Public Libraries Leading the Way

Online Ticketed-Passes: A Mid-Tech Leap in What Libraries Are For

Jeffrey Davis

Last year a library program received coverage from *The New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the magazines *Mental Floss* and *Travel+Leisure*, many local newspapers and TV outlets, online and trade publications like Curbed, Thrillist, and Artforum, and more. That program is New York's Culture Pass, a joint program of the New York, Brooklyn, and Queens Public Libraries. Culture Pass is an online ticketed-pass program providing access to area museums, gardens, performances, and other attractions. As the *New York Daily News* wrote in their lede: "It's hard to believe nobody thought of it sooner: A New York City library card can now get you into 33 museums free." Libraries had thought of it sooner, of course. Museum pass programs in libraries began at least as early as 1995 at Boston Public Library and the online ticketed model in 2011 at Contra Costa (CA) County Library. The library profession has paid this "mid-tech" program too little attention, I think, but that may be starting to change.

WHAT ARE ONLINE TICKETED-PASSES?

The original museum pass programs in libraries circulate a physical pass that provides access to an attraction or group of attractions. Sometimes libraries are able to negotiate free or discounted passes but many times the passes are purchased outright. The circulating model is still the most common for library pass programs, but it suffers from many limitations. Passes by necessity are checked out for longer than they're used. They sit waiting for pick up on hold shelves and in transit to their next location. Long queues make it hard for patrons to predict when their requests will be filled, and therefore difficult to plan on using.

For the participating attractions, physical passes are typically good anytime and so compete with memberships and paid admission. There are few ways to shape who borrows the passes in order to meet institutional goals. And there are few ways to limit repeat use by library patrons to both increase exposure and nudge users toward membership. As a result, most circulating pass programs only connect patrons to a small number of venues. Despite these limitations, circulating passes have been incredibly popular: at writing there are 967 requests for San Diego Public Library's 73 passes to the New Children's Museum. We sometimes see that sort of interest in a new bestseller, but this is a pass that SDPL has offered continuously since 2009.

In 2011, Contra Costa County Library launched the first "ticketed-pass" program, Discover & Go. Discover & Go replaced circulating physical passes with an online system with which patrons, remotely or in the library with staff assistance, retrieve day-passes — tickets — by available date or venue. This relatively simple and common-sense change makes an enormous difference. In addition to convenience and predictability for patrons, availability is markedly increased because venues are much more comfortable providing passes when they can manage their use: patrons can be restricted to a limited number of tickets per venue per year and venues can match the

Jeffrey Davis (jtrappdavis@gmail.com) is Branch Manager at San Diego Public Library, San Diego, California.

number of tickets available to days that they are less busy. The latter preserves the value of their memberships while making use of their own "surplus capacity" to bring in new visitors and potential new members. Funding and internal expectations at many venues carry obligations to reach underserved communities and the programs allow partner attractions to shape public access and receive reporting by patron zip code and other factors.

The ePass software behind Discover & Go is regional by design and supports sharing of tickets across multiple library systems in ways that are impractical to do with physical passes. As new library systems join the program, they bring new partner attractions into the shared collection with them. The Oakland Zoo, for example, needs only to negotiate with their contact at Oakland Public Library to coordinate access for members of Oakland, San Francisco, and San Jose Public Libraries.

Because of the increased attractiveness of participation, it's been easier for libraries to bring venues into the program. In 2011, Discover & Go hoped for a launch collection of five museums but ultimately opened with forty. The success of ticketed-pass programs in turn attracts more partners. Today, Discover & Go is available through 49 library systems in California and Nevada with passes to 137 participating attractions. Similarly, New York's Culture Pass launched with 33 participating venues and has grown in less than a year to offer a collection of 49.

While big city programs attract the most attention, pass programs are offered by county systems like Alamace County (NC), consortiums like Libraries in Clackamas County (OR), small cities like Lawrence (MA), small towns like Atkinson (NH), and statewide like the Michigan Activity Pass which is available through over 600 library sites with tickets to 179 destinations plus state parks, camping, and historical sites.

For each library, the participating destinations form a unique collection: a shelf of local riches, idiosyncratic and rooted in place. Through various libraries one can find tickets for the Basketball Hall of Fame, Stone Barns Center for Food and Agriculture, Dinosaur Ridge, Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art, Bushnell Park Carousel, California Shakespeare Theater, children's museums, zoos, aquariums, botanical gardens, tours, classes, performances, and on to the Met, MOMA, Crocker, de Young, and many, many, many more. For kids, "enrichments" like these are increasingly understood as essential parts of learning and exploration. For adults, access to our cultural treasures, including partners like San Francisco's Museum of the African Diaspora or Chicago's National Museum of Puerto Rican Arts & Culture — besides being its own reward — enhances local connection and understanding.

We're also starting to see the ticketing platform itself become an asset to smaller organizations — craft studios, school performances, farm visits, nature centers, and more — that want to increase public access without having to take on a new ability. Importantly, ticketed-pass programs are built on the core skills of librarians: information management, collection development, community outreach, user-centered design, customer service, and technological savvy.

THE TECHNOLOGY

Discover & Go was initially funded by a $45,000 grant from the Bay Area Library and Information System (BALIS) cooperative. Contra Costa contracted with library software company Quipu Group to develop the ePass software that runs the program and that is also used by NY's Culture Pass,

Multnomah County (OR) Library's My Discovery Pass, and a consortium of Oregon libraries as Cultural Pass. Ticketed-pass software is also offered by the LibraryInsight and Plymouth Rocket companies and used by Denver Public Library, Seattle Public Library, the Michigan Activity Pass, and others.

The software consists of a web application with a responsive patron interface and connects over SIP2 or vendor API to patron status information from the library ILS. Administrative tools set fine-grained ticket availability, blackout dates, and policies including restrictions by patron age, library system, zip code, municipality, number of uses allowed globally and per venue, and more. Recent improvements to ePass include geolocation to identify nearby attractions and improved search filters. Still in development are transfer of tickets between accounts, re-pooling of unclaimed tickets, and better handling of replaced library cards.

The strength that comes from multi-system ticketed-pass programs also carries with it challenges on the patron account side. ILSes each implement protocols and APIs for working with patron account information differently and library systems maintain divergent policies around patron status. There's a role for LITA and for library consortia and state libraries to push for more attention to and consistency on patron account policies and standards. The emphasis in library automation is similarly shifting. Our ILSes originated to manage the circulation of physical items, a catalog-centric view. Today, as Robert Anderson of Quipu Group suggested to me, a diverse range of online and offline services and non-catalog offerings orbit our users, calling for a new frame of reference: "It's a patron-centric world now."

THE VISION

Library membership is the lynchpin of ticketed-pass and complementary programs in the technical sense, as above, and conceptually: library membership as one's ticket to the world around. Though I'm not aware of academic libraries offering ticketed-passes, they have been providing local access through membership. At many campuses, the library is the source for one's library card which is also one's campus ID, on- and off-campus cash card, transit pass, electronic key, print management, and more. That's kind of remarkable and deserving of more attention.

Traditionally, librarians have responded to patron needs by providing information, resources, and services ourselves. New models and technologies are making it easier to complement this with the facilitation approach, of which online ticketed-passes are the quintessential example. We further increase access by reducing barriers of complexity, language, know-how, and social capital, for example, by maintaining community calendars of local goings-on or helping communities take advantage of nearby nature.

Online ticketed-pass programs will grow and take their place in the public's expectations of libraries and librarians: that libraries are the place that help us (better, more equitably) access the resources and riches around us. Powering this are important new tools for library technologists to interrogate and advance with the same attention we give to both more established and more speculative applications.