

Business Services Rooted in the Community
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The Town of Simsbury, Connecticut

Simsbury is one of Connecticut's oldest communities and was incorporated in 1670. The Town has a population of 23,329 people and covers an area of approximately 34.5 square miles (89 square km)¹ in the Farmington River Valley. A suburb of Hartford, the Capitol of Connecticut, Simsbury is a desirable place to live because of its highly rated school systems (rated #1 in the state), rural environment and historic charm. The majority of the population is middle aged, well educated and of higher income than the state average.

The Town is governed by a board of selectman comprised by a first selectman and five selectman elected every two years who are supported by various elected Board Sub-committees including a Board of Finance and Board of Education. Town residents have input into the Town's governance via Town Meetings and budget approval referendums.

Simsbury has a distinguished business and industrial history that includes manufacturing of explosives, copper mining and farming. Today the Town's top employers are the Hartford Life Insurance Company, Ensign-Bickford Companies, and the Town itself. Currently, there are over 1200 businesses located in Simsbury. Of these businesses, 77% employ less than 10 people and 64% employ less than five people. In addition, the Town's Assessor's Office and Chamber of Commerce estimate that about half of the businesses in Simsbury are home based businesses.

Although the Town is situated only 20 minutes from Bradley International Airport, it is at a disadvantage in that the major interstates are a half-hour drive away. Because of high land prices and its distance from major highways, Simsbury has had considerable problems in attracting and retaining a business base. For almost a decade now, the Town of Simsbury has focused on expanding its industrial and business tax base to relieve the 85% share of the tax burden that currently rests on the shoulders of its homeowners. While Economic Development is of great interest to the Town's residents and businesses, they believe it should be pursued through a thoughtful, carefully planned out strategy that will not change the Town's charm and appeal².

Simsbury Public Library:

The Simsbury Library is one of the state's top performing libraries. Built in 1985, it is 21,500 square feet (1997 square meters) in size and has a total collection of over 142,000 items. It has enjoyed modest but steady financial support from the Town. In FY2003, its budget is \$1,062,771 or \$46 per capita. Its annual circulation was 468,405 or just over 20 circulations per capita, more than double the state average. Between FY 2003 and FY 2003, the annual

circulation number increased by 7.5%³. The Library was ranked among the top one hundred public libraries in the country (out of 9,000) by the Hennen American Public Library Ratings, 2002⁴. The Library has a long tradition of outstanding service to adult and children with innovative programs and collections.

The Business Resource Center (BRC) – Evolution

The Simsbury Public Library has always provided a solid collection of business resources in print. The collection comprised mostly of investment and company information resources that would answer patron's questions about a company's history, investment rating and general contact information for companies. The collection contained only a small number of resources about entrepreneurship and business start-ups. In addition, there was no emphasis on marketing the resources or training staff to instruct patrons, therefore, the entire collection was often underutilized. Several factors contributed to the recognition of a need to increase service to the business community.

In the early 1990's many well-educated, highly skilled white-collar workers were laid off from area companies and were given large severance packages. Many of these workers investigated combining these funds with their skills to develop their own consulting businesses. The librarians working at the Adult Reference Desk observed an increase in questions asked by people who were just beginning to explore their options as entrepreneurs. In addition, during this time, the newly hired Library Director received a large number of offers to present business programs from local business people who were starting their businesses and saw the Library as a way to promote their business.

As early as 1994, in its Plan of Development, the Town asked that the Library become more responsive to the business community⁵. As a result, the Library staff and officials began thinking of business services to help grow and develop our business community. The Library conducted patron interviews and visited Town, Regional and State business and economic agencies. They identified that an initial and basic need was not being met. The novice entrepreneur with a dream or bright idea needed to be educated about business in order to understand and create the documents required by the State and agencies such as The Small Business Administration (SBA).

