry of Mid-Continent Public Library in Independence, Missouri. Duncan?

**Duncan Smith:**

Thank you, Tammy. And thank you, Amy and Morgan for joining me today.

**Morgan Perry:**

Thanks for having us.

**Duncan Smith:**

Before I get to my question, I'd first like to introduce you both. Amy Fisher has been Mid-Continent Public Library's information and reader services manager for 26 years and Morgan Perry joined the library in 2013 as a small business specialist. Mid-Continent Public Library serves a population of about 800,000 and has a strong history of providing services to entrepreneurs in the business community through it's Square One Small Business Services. Amy, tell me about why you chose to focus on serving this population and how you won community support.

**Amy Fisher:**

It was probably around 2010, 2011. We had all of these business resources that weren't getting used so we thought a way to market that would be going and talking to chambers and EDCs. At that time, it was just me so I went to talk to them about the online resources that we had that would help their business. As we came to realize later, this was not the best way to go about helping the business community. In 2013, I hired my first two small business specialists. Morgan was one of them and is still here today thankfully. We have pivoted many times on what our goals and missions were to come to where we are today, which is helping LMI customers. And an LMI customer is that low to moderate income customer. After the first small business camp we did, the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation talked with our director and our community development director about giving us a grant to promote resource help and classes for business owners.

From there, we evolved what we do today. We focused our attention on low to moderate income businesses from vulnerable communities when we branded the program at Square One. We not only had to win support from the community, but internally as well. The type of business that we are focusing on are our unseen businesses, because they're so small and unseen, it's hard for librarians to understand that they don't have the social capital to join the camp of the Chamber of Commerce, even though their needs for information are greater. One thing we say, no, they're not in the Chambers. We would like for them possibly to be one day, but they're not necessarily there right now. We were invited to apply for a grant to support our programming because of the reaction to the bootcamp that we did. The program got attention, because it was so different from when everyone else was offering at the time.

**Duncan Smith:**

Thanks, Amy. That sounds really interesting to me because as you talk about these unseen businesses and low to moderate income populations, I'm imagining that many of our libraries and many of our listeners are having to ponder exactly that population and how to develop services for that population, given today's economic climate. Can you tell us a little bit specifically about what kinds of services that you're offering?

**Morgan Perry:**

Yes. We provide access to information for entrepreneurs, small business owners and nonprofits through three major formats: programming, one on one sessions and online resources. I used to say in-person programming, but not right now, it's all gone virtual. But we've actually seen bigger results from our virtual programming because we've been able to expand our reach so much. What this actually looks like in practice is about 200 one-on-one sessions every year, about 100 programs and 12 or so resources like ReferenceUSA™ and DemographicsNow. But the major difference between how we do Square One at Mid-Continent and how other library systems address serving the business community is that our team is mobile. We don't rely on people who are walking into our branches. We don't rely on just who we meet through the chambers. We're not just embedded in the community, we are intervening in situations in the community to support sustainable growth.

We're not just offering that information to that customer. We're offering that information in the context of how they would use it in their business. And that's a major difference. Amy and I are pretty active in cohorts around the nation for public libraries who are learning how to get involved in the small business community. And a lot of people focus on that type of librarianship, that embedded, well, we'll just put that person with some office hours in that spot. Hey, to be transparent, Amy and I were there. Five years ago, that's what we thought was going to make a huge difference, but we were not thinking outside of our four walls.

We only knew the businesses that we met at Chamber networking sessions and it turns out, according to the research done on Kansas City's business community, that those Main Street chamber-style businesses are only 24% of our business community makeup. That means we were leaving out the majority of businesses and in fact, the businesses who most needed our help. But if you don't know your ecosystem and you don't have someone in your community helping you do that research on what kind of businesses make up your business community, you don't know that. All you know is who's at the chamber.

