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Cleveland Public Library shares its remarkable eBook success story

When Cleveland Public Library staffers had a casual conversation about eBooks with OverDrive, a library solutions vendor, in the Adobe booth at last summer's ALA show in Atlanta, they couldn't have foreseen the overwhelming response to come from patrons and press alike. After the library launched its eBook lending program this April, the press came knocking for print and broadcast interviews, emails poured in from libraries all over the world, and the library saw twenty percent of its titles fly out the doors in the first 48 hours. Tish Lowrey, the busy head of technical services for Cleveland Public Library, found a few minutes in those first hectic days to speak with us about the eBook program's phenomenal success.

Tish, when did Cleveland's eBook program officially kick off?
We went live Monday, April 7th, at 10:00 a.m., after giving the staff a weekend preview. (From the Web site, I guess it looks like we know what we're doing, but we're still adjusting!) We have 1,000 titles in the system, but based on demand in the first week, that won't be

nearly enough. Our patrons checked out 210 eBooks in the first 48 hours — pretty good, considering we hadn't told anyone about the program. We're offering them in multiple formats, Adobe Reader and Palm, with at least one copy of each title. But at this rate, we'll be out of eBooks by Friday!

Those are impressive results. What was the marketing plan?
This is a service that will be used by our remote viewers, so we did nothing in our buildings. No posters, no signage. But good press has helped us tremendously. The Cleveland Plain Dealer ran an article; that was the first public notice. And we had some attention from local radio station talk shows and an interview with the local NPR affiliate.

Who else has been working behind-the-scenes with you?
We partnered with OverDrive for design work and hosting of the eBook lending site. They're right here in Cleveland, and it's been a great experience to have them in the neighborhood. Cindy Orr, our manager of collection management, met OverDrive's Steve Potash at the Adobe booth at the ALA convention in Atlanta. They started talking, which led to lots of meetings over the last six months. OverDrive provides us with Adobe Content Server to "hold" the eBooks, and they also provide us with administrative

reports on usage. We can see which titles are checked out, the waiting lists…

You already have waiting lists?
Yes! It's wonderful, and we're so pleased. In the first week, more than 300 different patrons checked out more than 500 titles, and almost 200 titles are wait-listed. We already plan to change which books are emphasized on our online catalog, to see if we can balance out the demand for certain titles.

You're on the leading edge of technology, offering eBooks to your patrons. What made Cleveland Public decide to take this on?
Like other libraries, we've had lots of growth in remote usage of library services. We provide online reference assistance 24/7. We provide live answers 24/7. We have searchable databases 24/7. So we thought eBooks were the next logical step in delivering materials to our patrons' homes, offices, and classrooms without adding a lot of staff. We're looking at expanding accessibility to remote services even more. In the next couple of months, we may allow patrons to obtain a library card online. We want to make sure our patrons are treated no better or worse online than in person. And maybe we're going to charge for this extra service. We already have a successful books-by-mail program

for handicapped patrons, where they pay for shipping.

What's been the easiest part of launching your eBook program?
Working with OverDrive has been very easy. They're tremendously helpful. They understood that we wanted the online check-out experience to be similar to how it is in person. For example, we asked OverDrive to have users enter their library card number much later in the check-out process. They changed that for us. They also added the waiting list feature for us. They're very receptive to our ideas.

And the hardest part?
We expected some resistance among staff. I've been in libraries for 25 years, and have found that many librarians are not the most receptive to new ideas. They love handling books, but sometimes it's hard for them to imagine new products and services. And there's a fear of not having physical books, a fear of not having that familiar experience of handling them, and a fear for their jobs. On the other hand, we can't keep building new buildings just to increase capacity. While librarians have an affection for the book as artifact, we have to understand that these are libraries not museums. We have to give our patrons what they want, when and

where they want it.

On top of that, some libraries' past experience with eBooks was not very positive. They found eBooks awkward and difficult to use. There were software limitations, downloading was difficult. People were hesitant to try it again.

What kinds of eBook titles is Cleveland Public offering?
Michael Gorman, dean of library services at California State University, Fresno, had a quote in an article in the library press a while back, about people not wanting to read War and Peace on an eBook screen. Well, maybe they won't read it in a print copy, either. But they might read the J.K. Lasser Tax Guide. They need to look at one chapter, so they pick up an eBook — it's easy. With the eBook, they can fill in the blanks on worksheets, make notes in the margin, print off a page on their PC — really use it, and then return it.

With eBooks, the patrons' approach is different. People don't read travel books cover to cover, they just read a couple of sections. So we didn't buy a copy of War and Peace in eBook. OverDrive gave us about 10,000 titles to choose from. We bought the Bible and the Quran, and titles about the middle east and the war. We bought Help! My Science Project Is Due Tomorrow. We bought

science fiction and computer technology titles — like Wiley and McGraw Hill titles on network security — because we think readers of those titles are more tech-savvy. So, no westerns.

We have lots of print books that are never returned: test prep titles, repair books, CliffsNotes. It's expensive to buy, catalog, and process all those – then they're gone. With eBooks, I bought every CliffsNotes, and I'll get them back in three weeks. I got the Nolo legal books, the SAT books. With print copies, patrons get a pen and fill in all the practice tests. With eBooks, they can mark them up to their heart's content, because the marks disappear when the eBooks are returned.

What's the check-out process like?
We have a separate Web site section for ebooks, with icons for the Adobe Reader and Palm Reader formats. Right now, we have only links in our online catalog, not full eBook records. But that approach emphasizes format over content, so we may change that after the novelty is over. We'd like eBooks to become more an integral part of our catalog.

Our tight network security will not permit patrons to download eBooks while they're in our branches. They must check them out remotely. If we allow a patron to email eBooks anywhere, then we lose control of that library card and how they use it. When publishers sell to me, they want to know that I respect their copyrights. That said, we may change our procedures a bit so we
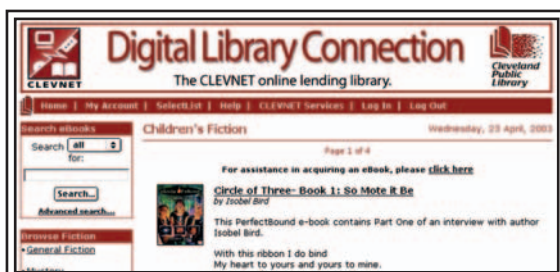
can at least do eBook demonstrations in-house.

This is all new to most libraries. What's the most surprising thing about it?
The level of interest among the press, from local papers to national trade publications. And this has gone all around the world. I've been contacted by librarians in Spain, Israel, Australia. It's huge. I had no idea.
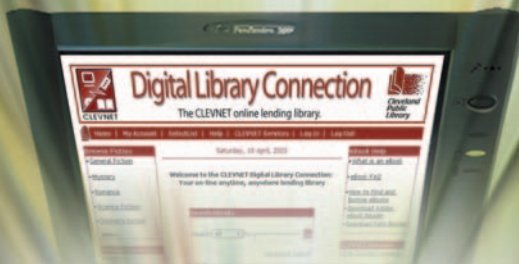
The new Adobe Reader expands eBook accessibility to handheld devices. What are you seeing with that?
In a couple of months, we'll have a better sense of eBook usage in Palm and PDA versus laptop and desktop.

Any advice for libraries thinking about starting an eBooks program?
Libraries tend to be distrustful of private industry. But as head of technical services, I deal with lots of vendors. I was lucky to have OverDrive as a good technology partner right here in our neighborhood. All I can say is, these people know what they're doing. The smartest move you can make is to find good vendors and let them do it for you. Why reinvent everything yourself? ∎