The result of this observation and needs analysis is the Business Resource Center (BRC) which has become one of the most useful tools, and certainly the most visible, in the Town's economic development tool-kit. The BRC has been operating since September 1999, first with a part time Business Outreach Librarian, and since July of 2000 with a full time Business Outreach Librarian. Because the Library is located on the main street, and it is one of the largest buildings along it, its sheer physical presence in the center of Town demands attention. And, because it is used by more than 850 people daily, and by more than 60 % of the population on a regular basis, a large built-in audience notices its efforts at economic development. Having a full-time staff member that is trained on business resources and who can market the resources and services of the BRC was an important way to leverage the Library's existing visibility.

Business Resource Center- Description of Center & Services

The Business Resource Center (BRC) is located in the Reference Department and occupies approximately 250 square feet. The area contains all business related reference books, business magazines and newspapers, small conference area, 6 Internet stations with business links and databases on them and bulletin boards and a slat wall for displaying posters, flyers and brochures about business programs and organizations. Four computer workstations with Microsoft Office software are located in a room off the BRC. In addition, some space near the BRC was annexed and a small display table placed to attract attention to new business references.

The business reference collection is arranged into four functional areas instead of in strict Dewey Decimal order: Job & Career related resources, General Business & Economic resources, Company information resources and Personal Finance & Investing resources. In addition, the business-related periodicals are located in the BRC instead of in the general periodical collection. During the initial opening of the BRC, we felt moving heavily used periodicals like the Wall Street Journal, Investors Business Daily, Barron's and Money magazine from the general periodical area into the BRC would "pull" patrons into the new area and help them become better aware of the wide range of business resources available. To ease the transition, signs were placed in the magazine and newspaper racks indicating the publications' new locations.

Electronic databases are an important part of the business collection. After conducting an extensive evaluation of the available electronic databases, comparing them by function, scope, price and how well they meet our patrons' different needs, we've invested in two databases: Reference USA and Mergent's FIS online. These databases provide valuable company information and are useful to a wide range of patrons including job seekers, small businesses, entrepreneurs, business students and consumers.

A key method of providing service to busy small business owners is via the Simsbury Public Library's web site. Information about the BRC is available via several access points on the Library's web page. Patrons can obtain detailed information about the BRC and its services including: a description of upcoming business programs, a link to the "Business Site of the Month"- an annotated collection of business related web sites selected by the Business Outreach Librarian, and 24 hour business reference service available by sending an e-mail message directly to the Business Outreach Librarian.

Free business programs and workshops are another way the BRC extends service beyond the walls of the BRC. By establishing a consistent "Wednesday Night is Business Night" program series, we built a constant awareness that the Simsbury Public Library was actively providing business information to the community. The programs, concentrated in the Fall and Spring, are held almost every week and meet the needs of a full range of Library patrons including: people starting businesses, small business owners, inventors, job seekers, investors and women in business. Each program is publicized in local newspapers and on radio stations as well as in the Simsbury Chamber of Commerce newsletter. Flyers are posted in the Library and past attendees are notified of the upcoming programs via email. The Business Resource Librarian attends every program, introduces herself and promotes upcoming programs at the beginning of the program. In addition, attendees are asked to fill out a "Program Evaluation" form after every program. The Business Outreach Librarian uses this form to identify future program topics and how frequently popular topics should be repeated. Programs are intended to be a "snapshot" of a

topic; materials relating to the topic are displayed in the room and a resource list is available for attendees as well, so they can continue to learn about a topic after the program is over. The number of programs offered each year doubled in three years from 12 to 25 programs per year. Equally encouraging are the attendance figures, which have risen from an average of 10 attendees per program in 1999 to 21 per program with many programs having 40 – 50 attendees. From September 2002 to May 2003, over 690 people attended the programs and over 440 of them were people who had never attended a program before.

The BRC's services are expanded through their collaboration with groups like the Service Corps of Retired Executives (S.C.O.R.E.), a non-profit group of retired executives that provides business support and assistance. A S.C.O.R.E. counselor is available to patrons and meets with them at the Library. In addition, the Library provides information about other local small business programs like the University of Hartford's Entrepreneurial Center, The Connecticut Small Business Development Center or Small Business Administration's Business Information Center located in Hartford, Connecticut. By providing information about these organizations, the Library can provide patrons with a wide range of support options at a variety of times.