**Duncan Smith:**

Thanks, Morgan. That's really helpful. One of the things that you said, one of the first lessons that you learned when you started doing these services, is that not everyone is your customer. And you just gave us a couple of examples of how not everybody at the chamber is a customer for public library business support services. What are some of the lessons you learned as you made this evolution from sort of this really traditional approach of going to the chamber and talking about business resources, to really looking at being embedded in the community and developing services that had impact and made a difference in the economy and the communities that you serve?

**Morgan Perry:**

Absolutely. Our first major lesson was really that not everyone is our customer, nor should they be. This was a process of probably about a year, Amy, right?

**Amy Fisher:**

Yes.

**Morgan Perry:**

Where we were being invited to Chamber of Commerce things and they were like, "Oh, do a Lunch and Learn. Be the keynote speaker for our luncheon." And we loved it. And we were having a great time and everyone was having this huge reaction. "Oh my gosh, the library has mosaic population guides and I can get to know my customers? I never knew. This is amazing!" But then we wouldn't see any return on that. And we handed out so many business cards and six months later, we'd be back at the same Chamber of Commerce and we'd do another great presentation and we'd go over eight amazing things that your library can help you with in your business for free. And we'd get the same reaction from the same people.

And that was the first time we were able to acknowledge that we were going about this in an ineffective way. We were turning the firehose of librarian-awesome information onto the crowd at the chamber luncheon and we were powerfully spraying them with data and they couldn't absorb it. By the time they closed the door on their car in the parking lot, all they could remember is, "That library's really doing something cool."

**Amy Fisher:**

It was a lot of, "Oh, I didn't know you had all of that information," and we had just talked to them a few months before.

**Morgan Perry:**

That's a challenge to your ego, because you're showing up and you're doing the networking and you're putting on these great presentations and everyone tells you how awesome you are. But when you look at the impact, it's not there.

**Duncan Smith:**

I'm fascinated. You just talked to us about what I think probably most libraries think about when they think about serving business community and that's not working, you discovered that wasn't working. I suspect that all across the country, people are getting similar results. Now you talked about a group that that wasn't working with, that approach wasn't working, but I know that you folks are spending a lot of time and energy on looking at food service-oriented businesses and startups. Can you tell me something about what you're doing with that population and their response to your services and the impact or the outcomes that you're achieving?

**Morgan Perry:**

Absolutely. We decided, oh Amy, what was it, about three years ago that we were going to do a special emphasis area?

**Amy Fisher:**

Our first one was food trucks.

**Morgan Perry:**

On the food business industry. And the reason that we were able to choose that emphasis is that we were looking at the breakdown of Kansas City's business community and looking at what kind of businesses were started as micro-enterprises, as opposed to a more traditional Main Street small business and what those needs were. And it turned out that a low to moderate income business really likes to start a restaurant and they like to do a food truck, because the barriers to entry into that industry are lower. If I'm that person that's super drawn to nurturing and feeding my community and I don't have a lot of startup capital, I can probably pull together enough money to get a food truck, but then I've also just entered a business that has a lot of regulatory stuff going on in it.

And in a metro like Kansas City, we've got all these different municipalities and local governments. ,So I might be in one county, but still as a part of Kansas City, Missouri and then who is the governing body at that point as far as health permits? It was just this incredibly complex thing that we saw unsupported people in underserved communities were extra attracted to it, because it all came back to that point of nurturing my community, feeding my community. We really dug in to what it looked like to start a food truck. And we were lucky enough to make some really great friends that own food trucks and felt like giving back. They had been the person that was chased away from the street because they were parking too close to a restaurant, but they didn't know the rules.

An easy win, right? We're librarians, we're really good at research. We know how to find the answers to questions. And we found a group of customers that were unsupported and needed access to that information. We're lucky enough to be at a particular organization that wants to support economic empowerment in communities so the funding was there to do some really in depth workshop work with this community. Our first thing out of the gate with the food business was the food truck workshop and Duncan, it's six hours long. It is six hours long and we do it twice a year and we usually have between a 100 and 150 people, not just from Kansas City, but reaching all the way up into Minnesota. The need is giant.

