

SAN BERNARDINO COUNTY LIBRARY: “OUR BUSINESS IS BOOKS”

“In this day and age, when people aren’t always convinced that they need libraries, we’re busier than ever, and we’re trending up. Part of that is having a reliable vendor that’s going to get us the books, and we’ve found that with Baker & Taylor. The results are better circulation and a real excitement among the staff because now we have the good stuff and a whole lot more customers.”

– Leonard Hernandez, County Librarian, San Bernardino County Library

About San Bernadino Public Library

Founded in 1913, the San Bernardino County Library system serves a population of two million in the largest county by area in the United States—larger than the four smallest U.S. states combined. Thirty-two branches meet the challenge of serving this large population and enormous geographical area with books, electronic resources, Internet services, and a variety of programs for youth and adults.

THE CHALLENGE

Like most California libraries, San Bernardino County Library was hit with extensive budget cuts in 2010 as the shock waves of the financial crash hit county government. The question wasn’t whether the library budget would be slashed—it was where and how to absorb the cuts and still deliver services to customers.

“We didn’t have a good story because we weren’t circulating a lot of books,” says county librarian Leonard Hernandez. The administrative team was cut from 30 staff members to nine and moved from a 40,000-square-foot facility to one with just 6,000 square feet. “We had to look at how to do everything differently. Cataloguing, materials selection, ordering and processing, and circulation as a whole. We knew there had to be companies that do this on a large scale for large systems like ours. But some of our existing vendors had the attitude that because our budget had fallen, we weren’t important anymore.”

The San Bernardino team set a goal: to rebuild the library’s standing in the community by getting back to basics and doing them better than before. That meant putting the latest, greatest books into the hands of community residents. But based on past experience, the staff was skeptical that a vendor could handle the county’s complex needs, much less with the care and tailored approach the staff had provided in the past.

Given the budgetary restraints, San Bernardino County didn’t have much of a choice. Hernandez says, “We weren’t ever going to be able to do it in-house again. We put together a committee of staff from throughout our library system—finance, collection development, branch librarians, and IT staff were all represented. We then came together and created the criteria we believed it would take for a vendor to do it right and still work with our budget and smaller team. Then the question became, can someone do this?”



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THE OUTCOME

San Bernardino engaged with several vendors. “Baker & Taylor gained a lot of credibility with our team from the beginning because they were helpful. They made suggestions that we hadn’t considered before—suggestions we actually liked,” Hernandez explains. “We had been working with another vendor for six to eight months, and the process still wasn’t complete. We did a couple of small orders with Baker & Taylor. When we requested adjustments on subsequent orders, we didn’t see the same problem [we had with the other vendor]. At six weeks, we were at orders that actually looked right and made sense. It just felt different.”

San Bernardino contracted with Baker & Taylor for a base level of library services, with customization to be added as the county felt their way through. “Just bringing 32 branch managers together and figuring out what we needed took several months. And we were still watching every single dollar,” Hernandez says. “When we would change our minds, Baker & Taylor was very accommodating and up-front about what we could do and still remain within budget.”

Both sides stayed focused on the philosophy of circulating more books. San Bernardino’s branches range from 89,000 square feet to pocket size, serving a diverse community over a very wide geographic area. With the funding challenges, “We had to be very creative,” Hernandez says. “The ability to talk, send lists, review, go back and forth” let them build a consensus on book titles and cataloguing, down to the nitty-gritty details such as what stickers to place on the books. Baker & Taylor’s responsiveness built a level of trust that San Bernardino had not always experienced with previous vendors.

As the relationship grew, San Bernardino entirely changed the way it ordered books. Hernandez says, “Rather than just do the sprinkling of books, we’ll order thousands at one time and do a big book festival for the community. It sounds simple, but when you’re ordering \$100,000 worth of books and you’ve set the date to unveil them to the community, you have to know it’s going to be right.” Under the new system, central control became a thing of the past. “We needed a vendor [that] could drop-ship directly to all 32 branches and create 32 different invoices. A couple of vendors choked on it. Baker & Taylor said, ‘No problem—we can do that for you.’”

The true test came when San Bernardino opened a new branch, expanding from a 1,200-square-foot storefront to a 6,000-square-foot, full-service library. Hernandez says, “The staff was nervous about the opening day collection because before Baker & Taylor, we had a similar size branch open, and it was a nightmare. Baker & Taylor took the demographics and some profiling and gave us an idea about the order, worked with the staff, and got the books there on time. That opening was a huge success. We had 4,800 people there. The place was full of children checking out books. We had an amazing summer reading program, and the feedback from the community is that they love the selection.”

Bottom line: “We had entered a downward spiral,” Hernandez says. “It was either come back or just fold. Baker & Taylor has really become part of the solution. Our business is books, and the books have to come in. Now we are doing record circulation in every single one of our branches. We jumped tiers from 1.9 million to close to five million total circulation. We are circulating more books than ever before in our history. Politically, that’s a great message. The county board of supervisors has been really excited about what we’re doing.”

“I would rate Baker & Taylor as the top vendor interaction we have,” Hernandez concludes. “They’re super professional. They follow through and keep their promises. It sounds so fundamental, but it’s not anymore. We have a good thing going here.”



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