



CASE STUDY: Best Practices

***BORROWING EXPERIENCE:
CULTURAL PARTNERSHIPS
AT THE CHICAGO PUBLIC LIBRARY***

By [Berlinda P. Recacho](#)

I. Background

Organization Name:	Chicago Public Library
Founded:	1873
Annual Attendance:	8 million visitors
Profile:	<p>Chicago residents are encouraged to “READ, LEARN, DISCOVER!” at the Chicago Public Library (CPL). The CPL consists of 78 neighborhood branches, two regional locations and central location in the south loop in downtown Chicago, at the Harold Washington Library Center. Since 1989, the City of Chicago and the Chicago Public Library have built or renovated 36 neighborhood branch libraries serving all areas of Chicago. The Library is an important part of the city’s cultural life. More than just a place to borrow books, the CPL offers its own free programming—including lectures, readings, performances, and dance lessons—establishing connections between literacy, the arts and culture, and the residents of Chicago.</p>
Mission Statement:	<p><i>We welcome and support all people in their enjoyment of reading and pursuit of lifelong learning. Working together, we strive to provide equal access to information, ideas and knowledge through books, programs, and other resources. We believe in the freedom to learn, to read, to discover.</i></p>

II. Description of Program

Marketing is the process by which you come to understand the relationship between your product and the customer (definition used by ArtsMarketing.org, attributed to the Arts Marketing Center of the Arts & Business Council of Chicago). Earned income is important, but there are benefits that go beyond the bottom line. Awareness, reputation, and community outreach are pieces of any organization's overall picture. When a service is free, the definition of customer can be viewed as more than someone who pays to attend a performance or an exhibition. The target customer for *Check Us Out* is a potential arts patron—or better yet, the parent of potential arts patrons. The objective of *Check Us Out* and the other CPL cultural partnerships is to offer free access to Chicago's many cultural attractions to a wider, more diverse customer base through the multiple branches of the Chicago Public Library.

The idea behind the cultural partnerships began as combined effort. In summer 1994, Anne Roosevelt (then executive director of Museums in the Park) and Amy Eschelmann (an aide to library Commissioner Mary Dempsey) brainstormed a potential collaboration between their respective organizations. Roosevelt and Eschelmann explored the possibility of creating a pass that could be "checked out" like a library book. It is not unusual for a family of four to spend over \$20 on museum admission alone; however, with this pass, Chicago residents who are aged 18 years and older and are current holders of library cards at the Chicago Public Library, could receive free admission to any of the nine museums on Chicago Park District Land. The partnership was dubbed *Check Us Out*—a catchy title that cleverly referenced both the library's traditional function as well as the invitation to visit these Museums in the Park. *Check Us Out* served as the blueprint for other cultural partnerships that followed in short order: *Words and Music* at Ravinia Festival, *Imagination on Loan* at the Chicago Children's Museum, and *Art Access* at the Museum of Contemporary Art. While the programs share a similar structure, they are separate partnerships that exist independently of each other.

The program runs on goodwill between the library and its partners, recognizing that public awareness and image can be as important as earned income. Both the Library and the museums benefit from the numbers of people who might not have visited either institution without the benefit of the pass. The library does not have a budget earmarked for re-printing passes on a large scale. The partnering museums each underwrote the cost of printing and laminating the initial volume of passes for their respective programs.

Three staff members at the Chicago Public Library administrate the cultural partnerships:

- Gerry Keane, Coordinator of Special Projects, is the head program administrator.
- Laura Haines, the Circulation Coordinator, is a librarian in the CPL computer services department. She deals with the technical aspects of the programs, troubleshooting problems.

- A recently added administrative assistant handles the requests for replacement passes.

Additionally, Library staff members at each of the Chicago Public Library locations function as “point-people” for the partnerships. They answer general questions about the partnership programs, handle the daily circulation and return of the passes and generate supplemental materials.