**Duncan Smith:**

That's outstanding. That's amazing. Congratulations to you and your team for seeing that need and recognizing it and moving forward with it. At the beginning of the program, you talked about the need to move from inside the library to out into the community. And so one of the things that I'm aware of is that we as librarians are very comfortable cataloging books and cataloging resources, but in some ways don't we also need to catalog our communities in terms of need and in terms of resources to address those needs?

**Morgan Perry:**

That was beautifully put. We work in a wonderful industry of people that have so much help to give, not just for small businesses, but in health, in financial literacy, in digital literacy, in all of these different areas. But we tend as public libraries to be thinking inside of our four walls, instead of just like you said, cataloging our customers.

I was sitting at a branch doing my regular office hours about five, five and a half years ago, checking in with Amy, doing all the things I was supposed to be doing and attending my chamber networking events. It turns out that if you survey people looking to start a small business, 'I need to go to the library' is not in their top 10 answers. We know that they think they need to go to the business licensing office, that's in the top 10 answers, but 'library' is not there. We had to acknowledge where our customer was and really understand how they think in order to be able to reach them with this information that we had. And that was really the first step in figuring out who our customer is and turning ourselves from resource-based to community-based. We were very concerned as any good librarian, and an Amy will tell you this, we wanted to provide the absolute best resources available to our community.

**Amy Fisher:**

And that led us to, we can't sit in our branches waiting for them to come in because we had discovered they're not coming in looking for that help. The library was probably the last place that they thought of for help. That's when we pivoted and started, okay, if you're not going to come to us, we are going to go to you.

**Morgan Perry:**

Our mindset was, we're providing the best resources available instead of, we are serving this customer base with these outcomes and outputs in mind. And that's a huge difference, because one's about collecting items and one is about helping people. And that's where that disconnect is. Are you collecting things or are you helping people? And really the best work comes with a marriage of two of those, where they're both on the table. We really started to look at what are the needs of not just the business community, but the needs of this 76% of the business community that's a micro-enterprise. Oh, and what if we get even more targeted and now we're looking at the low to moderate income micro-enterprises? What do they need?

And then making sure we were providing resources that met their need. We really talk about the balance. And it's the balance between what I think you need, what you think you need and then what you'll actually show up for. And we found that answer. That answer was basic Facebook for Business training. And that was our first big hit with the community. That's where we really started to see attendance at our programming pickup and then follow up one-on-ones. Changing that 'I will provide the best resources' to 'I will serve these customers'. And that's where our work really started to evolve and become more impactful.

**Duncan Smith:**

Let me just sort of step back here a second, Amy, you and Morgan both have talked about being a resource for other libraries out there and I'm so thankful that you are. But let's just sort of do a little simulation here, If you would. Let's just assume that I'm the library director at my local library and I just want to get started serving entrepreneurs and supporting people and having a better economic future. Where do I start? What advice would you give me if I had you two as a consultant?

**Amy Fisher:**

It really depends on the size of your library, the size of your city. Smaller rural areas may not have the resources as we do in Kansas City so you need to find those things in your community that work for you. If you're a small town, I would say, talk with your businesses in that area. Even if you don't have the online resources or the knowledge to help somebody, you know how to research. You can start there. You can look on your state's websites, other organizations, work with those businesses that you do have. If nothing else, open up your library for meetings for these business communities or these businesses in your community or find somebody in that community that can teach a class.

**Morgan Perry:**

Step one becomes about mapping your ecosystem. Do not assume what is out there. Make sure you're doing your due diligence, connect with the extension office out of your university system, look for your local SCORE chapter. Even in rural communities, that SCORE chapter might be waiting for someone outside of that metro to make contact with them. There are small business development centers all over the United States that also serve just huge amounts of territory. Look for those connections and that doesn't cost you a single dollar. And whether you're a small library that's one branch or a multi branch system, like we are, that's where you start. Map that ecosystem. That's part of your research. After that, Amy's exactly right. Survey your business community because that's where you start to find those needs. So often when libraries are starting this kind of work, they go to their resources first and go, "Okay, I own ReferenceUSA™. I need to be out in the community talking about ReferenceUSA™." That's not inaccurate, but it's not in the right frame.

