

CHATTANOOGA PUBLIC LIBRARY: “IT’S ABOUT THE COMMUNITY WE SERVE”

“CLS has allowed us to take our customer service to a much higher level. Now we have the inventory people want, it looks good, and it’s on the shelves in a timely fashion. It’s amazing how the word spreads.”

– Corinne Hill, Executive Director, Chattanooga Public Library (pictured right)

About Chattanooga Public Library

Founded in 1905, Chattanooga Public Library delivers books, electronic resources, and activities to a growing population of 177,000 in an area undergoing an economic revitalization. With three branches and a main library downtown, the library serves a community notable for its increasing diversity of cultures, education levels and socioeconomic backgrounds.

THE CHALLENGE

Failing. Irrelevant. In 2009, when the city of Chattanooga hired an independent consultant to assess the problems of its chronically underfunded, underutilized public libraries, the feedback was brutal. The library was seen as stuck in the past, with little to offer either to longtime residents or to the many young families moving to the area. One problem was the library’s technical services, which hadn’t evolved in decades. New materials took weeks or months to be processed and appear on the shelves. As a result, the city’s readers had become accustomed to bypassing the library in favor of retailers or simply doing without.

“This wasn’t my first rodeo,” says Executive Director Corinne Hill, borrowing a phrase from her earlier successes in Texas, where she had gained a reputation for leading the transformation of public libraries into efficient, process-driven organizations. Brought on board in 2012 to turn things around in Chattanooga, Hill recalls, “The staff was very entrenched. Technical services had developed into a culture where librarians were dedicated to the collection, but the community and public service had fallen off the radar. Orders were still being placed by checking off reviews in Library Journal. There was no notion of shelf-ready services.”

Something had to give. The first step was bringing Baker & Taylor on board to assist with ordering popular, high-demand books and media. “Baker & Taylor has ‘first look carts’ with suggested orders,” Hill explains. “All you have to do is tweak your order and your shipment arrives processed and catalogued. Check it in and boom! It’s ready to go, same day it appears at Walmart. That’s a big deal to patrons.”

As part of the process, most of the technical services staff was reassigned to public service areas. Hill says, “No one was let go and we didn’t lose any positions. But there was a period of adjustment. We had a number of retirements. When that happened, we didn’t necessarily backfill the exact same position. We repurposed those positions to meet the needs in the branches or other departments.”



Experienced
Library
Professionals

Quality,
Customized
Solutions

System- and
Shelf-Ready
Material



THE OUTCOME

Transitioning to Customized Library Services was a cultural and business change that took about a year to fully implement. “Some of it is paperwork—deciding what you want your shelf-ready books to look like and what you want your catalog records to look like,” Hill explains. “The other part is forming a leadership team. Once you decide to go this route, you need a team in place that understands how library services will benefit the community. Our children’s librarian was joined by a new staff member to order the adult books. He wasn’t even a librarian—he came to us from a large retail bookseller and understood the concept of purchasing.”

“The idea was to change the mind-set to something very businesslike,” Hill says. “What is this costing us? How fast can we get it out to the public? In Chattanooga, not all the staff got on board right away. There was some real pain involved in leaving the old ways behind. You can’t please everyone. We had to realize that today it’s not about us, the librarians, and our love of books. It’s about the community we serve and what they want.”

The focus was basic—inventory and customer service. Today, Chattanooga boasts 90,000 active library users—more than half the city’s population. In the past year, the library celebrated a first with the circulation of more than one million items, double the numbers from just five years ago. “The good news is that once staff realized they could work with Baker & Taylor directly to get patrons what they wanted, it was actually very empowering,” Hill reports. “They could solve problems, save the day and be a hero to that patron.”

“CLS made a huge impact,” Hill says. “Before we went with Baker & Taylor, it took three months from the time a book was ordered by technical services to the time it hit the shelves. We’ve reduced that to two weeks or less. This is not a big town. You deliver the books people want and the word spreads. You don’t even have to advertise.”

There were other benefits. With technical services reduced in size and with the elimination of the backlog of books waiting to be processed, the staff was able to move a low-circulation government documents collection out of the public area, freeing up space for exhibits and activities. The cataloging staff shifted focus as well, spending more time on permanent holdings and less on recent books and best sellers. “It’s just data,” Hill says. “The staff has created shortcuts and made cataloging easier. It’s all about making the materials accessible. The latest John Grisham doesn’t need the same level of attention as a local history collection.”

The relationship with Baker & Taylor continues to evolve. Hill says, “We’re making smarter purchasing decisions. Before, our ‘dead on arrival’ materials were in the double digits. Now, we’re under six percent. The community is really building the collection now. We’re buying what they think is interesting. With CLS, all we have to do is place the order. People are learning that we deliver for them, and that’s changed the game for us.”

Bottom line: “CLS really does work. It saves you money, and it allows you to move your resources around,” Hill says. “It’s a new mind-set, to think of delivering library materials as a business transaction. You open the box, you scan it in, and you roll it out. And staff figures out quickly that it helps them too. There’s a level of satisfaction in working with the public that just wasn’t there before.”

“Baker & Taylor is always coming up with new ideas,” Hill concludes. “They’re fun to work with and they’re super professional. They care about the collection as much as my staff. They know that it has to be right, and they understand the trust we’re placing in them.”



*Experienced
Library
Professionals*

*Quality,
Customized
Solutions*

*System- and
Shelf-Ready
Material*