

LIBRARIES BUILD BUSINESS



CASE STUDY: TOPSHAM PUBLIC LIBRARY

Using Evaluation Tools to Strengthen Your Library Small Business Program

LIBRARIES BUILD BUSINESS IN MIDCOAST MAINE

Situated in the heart of predominantly rural Topsham, Maine, the Topsham Public Library is an integral part of the community, supporting access and connectivity for residents. Its mission is to be “a community center for all ages.” As you arrive in Topsham, a community of roughly 7,000 people located between Portland and Augusta, you are greeted by the Androscoggin River and a small downtown area. Beyond the town center, broadband access quickly drops off in the more rural parts of Topsham.

The Topsham Public Library has been actively involved in supporting small businesses, entrepreneurs, and jobseekers since before the Brunswick Naval Air Station, a large employer in the area, closed in 2005. When Susan M. Preece, Topsham’s Library Director, moved into

her position shortly after the Naval Air Station closed, she set out to support the community with needed career and entrepreneurship support. Building from there, in 2020, Topsham was awarded a Libraries Build Business (LBB) grant from the American Library Association to advance their work supporting small businesses

and entrepreneurs and developing the Employment and Business Entrepreneur Center at the library.

The Topsham Public Library Employment and Business Entrepreneur Center provides a comprehensive and coordinated series of programs, drop-ins, informational opportunities, and

collection enhancements in collaboration with partners, including the Maine CareerCenters, New Ventures Maine, the Southern Midcoast Chamber of Commerce, and Topsham Economic Development. Topsham Public Library provides access to technology and the Internet to the community, including low-income and rural patrons, trying to evolve and grow its small businesses. “Partnering

“Partnering with experts and connecting people is what libraries do.”

—Susan M. Preece, Director, Topsham Public Library

with experts and connecting people is what libraries do, and our goal is to provide tailored services to each individual patron based on their needs, with support of knowledgeable staff and our community partners with business expertise,” Susan said.

In order to develop sustainable and impactful programming for local entrepreneurs and other patrons, monitoring and evaluation is a critical component of your work. The monitoring and evaluation (M&E) process is an iterative cycle of monitoring, which includes ongoing observation and detailed record keeping, evaluation, reflection, improvement, and implementation. This process engages practitioners in making adjustments and improvements along the way. For LBB, the M&E system was collaboratively developed by the cohort. Its components include a Theory of Change, M&E Framework, survey instruments, interview protocols, and other tools to capture data and feedback from small business owners and entrepreneurs engaged in libraries’ programs. In Topsham, the library staff integrate evaluation tools such as the

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Public Library Association’s Project Outcome and the LBB Monitoring and Evaluation framework to better understand community needs, interests, and the library’s impact.

Below, Susan M. Preece, Topsham’s Library Director, provides more information about the role evaluation plays at Topsham and in the LBB initiative.

GETTING STARTED WITH EVALUATION

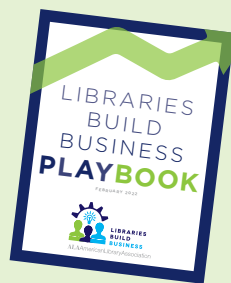
In small, rural libraries, library workers wear multiple hats, or as Susan put it, “in a small place you usually are a jack-of-all-trades.” Susan began using Project Outcome at its inception five or six years ago after her last board president was concerned that the library wasn’t doing enough evaluation of their programming. According to Susan, “[Project Outcome] was the closest evaluation technique that I felt was reasonable for a small library to do because it was based on individual response or reactions.” Additionally, one very helpful aspect of using Project

Outcome is that it is a standardized format that allows you to aggregate data from libraries across the U.S. who have utilized the same survey (for small business programming, that’s the economic development survey).

Evaluation and Project Outcome are essential components to Topsham’s work both in the past and currently. “You have circulation statistics and attendance statistics, but this [Project Outcome] was asking, ‘how did this program affect me?’ For me, that’s the most important number. It helps you create a snapshot of how [your library and library programming] is affecting people’s lives,” Susan said.

Read more about Libraries Build Business and the LBB M&E framework in the [Libraries Build Business Playbook](#).

Additionally, if you would like to learn more and hear directly from members of the LBB cohort and libraries across the country about their small business programs, join the [LBB Community on Slack](#).



With the LBB initiative, Susan was excited to show and expand upon the work of Topsham's Public Library Employment and Business Entrepreneur Center, and to show stakeholders "what you can do in a one-on-one situation with a more limited budget." Prior to joining the LBB initiative, Susan got a sense through the Employment and Business Entrepreneur Center that people needed one-on-one support with developing and updating business plans and with interview techniques. Data gathered from the LBB M&E system supported what Susan and other Topsham library workers hypothesized based on their experiences: one-on-one business support was much more impactful in people's lives. This important feedback from evaluation informed how the Employment and Business Entrepreneur Center conducted programming moving forward.