The frame needs to be, "I talked to my business community about what they didn't have access to, what they thought their largest barriers were, and then I went back to my organization and looked at my resources and saw the opportunities I have to meet those needs." Along with all of this great intention, we have to start with our customers instead of starting with our resources. Our resources are great. Even the smallest library systems still own information that will help their customers, but we have to get to know our customers before we can give them the context around that information and make sure that we're collecting the right information for them. That's really beginning steps, no matter what size of library you are, that is where I would start with mapping your ecosystem. And there are a lot of great books even about mapping your ecosystem and a lot of really great resources that you can actually talk to a person across the nation about how to do that in your communities.

**Duncan Smith:**

I really love what you just said. As a matter of fact, I love everything that you've said today, both of you. And so I want to just sort of make sure, I'm going to practice my reference interview skills here and make sure that I reflect back what you have shared with us today. First of all, is realize that not everybody is the right customer for your library. That libraries need to sort of individualize their services based on the needs of their community and the resources they have, that you really need to ask questions about who is in your community and what exactly. Start with their questions rather than your resources. Once you know what questions they have, then you can figure out how your resources might help them find the answers that they need to move forward.

I'm also remembering that when we talk about mapping your ecosystem, that we're also talking about mapping the expertise that is within your community. I really love the fact that when you started your very successful food truck program series, that you actually found that there were food truck operators who were ready to share what they had, what their experience was. And I just have to believe that that had to be very impactful and valuable to the people who participated in your program. Did I miss anything?

**Morgan Perry:**

No, you haven't. We haven't talked about the diversity inclusion piece and I think that's really important if we have time to go into that a little bit.

**Duncan Smith:**

Let's go into that a little bit.

**Morgan Perry:**

You got it. Along the way in this journey, we were challenged by the liaison office between the business community and the city of Kansas City, Missouri, to go beyond having entrepreneurs and small businesses teach our classes, to making sure that our instructors and our teachers reflected the business community. That was a huge challenge for us. And in the spirit of transparency, when we sat down and audited who are our instructors, they were about 75% white males and we hadn't noticed. Then we started to look at, wow, who is sitting in our classrooms? And then it turned out that our classrooms were majority white as well, even though we knew that the section of the business community that was our target customer, they weren't majority white. They were business owners of color.

We really had to do some work within our team to acknowledge what was going on and then build a plan around how to change that and be honest about what does it look like to recruit teachers of color for our programming? What does our team look like? And our team is all white and a majority female. If we were just getting instructors that were in our personal networking circles, of course that's what our instructor base looked like. That led us to a discovery that I can't believe it took me almost 40 years of life to figure out. It turns out that people have to trust you.

We do business with people we know and trust. That is said in the business community every single day. For some reason, I thought as the public library that didn't matter to us, but it is equally as true of us. People have to trust us in order to show up. And that meant going out into the community in a very different way. Instead of focusing on business networking groups like BNIs or on chambers, we really started to look at community-driven groups and focus our networking there. Those activities looked a lot different. It wasn't time to wear my Dillard's two-piece ladies suit. It was time to look more like a human being. We even changed the wardrobe of the team. We got away from business suits and got more into business casual, got more into a branded polo or a branded t-shirt.

We became more approachable and it has to be intentional. You have to be able to look at how you are presenting the information and who you are targeting, because even if you don't think you have a plan, if you're sending information out into your community, you are doing it in a way. And to change that way, you have to be intentional. By targeting groups in our communities that were community driven, we met a whole new group of entrepreneurs and small business owners and nonprofits. And we can't expect them to come to our house if we're not willing to go to their house first. We knew things about the immigrant community, like they're 34% more likely to open a business than someone who's native born, but there were no immigrant entrepreneurs in our classes. And it's because we weren't showing up to their communities. We weren't building relationships.

