

PIONEER LIBRARY SYSTEM NORMAN, OKLAHOMA

Interview conducted with Adriana Edwards-Johnson, Virtual Library Coordinator

Reading Club Challenge: Adding Gamification to Summer Reading Club

Located in south central Oklahoma, the Pioneer Library System (PLS) serves 350,000 people in a three county area from eleven branch locations. Branches vary widely in size, with the largest being located in Norman.

Prior to the summer of 2015, PLS was using an electronic summer reading program that provided patrons with the opportunity to register online. But library staff found they wanted more robust gamification to increase interest in their summer reading club. Customers were asking for badges and avatars and the library wanted to satisfy demand for these capabilities. PLS was using a third party product to add badge capabilities, but the process was manual, labor intensive, and time consuming.

“Our previous summer reading club program software helped us introduce online registration, but we wanted more than that,” says Adriana Edwards-Johnson, PLS Virtual Library Coordinator. “Ultimately, it wasn’t meeting the needs of our customers or our staff and we needed an alternative solution.”

Reading Club Web App Provides Robust Functionality, Flexibility...and Fun

PLS implemented the RC App for their 2015 summer reading club. According to Edwards-Johnson, the software provided benefits in multiple areas.

- **Link to ILS to Import Registration Information.** The majority of the people who participate in the summer reading club have a library card. They can register online and have the form pre-filled with their information, saving them time and eliminating the need for library staff to enter information from paper forms. For those without a library card, paper forms are still available but the ease of registering online offers another incentive to get a library card.
- **Digital and Mobile.** Although the library has customers who prefer to track activity on paper forms, online registration and tracking allow program participants to manage their progress and receive badges through their mobile devices. Edwards-Johnson says they have a lot of people who travel during the summer so the ability to follow their summer reading progress completely online is a definite perk.
- **Customization.** PLS customized the registration form with a drop-down menu of schools, including an option for home-schooled children. Edwards-Johnson says they appreciated the

fact that Counting Opinions imported the names of all the schools in the three-county area, saving the staff the time of entering them manually. For reporting purposes, they requested gender on the registration form, but didn’t require it. As they look into using the RC App for their next reading program they will consider greater customization of the registration form.

- **Flexibility.** Having successfully managed the summer reading program with the RC App, PLS is launching a new winter reading program in December 2015. They are configuring the software to offer learning tracks for technology, cooking, DIY, and fitness. The goal is to encourage people to learn new things through reading and activities. “We are excited that the RC App will support our introduction of this new type of reading program,” Edwards-Johnson says. “People will sign up by track instead of by age group. We’re offering yeti avatars and creating pathfinders that are age appropriate. We’re able to introduce this new program because the RC App will let us track different types of activities and provide badges for attending library programs as well as reading books.”
 - **Badges, Badges and More Badges!** “Two weeks into our summer reading program with the RC App we had to create additional badges because the ones we started with were used so quickly,” Edwards-Johnson exclaims. “We were amazed at how much people were reading and how motivated they were to get their badges. With the flexibility of the app we could create codes to be used with library programs to get special badges as well as offering badges for minutes spent reading, number of books, and number of reviews.” The library gave recommended goals but allowed participants to set their own specific goals—another flexibility feature of the software.
- The RC App allows the library to assign badges to different groups of participants (e.g., adults and children) and, depending upon how they registered, children in a family could get different badges. At the end of the summer, all participants who read a minimum of twenty minutes a day received a certificate they could personalize and print out.
- **Robust, Feature-Rich Software Assists with Data Analysis** In the first summer there were features of the RC App that PLS didn’t use but that they hope to incorporate into future reading programs. One of these is the Suggested Titles functionality that they might utilize in the winter reading program. Another is the customer feedback survey. Edwards-Johnson says the library does a lot of surveying and decided for now not to turn that feature on.

The library is also looking to use the software to help analyze the connection between coming to the library for programs or other activities and participating in reading programs. Over the summer, they gave achievement codes to people who attended programs and told them to go online and enter the code to receive a badge. In this way they could begin to measure the relationship between different types of library activities.

One of the satisfying elements of creating more fun through badges was watching the impact on parents. With a super heroes theme last summer, kids got excited and introduced their parents to the program and they got excited, too. “There’s no question that increasing the fun of reading impacts the level of excitement and participation among children as well as adults,” says Edwards-Johnson.

- **Simple Reporting Supports Individual Branch Needs** “I love the reports,” Edwards-Johnson proclaims. “We have a lot of branches who love giving away prizes. In one branch they wanted to enter every kid who wrote a review for that branch that week into a prize drawing. With the RC App it’s very easy to produce a weekly report just for that branch so they can do their weekly prize drawing.”

In addition to the ease of creating reports on the fly Edwards-Johnson says Counting Opinions provides great canned reports. With the reports available she could quickly assess how rapidly participants were using badges and react swiftly to add more badges to keep ahead of their active readers. She could also easily export the data from the RC App into Excel for more analysis. For additional help, she says the Counting Opinions support team is very responsive to requests for other types of reports.

The Bottom Line: RC App Attracts More Readers and Reduces Program Management Impact on Branch Staff

Edwards-Johnson says the goal of her area of responsibility is to translate the physical library experience to the online environment. The RC App introduces staff to a process that makes their job easier. Use of the App in 2015 generated more online summer reading club participation than in past years and staff as well as customers were excited by the fun and adventure of avatars and badges. A small rural branch eliminated paper registration, save for a few families who did not have computer access at home, and found that their registration figures for teens tripled from the year before.

For the first winter reading program using the RC App the library will target people who participated in the summer to see if those people will also join a winter reading program. The RC App is allowing the library to add this type of program because

of the reduced paperwork and maintenance associated with running a reading program. “In the past, we wouldn’t have thought about adding this type of program,” says Edwards-Johnson. “The staff, recovering from summer reading club, wouldn’t want to take on another reading club so soon. But the RC App makes it so easy to set up and implement a reading program that we are all excited about this new venture.” She also says knowing they can count on Counting Opinions for expert support encourages them to try something new.

Edwards-Johnson laughs when asked about how their customers responded to the first summer of super hero excitement. She says the most feedback they received focused on the formula to get rewards. People wanted to know what levels they needed to achieve to earn rewards. PLS had decided, however, not to make available the details on how and when participants would receive badges, so each time they logged on there might be a surprise. She says this kept the program fresh and fun and encouraged people to stay engaged. The program was so popular that library staff had to keep ahead of the readers to make sure there were always more prizes and badges. By the end of the summer, the maximum number of minutes spent reading by a participant was 13,000—that is a lot of reading!

Finally, Edwards-Johnson reflects upon the impact of using a robust electronic reading program solution. She sees an online program as offering a nuanced look at achievements. “In the physical world, the goal is either black or white—you achieved it or you didn’t. But online you can see kids who maybe made it 75% or 80% to their goal and that is worth recognizing. Maybe their goal was set too high. But more importantly, they were engaged throughout the program—and you can see that through reports and data analysis. With an online program you can see that gray area and respond to it. In the future, it could make a difference in the way rewards are allocated because you have access to this information.”

About Counting Opinions

Libraries need better tools to enhance customers' experiences, improve staff effectiveness and support advocacy objectives. Counting Opinions offers the library community robust, scalable, comprehensive solutions, all integrated on a single platform.



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