As Susan implies above, evaluation can be challenging, particularly for small and rural libraries that have limited resources. Ultimately, the payoff is worth the effort. In small libraries where library workers are fulfilling multiple jobs, evaluation can make you feel exposed and like you are putting yourself and your carefully crafted library business program up for judgment. However, Susan offered that evaluation simply provides library workers with an additional piece

of information to use to improve programming and library resources for your community. Through evaluation, you can make small adjustments through a dynamic process.

Advantages of Using Evaluation in Your Small Business Program

M&E not only allows you to gain insight into library patron engagement with library small business programs, but it also provides the statistical information to tell a more impactful story about how libraries affect people's lives. Implementing M&E allows libraries to fold the data into the bigger picture. Marrying your program evaluation data with your existing library statistics creates a holistic picture of the impact your library has on the community. The combination can then be brought to library boards and town councils to showcase your library's impact and potentially expand funding.

Evaluation demonstrates the value of the library. Susan has seen firsthand the benefits evaluation can offer to library programming: "I have seen how it can help funding. If you say I've seen this many people and this is the result, the M&E is the connecting piece."



To learn more about how to build your own small business survey using Project Outcome utilize the [LBB Resource Guide](#).



The projectoutcome.org homepage

For example, Topsham Public Library used information from Project Outcome reports coupled with their standard collection statistics in a grant request to an independent foundation to demonstrate the impact their book discussion groups have on the Topsham community and the need for further funding. In the grant request letter, Susan directly mentions Project Outcome survey results: “From ‘tweens’ to seniors, 77% of the attendees reported that they learned something that was helpful. 67% intend to apply what they learned.” Susan tied evaluation to the demonstrated impact funding would have on programs. Ultimately, Topsham received this grant.

Susan also presented survey results of summer reading and book discussion programs to Topsham’s Town Select Board and the Library Board. According to Susan, “Survey comments and the number of people who were satisfied with the programming helped explain why the programs were important. Numbers became expressive

when coupled with Project Outcome survey data.” Susan saw the “aha” moments on their faces. The Project Outcome survey results made the numbers real to members of both Boards.

Setting Yourself Up to Successfully Evaluate Your Business Programs

According to Susan, integrating evaluation from the beginning of your programs is key. Having staff buy-in is crucial to the success of your evaluation, especially in a small library. As Susan stated, “explain to your staff that evaluation is just another tool in your tool belt to understand your library programming and patrons.”

Having different staff administer surveys may eliminate survey bias and take some pressure off staff who developed or delivered the programming. In Susan’s experience, “People feel when you hand them a survey, that because

TIPS, TRICKS, AND ADVICE



- 1. Don’t survey patrons too often.** One advantage of Project Outcome is that the surveys are short and concise. Build them into your programming from the beginning, so that you are surveying pre- and post- program series, for example, or at some other time that makes sense for your library.
- 2. Utilize the reports Project Outcome can generate.** Reports help visualize survey data and demonstrate impact. Project Outcome aggregates survey results into reporting tools including a custom PDF with high level findings that can be filtered based on your needs. The report also provides standardized text that gives an overview of Project Outcome, background on how surveys were designed and highlights the importance of the library’s work in the survey topic area. Reports can be utilized with library boards, community partners, and non-library stakeholders. The text of the reports is easy to understand and succinctly explains topics people outside the library community might not understand.
- 3. Don’t get discouraged** even if you only get a small number of questionnaires filled out; that’s still more feedback and data points than you had prior to evaluating your programs.

Susan gave it to me, she will look at it, so I have to say nice things. Adding distance between the person providing the program and the person asking for the evaluation can help.” To encourage better survey uptake with patrons, tell patrons up front that surveys will be given and ensure their privacy. Susan noted, “People are suspicious about what you want, and people don’t want to give demographic information because public libraries aren’t that place, they are the place where you go and do something by yourself, and you can be anonymous. People want to be recognized when they walk in the door, but they still want some anonymity.”

WHAT’S NEXT?

Topsham Public Library will continue to use Project Outcome and the lessons learned from LBB M&E in their library programs moving

forward. Susan would like to expand the work of the Topsham Public Library Employment and Business Entrepreneur Center to other libraries in Maine. So far, there are nine libraries that are working with Maine CareerCenters. In May 2022, Topsham hosted a convocation with other Maine libraries adapting Topsham’s Employment and Business Entrepreneur Center model in their libraries. The libraries met to discuss what the experience of working with Maine CareerCenters has been like, what has and hasn’t worked in their different communities, and to brainstorm about what comes next.

According to Susan, “tools like Project Outcome and M&E generally are going to bring the field and the library mission further forward in a business world, in a world that’s looking at numbers and trying to evaluate how successful something is. [Project Outcome] provides support to every size library.” ■

Integrating evaluation from the beginning of your programs is key. Having staff buy-in is crucial to the success of your evaluation, especially in a small library.

For further information about this report or Libraries Build Business, contact Megan Janicki (mjanicki@alawash.org) or visit our website: ala.org/advocacy/workforce/grant.



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ALA American Library Association

**American Library Association
Public Policy & Advocacy**
1615 New Hampshire Avenue, N.W.,
First Floor, Washington, D.C. 20009
Telephone 202-628-8410 / Fax 202-628-9419
www.ala.org/wo