



A slice of the pie: how Emerald Library engaged local youth

Everyone knows that teenagers and food are a winning combination. Utilising that natural phenomenon was paid off for the Emerald Public Library with the creation of its 'Pizza & Paperbacks' book discussion group in mid-2007.

A book discussion group seemed ideal to promote the Young Adult collection while simultaneously offering the library as a positive place to 'hang out' with friends. However, attracting interest in the initial stages was daunting.

Moving away from 'school-like set texts' and lack of available resources was the reasoning behind the library opting for a loose format for the group and allowing those who attended to discuss anything that they had been recently reading.

But even after publicising the event in the library and through school newsletters, two 'Youth Book Club' sessions were not successful ... not one person came!

The suggestion of food as an incentive was raised and since the event was to be held at night, the library felt pizza would be a relatively cheap, low-mess and popular choice for most teenagers.

The first session held with pizza went well, succeeding in dragging six teens away from the consoles. However, there was still resistance to the concept and the library wanted to reach out to those who were not regular visitors or didn't consider the library as a viable place in which to relax or hang out with friends.

A passing comment made by a work experience student made the library realise that there had to be a name change. From a teen perspective, calling it a 'Youth Book Club' was a definite mistake – the reference to 'Youth' was 'patronising' with kids knowing that it was adults trying to make something educational seem fun. Also any mention of books and clubs was a definite mood killer.

And so 'Pizza & Paperbacks' Emerald-style was born. The new theme was used as the basis for a promotional

campaign, utilising posters, flyers and stories in local school newsletters and the council internal email.

The next session of 'Pizza & Paperbacks' had 15 young people lining up for pizza and a chance to share their views with their peers. The young staff member in charge of the event found it a task to get them to stop talking – a real change from the three previous attempts! All attendees were enthusiastic to share their reading passions, from manga to graphic novels, magazines to books in general.

Since then 'P&P', as it is becoming known, has attracted a regular audience of between 10–15 teens each month and they stay long after the pizza has been eaten. This experience taught library staff a great deal about engaging with youth audiences, including us realising how important it is to get the right name. Food may be able to get them in the door but if it's not interesting, they won't return. We also realised that we had to set some boundaries however, they needed to drive the conversation as much as possible. And finally we learnt that word of mouth is worth more than any advertising feature or story.

Yes, they do get boisterous and yes, the success of the program may have quite a bit to do with free food but the library is full of young people talking about books – what more could a library want?

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Outside the box

The State Library of Victoria, in partnership with ALIA will once again host **Outside the Box**.

Outside the Box is a series of professional development programs aimed at challenging the profession to think beyond the square.

Outside of the Box evening events will be held on April 22 and October 21 2008.

Look out for further updates in upcoming issues of *inCite*.

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