III. Strategy and Implementation

Product:

A plastic pass slightly larger than a credit card gives the bearer access to the partner organizations AND encourages repeated library visits. Each of the nine Museums in the Park in the *Check Us Out* partnership has a unique pass design that distinguishes its particular program. The passes for *Art Access* at the MCA and *Imagination on Loan* at the Children's Museum are also unique to each program. The passes are keyed into Library circulation, and each program can track the use of their pass (and the popularity of their program). One card may be checked out per family, per library visit. [Since it does not operate the same manner as the museums, Ravinia does not use laminated passes with its *Words and Music* program. Instead, Ravinia makes available a limited number of vouchers for season performances to library patrons at the Harold Washington Library Center, and at each of the Library's neighborhood locations and regional branches.]

These passes are meant for family use: one pass admits up to ten people, depending on the partner institution. It can be difficult for a family to visit a cultural institution together as the combined admission fees often exceed \$20 for a family of four. In particular, lower income families were the intended targets, since they often do not have the money to spend on “extras” such as museum visits.

The copy for the *Check Us Out* brochure reads, “The *Check Us Out* Card is your family's free passport to the world of education, culture and fun available at Chicago's world-class Museums in the Park and all locations of the Chicago Public Library.”

Price:

Passes are free to Chicago Public Library cardholders. There is a late fee of \$1 for every day that the pass is not returned after the due date. If a cardholder loses a pass, the cost of a replacement pass (\$30) is charged to the cardholder. The cultural partnerships “reward” Chicago residents for their support (as city taxpayers). The passes make free admission to the partner institutions available to Chicago Public Library cardholders, encouraging local patronage (much of the existent marketing for the partner institutions targets out of town tourist visits.) The pass removes the barrier of cost to some of Chicago's most popular cultural attractions.”

Place:

Crain's Chicago Business credited the success of these cultural partnerships in part to the “distribution system available in virtually every city neighborhood: the local library.” Passes can be checked out at all

locations and branches of the Chicago Public Library and at the Harold Washington Library Center.

Promotion:

Word of mouth serves as the main method of promotion. Informational articles and features are placed in city newspapers and magazines at the launch of each program, and occasional articles help boost awareness and interest. Well-informed library staff provides information and support the promotion effort. The popularity of the programs and the limited number of passes create potential problems in supply and demand.

Program Implementation:

It took approximately eight months for the Chicago Public Library and Museums in the Park to plan, prepare and activate the first partnership [*Check Us Out*]. Almost immediately after the program was launched in February 1995, Conductor (and president/CEO of Ravinia Festival) Zarin Mehta contacted Library commissioner Mary Dempsey, interested in developing a similar program for lawn passes at **Ravinia; *Words and Music*** was launched in May 1995. In the summer of the same year, the Chicago Children's Museum approached Gerry Keane about partnering with the Library on another program called ***Imagination on Loan*** again reinforcing aspects of both institutions). The program was implemented in September 1996. **The Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA)** expressed interest in starting its own partnership with the Chicago Public Library titled ***Art Access***. The initial inquiry occurred in 1997, when the MCA was moving from one site to another, so the idea was temporarily shelved for about eight months. When they got back in touch with the CPL in 1998, the MCA benefited from the Library's three solid years of experience in running the earlier partnerships. With *Art Access* the Library shortened the loan period for the pass from 14 days to 7 days. With the earlier programs the Library assumed that families would need time to plan their visits and return the passes, but actual use of the passes proved that this was not necessary. The Library increased the number of *Art Access* passes from 5 to 10 at the neighborhood branches, and from 10 to 15 at the regional and central locations. They also raised the lost card fee up to \$30 (equal to one student membership) to improve the movement and the return rate of the popular passes.

The programs operate under the same basic structure. The common element is a colorful, reusable pass that can be checked out at any Chicago Public Library location. The passes were printed using the four-color printing process and then laminated. The production was most costly element of the partnerships (in monetary terms). There was no internal budget in the Library for these initiatives; the partner organizations each underwrote the cost of printing 10 passes each for the Harold Washington Library Center and both regional branches and 5 passes each for the 78 neighborhood locations, a total of 420 passes for each participating museum. While Museums in the Park underwrote the cost of printing *Check Us Out* signage/posters for display in the libraries, the other programs did not factor advertising into their cost, and did not produce posters.

