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The Y-Factor: Why Is Change Difficult?



Adam Solomon, Information Professional

In the beginning we read of a beautiful garden. Reading the current news, one sees the global devastating virus spreading throughout the whole earth. People are seeking to learn more about the origin of the virus, a virus which has shut down almost everything that was once considered normal including libraries. There is evidence that destroying ecosystems is an origin in that, “Fruit bats (Pteropodidae in the Old World, the genus *Artibeus* in the New World) are more likely to feed near human settlements when their forest habitats are disturbed; this has been a key factor in viral emergence in West Africa, Malaysia, Bangladesh, and Australia” (Dobson et al., 2020, p. 379).

Why is change difficult? The world is currently changing and not in a good way. Small changes are usually manageable. Large changes involve great difficulty. Avoiding the connection between the word ‘change’ with that of ‘repent’ is almost impossible if one wants to truly understand why change is difficult. Do certain practices or inactions involving libraries need to change?

I keep going back and forth on which is more valuable: electronic resources or print resources. I am defining value with sustainability in mind. We must look at the full life cycle of materials. Electronic devices such as tablets or the servers where electronic resources originate will all eventually become e-waste. Some of these electronics have gold inside that is eventually thrown away as it is too costly to reclaim. If gold does not have a chance of being recycled, then the small plastic parts most likely will not be recycled either. Throwing gold away is concerning.

Print resources are easier to recycle, but publishers still have a long way to go in documenting their paper sources. We should be concerned if the rainforests are being cut down for books that might get checked out only once or twice or never. If printed materials are seen from a technology perspective, print resources are a very stable format. Printed books can be available on shelves for a century or more where e-readers seem to rarely last a decade. If the earth is getting destroyed as global resources are mismanaged and viruses are just one result of that destruction, what solutions are needed to change/repent?

We have the power to demand change from those we do business with. When ordering print resources, the publisher should disclose the paper source that was used. Even if vendors do not want to change or be accountable, we can add that information to book reviews. Just like any book that has some unique aspect such as oversize books or picture books, we should highlight the sustainability part of books. We can include that information very simply for example, "This edition of the book was printed with recycled paper." Some publishers are including this information on the verso page, but we need that information more prominent. Having the source information also listed on the cover or in book descriptions on order pages is needed. So too should electronic devices state their sources for example "This electronic device was manufactured with 100% fair trade materials." All people in the world should have a living wage. Labels can add accountability and labels help provide documentation so that finite resources can be properly managed.

Long overdue is the need for libraries to have a sustainability policy. Policies though are usually connected to budgets based on what is financially possible. Sometimes the cost to purchase does not include the hidden costs. Hidden costs usually are the costs that end up impacting the environment. For too long the throw-away society model has been dominant, which helps explain why the oceans are choking in plastic. We can vote with our budgets and can choose better solutions in the materials we purchase. Being a good financial steward is important but trying to be conservative with financial resources and spending all the budget so that it does not get reduced next year seems to be two financial management practices that are at odds.

I am sure you have read of research studies or seen it in your own checkout numbers of the percentage of books that never get checked out. Spending out the materials budget might not be a good idea if the books are not going to be used. True we cannot anticipate if every book will be checked out, but we can be more proactive with our book displays to highlight unchecked out books or we could just reduce the number of books purchased focusing on the needs of the patrons. A survey of patrons might show they might want more study carrels or reading desks compared to more and more books.

As collections are evaluated from time to time, please take all of this into consideration. Also consider strengthening your environmental sections in your core collection. Explore environmental encyclopedias for your reference section if you do not already have any available. A subject guide on the environment with available resources would also be helpful. Audiobooks and films on the environment can also give some balance to the overall collection. A book can plant a seed leading someone to change their habits or they might create new solutions that can help better protect the planet. Put a call out to your community that you are accepting these types of

resources as donations and you might be surprised with a great response. People are passionate about the environment and this outreach can help build collections while also creating environmental awareness at the same time. This will also in some ways be a statement about your library in that your library is pro-environment.

Change can be difficult if it requires turning from previous ways, but that also means the change can make the world a better place. If we turn to solutions that benefit everyone including future generations, we can truly make a difference. All of this will require everyone working together. One thing is for certain is that the planet needs more trees planted. We will all need a lot more trees from sustainable tree farms if print resources make a comeback, because throwing gold away is probably never going to be sustainable. With more trees to regenerate forests, we can also help rollback climate change and with ecosystems restored wildlife will be less likely to retreat into cities which will help reduce exposure to zoonotic viruses. With enough change the planet might start looking like a beautiful garden again. †

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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