Business Outreach Librarian – Role & Outreach

A key element in the business services provided at the Simsbury Public Library is the Business Outreach Librarian. Having a knowledgeable, trained, full-time staff member devoted to business collection development, staff training, program development, marketing of the BRC and one-on-one patron consultation is a vital investment for the BRC. In hiring and training the Business Outreach Librarian, the Simsbury Public Library drew from other business service models in the state, visiting existing business libraries and interviewing business librarians in public libraries located in Stamford, Newington and Greenwich, Connecticut.

Connecticut public libraries have had business departments and business librarians located in their larger, city libraries for decades. As the economic climate changed, so did the business services. In the 1990's, there was an emphasis on exporting and many libraries found they needed to reevaluate their business collections to meet the needs of their business patrons. In addition, around this time the Connecticut Library Association founded their Economic Vitality Task Force. Comprised of academic and public librarians from around the state, this task force sought to communicate to business leaders and state decision-makers all of the ways in which libraries could help boost the economy. They provided an important service by educating the workforce, helping businesses connect to prospects and vendors and providing export information that needed to be understood and supported. Over the past ten years, this group has changed to be comprised mostly of smaller public libraries that have strong business collections and community colleges that train working-adults in new or developing fields. Today, although there are perhaps only a dozen or so business librarians in public libraries in Connecticut, most public libraries provide some business support including resources for job seekers.

After evaluating different libraries' business services, it became evident that the success of the business department depended upon the support of the Library administration. Providing a flexible schedule and the ability for the librarian to participate in activities and meetings outside of the Library is very important. Simsbury Public Library's Business Outreach Librarian serves

as a visible advertisement for the BRC. To get the word out about the BRC and its resources, the Business Outreach Librarian contacts local organizations like the Rotary Club, Chamber of Commerce, Jaycees, the Farmington Valley Reemployment Network and local investment clubs and offers to speak to their groups about how the BRC might help their businesses. She develops multimedia presentations that are a “virtual tour” of the BRC and demonstrates some of its electronic resources. In addition, the Business Outreach Librarian is an active member of the Simsbury Chamber of Commerce and is a member of the Chamber’s Education Committee and Membership Committee. Through her involvement with these committees, she has made contact with teachers at the Simsbury High School and local businesses. For the past 2 years, she has made presentations about job and career resources available at the Library to several high school classes. She is a member of the Simsbury Main Street Partnership, a non-profit organization that supports the revitalization of the historic commercial section of Town. As a member of the Marketing Committee, she works with local retailers on programs that help raise awareness of local businesses and which bring customers into the downtown shopping area. Local retail organizations had been the most difficult population to reach via programs and in library service so this relationship allows her to demonstrate in person the Library’s business services and to better understand their needs.

The BRC’s services embrace the larger community as well. Involvement with organizations like S.C.O.R.E. (The Service Corps of Retired Executives) and the University of Hartford’s Look Forward program and Entrepreneurial Center have brought patrons from the surrounding areas into the Library. Presentations to the S.C.O.R.E. counselors and the entrepreneurs at the Hartford College for Women have created opportunities to help patrons in other communities. It is felt that many entrepreneurs are not familiar with Simsbury. Coming into Town to use the Library opens their minds to the possibility of locating their business in Simsbury.

The Business Outreach Librarian constantly re-evaluates the business community’s needs via the program evaluation forms, personal interviews and discussions with other business organizations. Via these methods, it became obvious that it was difficult to easily provide information to patrons who wanted to understand what steps they needed to take to open a business in Town. This need resulted in a collaboration with the Chamber of Commerce and the Town of Simsbury on a “Doing Business in Simsbury” brochure, intended to help new businesses understand the Town’s registration, tax and zoning regulations.