We've even started using instead of the term networking, relationship building. And we know that that takes more time. That's not transactional. That's not me going to a happy hour and flinging business cards and rack cards about my next big event. That means I'm showing up to a community event and I'm listening. I'm relationship building. I'm following up with coffee dates with people. We are taking the time to get to know that community in order to gain their trust so that they will come to programming. And this was the next step. That's not the end. Then it was, how do I put programming in their community with them as a collaborator? And once we got there, the makeup of our instructor pool changed and it became more reflective of the people that we were looking to help. People knew our names. They reached out about other events.

We recently have been starting career services work. That made those relationships start faster because we had built the small business relationships first. And that's hard because what we had to do was say, "Hey, these business specialists, they can't be working the desk so many hours a week." And we had to figure out what are our procedures and policies around going to these meetings? How do we feel about a staff member spending two hours at a community event? And I think that, Duncan, that's the part that really catches libraries off guard is the amount of relationship building that you have to do.

**Duncan Smith:**

Morgan, to me, that certainly sounds like a long term investment that is not as easy as making hash marks about how many reference questions you answered today. Libraries are in the long term game. We build collections for not just a day or a week, eternity is a little farfetched, but you know what I mean. You see where I'm going with that. But what you're talking about is really information services and information. And as you said earlier in this program, services that change people's lives or empower people to change their own lives. And those outcomes, those require an investment and a community development policy, just like we have a collection development policy, right?

**Morgan Perry:**

Yeah. And I guarantee your hash marks about reference questions, those will go up. I swear to you, those hash marks will go up as well. But you're not going to see them go up for about 18 months until you really get in there and get away from this idea of embedded librarianship and more to this interventionalist librarianship where we give context for the information and build the relationships.

**Amy Fisher:**

We do have a business reference librarian or a business librarian, but his job is not to sit behind a reference desk waiting for people to come in. When we were out in the public before all of this shutdown and everything, he spends a lot of time doing research on one-on-one questions that he gets from our customers so he can have a one-on-one interaction with them. He goes, actually all of the business specialists, they go to that person. They're the only person in their business, they may not have time to come to the library so we make sure our specialists and our business librarian can go to them, can meet them where they are instead of, "Well, I'm at the branch at this time and this time, please come in." If they have to meet in a coffee shop, they'll do that. If they have to meet in their business, they will do that.

**Duncan Smith:**

You guys are really serious about your staff being out in the community and meeting people where they are. You're doing it. You're not just talking about it, right?

**Morgan Perry:**

Right. That's where the success comes from is that we're actually putting these philosophies, if you will, into action. We wrote down, and it's funny because Amy and I yesterday were looking through our old documents and we found that very first draft of a mission statement that we put together for Square One and looking at how it has gone from Square One Small Business Services to really Square One Economic Empowerment. And when we talk about the way that we serve our community at Square One, it would be the same if it was health. This is not just about the business community. This mindset change is about how libraries interact with communities. It could be the arts. These philosophies translate to all sorts of different kinds of information, not just business information. And please understand I'm not making a case to do away with professional librarians, I'm making a case to put professional librarians in relationship building so that we can really maximize their potential with the community members who need us most.

**Duncan Smith:**

Well I just want to say to both of you, amen and you are preaching to the choir in terms of talking to me about what you just said, because that is, to me, the essence of the future of the public library in this country at this time, what you just said. Thank you. Thank both of you so much for not only being with us today, but for the decades of work you have done to change the lives of the people in your community and hopefully inspire some people to follow you in the journey of making the public library an essential part of its community and especially its entrepreneurial ecosystem. Morgan and Amy, thank you again and keep doing what you're doing.

**Amy Fisher:**

Thank you.

**Morgan Perry:**

Thank you so much for having us on.

**Tammy Ross:**

If you'd like to learn more about how EBSCO's new entrepreneurial mindset training course can help your library support entrepreneurial thinking in your community, please click the link that we've shared in the episode description. Thanks for checking out Long Overdue: Libraries and Technology. Be sure to tune in for the next episode in our series.

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