Each institution has a pass with its own logo and design to distinguish it from the other programs. Each of the nine Museums in the Park in the Check Us Out program has a separate pass. Library Staff produce each partnership's brochures and bibliographies in-house as part of their day-to-day operations. The most costly elements (in terms of human resources) are developing the logo, writing the text (in English and Spanish) and designing a respective brochure for each partnership. Being responsible for production is challenging and time-consuming, but CPL's ownership is ultimately strategic. The brochures always include the Chicago Public Library logo. The program bibliographies compile book titles on subjects related to the museums. The bibliographies are designed to encourage the pass-user to check out these titles in preparation for a museum visit, or to follow up such a visit by reading more about an interesting exhibit. In either case, pass-users begin or complete their cultural journeys at the library.

The checkout process is simple. The passes cannot be reserved, so the borrower must make a trip to the Library. A cardholder per library visit can check out only one pass. The pass was designed as a reusable card, keyed into the Library System like the books in the library collection. The Library doesn't track the exact number of people—instead, it tracks the number of times a particular pass is circulated since the pass admits up to ten people, depending on the particular program). Library personnel can track the pass in its computer system as circulation report, sorting the number of cards and circulation by branch and museum. One of the flaws in the Library system is that it does not break down the results, listing the cumulative numbers from the onset of the programs. Keane developed a spreadsheet to finely tune the raw data so that the Library can view the numbers on a monthly basis. The cards are designed to coincide with normal routines at the libraries. The standardized process is easier on the staff, and keeps procedure consistent with circulation and free admission to library programs.

IV. Program Results

The heavy circulation of the passes is a measure of *Check Us Out's* immediate success. Enthusiastic library patrons were quick to share news of the program with friends and relatives. *Check Us Out* generated its own press through this word-of-mouth promotion. At times the interest generated by the passes threatens to overwhelm their availability. Limited supply and high demand prevents the Library from marketing the passes on a higher profile level. Circulation of the passes has increased 12-15% each year for *Check Us Out*, *Words and Music*, and *Imagination on Loan*. [At the time this case study was written, *Art Access* has not existed for a full two years and percentages of its increases are not compatible with the others].

The cultural partnerships have strengthened the images of the participating arts organizations and the Library. Prior to the partnerships, many critics pointed out that the city's nine leading museums had not done much to reach out to Chicago residents, despite

the fact that city taxpayers annually provide a multimillion-dollar subsidy to the museums. *Crain's Chicago Business* applauded the advent of *Check Us Out* in 1995, noting, "There's no stigma associated with taking a free pass, much as there's no stigma in borrowing a book for free." *Check Us Out* was named "The Best Reason to Pay Your Library Fines" in *New City's* Best of 1998" issue. In February 1999, Raymond Coffey's article in the *Chicago Sun-Times* proclaimed that the programs "have grown into as wise and worthy a cultural outreach effort as we've seen around here lately."

In addition to the benefits generated for patrons, the partnerships establish a network of collaborators for the Chicago Public Library.

The American Library Association will have their conference in Chicago in the summer of 2000. The Chicago Public Library will offer behind the scene tours at the partner museums as an added attraction for conference attendees. The partner museums have also launched summer reading partnerships with the Library—such as the Field Museum's "Tyrannosaurus Reads". Participating children are encouraged to read books about dinosaurs, supplementing the information they learn at the Field Museum's exhibit "Sue" (the world's most complete *Tyrannosaurus Rex* skeleton).

By tracking specific information about frequent pass users a partner museum could potentially create its own partnership with a particular community.

"The partnerships are not the end product," Gerry Keane points out. "The Library's initiatives are only a starting point for future collaborations."

V. Conclusions

In the future, the Library would like to expand cultural partnerships to include additional programs. Ideally, they would like to work with the museums' exhibition schedules and "order books" that complement the larger shows. They would like to jazz up the website (which currently holds basic information on all the programs) once they get funding for printing and changes.

