

Surveys: Feedback is key

By Errin Morrison.

Thank you for Your Feedback!

I'm one of those people who really likes filling in surveys. I like being asked for my opinion and I like giving it. Politics, social issues, library trends, books, music, food ... you name it; I'll tell you what I think about it! I know I'm not alone here, but I also know that there are plenty of us who don't like filling in surveys and would rather not be asked to. Beyond a mere disinclination to share, survey fatigue has become a real issue. Surveys that are prepared too quickly, sent out too often, and ask poorly structured questions do a true disservice to the art of soliciting feedback.

BCLA has conducted three surveys since the beginning of the year: a general survey of members and non-members on BCLA activities and priorities; a survey of BC Library Conference attendees; and a survey of tradeshow exhibitors at the BC Library Conference. Before I launch into my summary of these, I hope that we have not contributed to the general level of fatigue out there or caused you too much frustration with our survey design. We do our best with the limited resources we have, and I can assure you our intentions are honourable!

2011 Member and Non-member Survey

Just over 300 people completed our general survey on BCLA activities and priorities – 277 of these were BCLA members, for an approximate membership response rate of 35%.

From these responses, we were able to conclude with some confidence that we need to focus on continuing to hold the annual conference; providing more and more varied continuing education opportunities; facilitating advocacy activities and campaigns; providing enhanced networking opportunities for members; and improving our web presence, profile and communications. None of this was a great surprise, but the feedback enabled the board to make some difficult decisions about where to allocate increasingly scarce monetary and staff resources.

We sent out a full summary of the survey findings some time ago, but some of the most valuable feedback came in the form of comments accompanying each set of questions. Although not

quantifiable or easily incorporated into a formal report, comments can be especially enlightening when they expose common themes (or confirm suspicions). Here are some response threads that jumped out at me:

Why are you no longer a member of BCLA?

- As an academic librarian, I didn't find much that BCLA had to offer – particularly its focus at conferences, which I always found to be geared towards public libraries.
- Applies only to public library staff. Doesn't address special library issues.

Conclusion: We need to ensure we are addressing the needs of all BCLA members – public, academic, and special library workers of all kinds.

Are there any other activities you feel BCLA should be focusing on?

- Advocacy!!!
- More advocacy work with government and decision-making bodies to strengthen libraries in BC.
- I think the most important is library advocacy.

Conclusion: Many of our members truly value the advocacy work that BCLA engages in. We need to ensure that this is a priority activity.

What are the benefits of BCLA membership?

- I am not aware of any.
- None.
- That is a question I have been asking myself lately.
- Good question these days.

Conclusion: Wow. We need to better communicate the benefits of BCLA membership, and think about



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how we can provide more value for time and money invested in the Association. (And perhaps members themselves need to do some thinking about how they can make association participation beneficial to themselves and their colleagues. BCLA is its members, after all.)

How can BCLA increase its value to you?

- Provide more learning opportunities.
- Through more educational opportunities.
- Do more things virtually like web conference and web workshops.
- More opportunities for continuing education and networking.
- More online offerings and social networking.
- Provide more learning opportunities; help librarians and staff update their skills.
- More social networking.
- Online professional development opportunities/regional occasional events.
- Make conference-type sessions available during the year.
- Provide more year around training opportunities.
- Have more continuing education sessions available outside the lower mainland.
- More webinars or other types of meetings.
- Provide programs/speakers outside the annual conference

Conclusion: Loud and clear...we need to provide more and more varied continuing education and networking opportunities.

There were other patterns and consistent messages that arose throughout the survey responses, but these were a few that really stood out for me. I know there are many other opinions and a lot of feedback that didn't make its way into the survey for various reasons, but I think this is probably pretty representative of general member and non-member perceptions of BCLA. We'll certainly be using this survey to inform BCLA's priorities over the coming months.

BC Library Conference Evaluation

The next survey we conducted, the 2011 BC Library Conference Evaluation, was equally revealing – although perhaps not as representative a sample as the member survey in some respects. In my experience with event evaluations, the most memorable comments come either from those who had a fabulous time, or those who had a much-less-than-fabulous time for one reason or another. Those who fall somewhere in between tend to provide few if any comments – or they don't fill out the evaluation

in the first place. So you get a lot of highs and lows in a conference evaluation.

A link to this online survey was sent to all conference registrants shortly after the conference. In terms of overall trends, we saw that 51% of respondents hailed from the Lower Mainland, 22% were from the Island, 26% came from other areas of BC, and 1% came from outside the province. Forty five per cent of respondents were from the public library sector, 29% were from the academic sector, 9% were public library trustees, and another 17% were from school, special, or other types of libraries. Fifty three per cent identified themselves as BCLA members, 9% as BCLTA members and 5% as HLABC members. These numbers are obviously not a perfectly accurate picture of who attended the conference, since only 175 of approximately 500 conference attendees completed the evaluation, but I think they give a relatively reasonable snapshot of conference attendance.

Feedback on individual sessions was also collected – which ones people attended and how they liked them. I was impressed with the amount of detailed commentary provided here...BCLA board, staff and Conference Planning and Program Committee members can't attend every session, so this input enables us to evaluate the relative success of our session offerings, speakers and presenters. This information is taken into consideration in planning for future years...a speaker who received high marks for putting on an excellent session would be someone we'd be interested in having back at some point, and the opposite holds true for those who weren't so successful.