There are several large corporations located in Simsbury. Although the Business Outreach Librarian has attempted to promote the business services to them, to date they have utilized the BRC very little. After four years of studying the local business market it is apparent that our core users are entrepreneurs or would - be entrepreneurs. Therefore, while we address all questions directed to the BRC by our major companies and Town officials, the majority of our programs and services are developed to meet the needs of the small businessperson.

The Business Outreach Librarian’s services have evolved over the four years since the position was created. Initially, she handled basic questions about starting a business and directed patrons to resources. Now, after four years, she answers more complex questions about market research, business expansion and sources of funding for non-profit organizations. Typical recent questions include a request for help identifying sources of sales leads for a financial service provider, information about the size of the coffee market in Connecticut and resources that

provide a checklist for evaluating businesses for purchase. Through her business programs and outreach, she has become acquainted with many local business people and now is in a position to 'connect' business people with each other. An example of this is when a patron came in looking for information about starting an importing business, the librarian was able to make an introduction to another patron who had started a similar business the year before. A patron who was interested in starting a business that involved participating in many trade shows was introduced to another patron who provided trade show support throughout the United States.

Business Resource Center Budget

The BRC's materials budget includes not only small business resources, but also career, personal investment and finance resources and represents about 20 percent of the entire Adult Materials budget. This figure has not changed significantly since the opening of the BRC. The biggest investment in the BRC has been in personnel and electronic databases. The prices of electronic databases have tripled in the last five years. The Library doesn't actively solicit donations or funding for the BRC, but in the past small donations have been and we've used them to acquire new reference materials and an audio book collection. In addition, the business program speakers donate their expertise and time which amounts to about \$4500 worth of "in kind" donations. In all, the annual cost to the Library for the operation of the BRC is about \$75,000. The Director feels this is a very worthwhile expense and feels the investment contributes not only to the overall economic vitality of the Town, but also to the Library. The Library is planning a \$7.5 M building expansion in the next couple of years. The Library Director feels that the business community is supportive of this expansion and has incentives to contribute because of the services and support the BRC has given them. In fact, the Library has already received a \$50K donation to be used towards the expansion of the BRC.

The Future

The Connecticut State Library requires the Library Board to develop a long-range plan every five years. Based on initial activities and demonstrated need, the 2000 Simsbury Public Long Range Plan, outlined initiatives that included enhancing awareness of the Library's business services, and expanding the service so that 5% more of the Town's business community use the BRC per year⁶. The technology initiatives include increasing business databases and providing remote access to them, providing additional electronic workstations and adding an Employment Room to facilitate job searches. The overall objective is to put Business Services on the same level as Children's Services - totally indispensable!

Beyond the year 2005, we look forward to the overall Library building expansion. The BRC will also be expanded; adding conference rooms and quiet study areas that can be used by small businesses and entrepreneurs for affinity group meetings and for consultation with the librarian and advisors from SBA and S.C.O.R.E. We will increase the size of our large meeting room by 50% (occupancy 150) which will enable the Town to hold public meetings on economic development in the Library. We will also add a Training Center adjacent to the BRC equipped with 20 computers so that hands on training can occur on each of the Library's licensed business databases and on selected web sites. Hands-on group instruction will become a major part of the

Business Outreach Librarian's duties. To this end, she is pursuing her State Certification in Library Media and Instructional Technology.

Our goal is to have the Library be not only a partner, but also a leader in the town-wide collaboration on economic development. We will get there through continued cooperation with the other economic development stakeholders and by leading the way in "thinking out of the box".

¹ Connecticut Department of Economic and Community Development. Connecticut Town Profiles. Hartford, CT: November 2001.

² Planning Commission, Town of Simsbury. Plan of Development. Simsbury, CT: November 1994.

³ Town of Simsbury. Town of Simsbury Annual Report 2001-2002. Simsbury, CT:2002.

⁴ Hennen, Thomas J. "Great American Public Libraries: The 2002 HAPLR Rankings". American Libraries, October 2002: 64-68.

⁵ Town of Simsbury. Plan of Development. (1994).

⁶ Simsbury Public Library Board of Directors. Simsbury Public Library Long Range Plan 2000. Simsbury, CT: 2000.