Whether this program would work in another city is dependent on the relationship between the city's cultural institutions and its public library. Libraries are places accessible to all people in terms of location, knowledge and free admission. Chicago's public libraries are numerous and widely spread through its neighborhoods. Its museums are world-renowned. The role of arts and culture on daily life is also a factor. Art and culture are important to the quality of the lives of Chicago's citizens.

Public participation—indeed, the success of the program—is dependent on the number of the passes available. Keane admits that the popularity of the partnerships has resulted in a *Catch-22* situation. It is not unusual for an entire set of partnership cards to be checked-out from a Library Branch location. If a card is lost, the Library branch needs to request a replacement immediately. Ideally, each location should have

a full inventory of cards, especially for the Christmas Holidays, Spring Break and the summer. Also, only Chicago residents are eligible to use the passes, which has upset some suburban dwellers.

The Library is currently looking for funding to reprint the cards for the first three programs. General guidelines will be updated to improve the movement and the return rate of the passes. The Library is planning to widely incorporate the terms of the MCA's Art Access partnership, shortening the loan to seven days, and increasing the number of passes to 10 at the neighborhood locations, and to 15 at the regional branches and central location. They will also make the \$30 lost card fee standard across all four partnerships. When the passes are reprinted, the new guidelines will be stated on the pass. While the logos will remain the same, they will change the background color on the passes and implement a transition period to change over from the old pass to the new pass.

The partnerships suffer from an identity crisis. *Check Us Out* is perhaps too successful a term. In interviews and other publicity, people were quick to put all the programs under the umbrella of *Check Us Out* when each program stands alone. Library staff constantly emphasize that each program is different and separate of the other. The Library faces the challenge of retaining program identity while grouping them under the wider category of cost-effective cultural partnerships.

VI. Personal Observations

Chicago residents have a wealth of cultural opportunities to choose from, and these partnerships truly open the door to the treasure trove for them. The library is a natural gateway to free culture. The library itself is free, which reinforces the free passes. The library holds books as museums hold collections and exhibitions. Both are places of exploration and discovery. Encouraging reciprocal visits between the library and the museums make perfect sense, creating chain-reactions of research and experience.

The Chicago Public Library could be more strategic about allocating funding for the programs. While the partnerships are not driven by the bottom line, they would work more smoothly if there were funding allocated for costs such as reprinting passes when guidelines change. The programs are dependent on only a few basic elements, but the lack of funding results in delays when guidelines need to be changed or passes need to be replaced. A laminated card is certainly slick and attractive, but may be an extra cost. A paper pass that is good only for the day of issue with a barcode in the system would cut down on the cost of the program and still allow the Library to track pass usage (at point of check out). The pass could simply be thrown away afterward.

Finally, the people in under-served neighborhoods who could benefit most by getting free admission to the museums may not be able to get the pass. The cards are very popular, among all Chicago residents, and since there is a two-week loan period for all programs except Art Access, the cards are not put into circulation quickly enough to meet the demand—and again, if a card is lost, it takes time to replace it.

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VII. References and Resources

The author would like to thank **Gerry Keane**, Coordinator of Special Projects at the Chicago Public Library, for her help in researching this project.

Crain's Chicago Business. February 6, 1995. p. 12. Museum Patrons get free pass.

New City. Vol 13, No. 537. 9.24.98. p. 32. "The Best of Chicago" Culture and Nightlife: Best Reason to Pay Your Library Fines: Free cultural attraction tickets

Chicago Sun-Times. Tuesday, February 2, 1999. p. 21. Commentary by Raymond R. Coffey "Your Gateway to Knowledge: A public library card can give its holder free admission to some of the best cultural institutions the city and the area have to offer."

VIII. Relevant Attachments and Examples

- *Check Us Out* link on the Chicago Public Library Homepage.
<http://www.chipublib.org/003cpl/museumcd.html>
- *Check Us Out* card design (front view).