Feedback on the Tradeshow is also important. This year 87% of survey respondents indicated they attended the Tradeshow – and for the 13% who didn't, lack of time seemed to be the main obstacle. Lack of interest was the problem in a few cases ... so perhaps there is an opportunity for us to improve the Tradeshow experience for some folks.

Overall conference ratings were interesting. Most respondents gave sessions and speakers an "above average" rating. Somewhat to my surprise the networking and social opportunities received an overall "average" rating (I had a great time networking and socializing!), as did the exhibits. Many people gave ratings of "excellent" (sessions 26%, speakers 29%, networking 19%, social events 13%, exhibits 3%) and only a very few selected "below average" or "poor" (sessions 3% and 0%, speakers 0% and 0%, networking 5% and 1%, social

events 4% and 2%). The only clear exception here was that 18% of respondents found the exhibits or tradeshow to be "below average". This is something we need to work to improve for 2012.

Overall commentary indicated people most enjoyed reconnecting with colleagues and friends; meeting new people; the opportunity to network and to discuss issues of importance to libraries; the sessions, speakers and learning opportunities; the author visits; the keynote address; the Great Debate; the beautiful venue; and the ice cream!

Suggestions for improvement ran the gamut from providing more educational opportunities and content of interest to trustees, to improving the layout of the exhibits, to ensuring better balance between academic and public sessions, to offering more free food, to reducing ticket costs for social events and the conference as a whole, to allotting more time for lunch and extending tradeshow opening hours. All good feedback and things we can work on...aside from the "more food at no cost" request I'm afraid. I'm not sure how many people are aware that a cup of coffee at a hotel costs us \$4.50 plus taxes and gratuity, a soft drink runs between \$3.00 and \$4.50, and an individual cookie is about \$3.50. The bag lunches you may have seen or partaken in were the cheapest lunch option available to us, and they were \$25.00 each plus gratuity and HST. Providing more food at no cost means conference registration fees would have to go up to compensate.

Survey of Tradeshow Exhibitors

Our third and final survey of the year was an evaluation of the Tradeshow experience that we sent to 2011 BC Library Conference exhibitors. We heard back from 22 exhibitors and gathered some useful feedback that will inform next year's Tradeshow planning process.

Most respondents (77%) indicated that they had exhibited at past BC Library Conferences – meaning they were able to compare this year's Tradeshow with other experiences. 55% liked this year's layout; 45% did not. The feedback on this point was pretty divergent. Kudos included "Layout was ideal"; "Loved the open space setup"; and "Perfect". Cited layout problems included visibility issues, bad sight angles, poor placement of exhibitors in the hallway, exhibit hall located on a different floor than other activities, and excessive size of main exhibit area...highlighting the eternal truth that there's just no way to make everyone happy! What works for

some exhibitors just doesn't work for others. That being said, there is always room for improvement.

Regarding the shorter exhibits timeframe, 59% of respondents thought it worked well and 41% disagreed. The consensus seemed to be that Thursday evening and Friday was prime exhibit time and Saturday was something of a loss. This is great feedback and something we can definitely adjust in planning for 2012.

Happiness with the overall conference experience was limited to 46% of responding exhibitors, with 14% stating they were unhappy and 40% falling somewhere in the middle. In my mind, although this isn't bad, it also isn't good enough and we'll need to work to improve things for our exhibitors if we wish to keep them coming back. Indeed, a couple of respondents indicated they would need to evaluate whether or not to return to BCLA, since the number of visitors to their booths didn't seem to make it worth their expense. Of course, as with the conference evaluation, I suspect we are not hearing from some of the exhibitors who had a pretty good experience overall...those with strong feelings one way or the other are just more inclined to take the time to complete an evaluation.

However representative a sample this was, there's no doubt we got some very useful suggestions for improvement which we will consider in planning for next year. In fact, once we have an Exhibits Coordinator in place we hope to put together a meeting of some of the key conference organizers and a few exhibitors who have volunteered to provide their feedback and help us to refine and improve the Tradeshow experience. Sixty per cent of respondents did state that they intend to return to the 2012 BC Library Conference. Sixty per cent were also hoping we would stick with our mid-April conference date to avoid overlap with other Canadian library conferences, but I can report that although next year's conference will be in May we were careful to ensure our dates do not conflict with those of other associations. So I hope we will see most, if not all, of our exhibitors again next year and I look forward to working with them to put on a great Tradeshow in 2012.

Conclusion

So thank you, to all of those who took the time to complete our surveys. As you can see, your responses are valuable to BCLA. Gathering this kind of feedback is one of the key ways we are able to

gauge our effectiveness and identify areas for improvement.

If I can offer one suggestion, especially when it comes to the Conference evaluation, it would be to please remember that it is your colleagues and friends who have given up their valuable personal time to organize these events for your benefit. While there are a lot of kudos and thanks to pass along, there are always a few harsh and hurtful comments that cannot in good conscience be shared with

people who worked so hard, for so long, at their own expense. If you can't say something nice, as they say...or at least if you can't say something constructive, perhaps it's best to say nothing at all.

And please remember that your feedback is always welcome. You don't have to wait for a survey to share your thoughts and suggestions, and I hope you won't. I look forward to hearing from you!

Errin Morrison is BCLA's Executive Director.