



The new RRL mobile library rig on the road.

INSET: Way back when shelves and photocopiers were the latest thing for mobile libraries.

ON THE ROAD AGAIN

What does it take to be a mobile librarian? Mobile libraries play an important role in library service provision to people in many different geographic and demographic areas. They are predominately used throughout the eastern states of Australia, where they provide a practical and affordable alternative as 'pop-up-libraries' in communities where static libraries are not viable. Riverina Regional Library's two mobile libraries serve 60 communities between them.

Riverina Regional Library is the largest regional library in NSW, providing services to 12 member councils through a network of 18 static branches and two branches-on-wheels – the mobile libraries. The regional network spans a geographic area of 39,000 km with a population of 130,000 residents. The mobile libraries cover a reasonable stretch of this big patch, as well as providing services to two Victorian council areas on a service contract basis.

The characteristics of the communities on the scheduled mobile library routes vary considerably, from service points in suburban Wagga Wagga (total population 62,000) to small and remote villages such as Beckom, located 110km from Wagga Wagga with a population of 170 people. The mobile library operators develop close professional relationships with many of their customers, a number of whom have depended on the RRL mobile library service since it began in 1979.

The three mobile library operators, Margaret Ross on the Southern Mobile Library, along with Rob Chapman and Ryan Hutton on the Northern Mobile Library, drive long distances to deliver their unique brand of library service, spend a lot of time working alone, and have a special set of skills that are often difficult to find in the right combination.

The first and most obvious requirement is the ability to drive a large truck, either pantechon or articulated configuration, combined with mechanical knowledge, customer service skills and an aptitude to handle the ever-changing technology developments in the library environment. For a glimpse into this unique role in library sector employment, have a look at the following ABC Open story called *A Day in the Life of a Mobile Library Bloke* featuring one of RRL's Northern Mobile Library Team, Rob Chapman (find it at bit.ly/b.co/1bQu0C2).

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Like all aspects of contemporary library services, mobile libraries are changing. The first RRL rig, introduced 36 years ago as a collaborative venture between five local government areas, was a large semi-trailer offering service delivery that was considered state-of-the-art for its time. It even had a photocopier! Since then, not only the fashions have changed.

The latest RRL mobile library trailer, launched in February 2013, was designed with the future in mind. Although contemporary mobile library designs were functional, RRL management had a vision for its new rig that had not been evident in new mobile libraries that we had visited. The brief was to maximise accessibility, flexibility and internal space with a view to ensuring that this important service delivery mechanism would be able to adapt to changes (that we couldn't even accurately predict) over its projected 15 year lifespan. We also insisted on a reliable airconditioning system to cope with the -5-45C temperature range as well as the capability for the trailer to operate completely on generator power supply.

Brimarco at Ballarat was the successful tenderer for the project, and was acutely aware of our desire for innovation. The Brimarco project team worked collaboratively with RRL to meet the design brief, resulting in a mobile library that achieved our original vision. Accessibility was optimised through a flat floor design, allowing all customers to access every part of the interior, combined with discrete disabled access to enable more seamless entry for disabled customers. Internal space was maximised by using one massive extendable pod measuring 9m x 1.5m aggregating all entry points at the rear of the trailer, and clever integration of the service counter and staff facilities. Flexibility was created through the creation of a large open-space area to cater for programs, presentations, meetings and performances, as well as modular fittings – for example, shelving that can be removed bay-by-bay as collection characteristics change. And last, but by no means least, the trailer was fitted with a brilliant ducted air conditioning system that is (touch wood) completely reliable and almost too efficient, as well as a generator that could power a small town.

The exterior design is deliberately bold and colourful, using the RRL logo as its foundation, and leaving borrowers, motorists and the general public in no doubt about the

purpose of this imposing rig! As anticipated, the new mobile library, so different from its predecessors (and any other mobile library that we know of) drew mixed reactions during the early days and months of operation. It was heralded equally as a brilliant example of innovation, and a futuristic mistake. But as is so often the case, once people became accustomed to the change and experienced the advantages that innovation brought, it soon became business as usual.

Although we can't easily predict what the future will hold for public library services, how technological change, ever-shifting patterns of customer demand, financial constraints, and partnership opportunities will reshape our view of the world, Riverina Regional Library has done its best to future-proof the Northern Mobile Library. We hope that this fantastic facility will remain relevant and functional in its role of delivering library services to a broad range of communities that most need them, up to and well beyond its projected replacement date in 2028.

ROBERT KNIGHT
Executive Director
Riverina Regional Library
knight.robert@wagga.nsw.gov.au



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