

Folks Are Flocking to the Library, a Cozy Place to Look for a Job

Books, Computers and Wi-Fi are Free,
But Staffs are Stressed by Crowds, Cutbacks

BY JIM CARLTON
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The financial crisis has caused a lot of withdrawals at the public library. A few years ago, public libraries were being written off as goners. The Internet had made them irrelevant, the argument went. But libraries across the country are reporting jumps in attendance of as much as 65% over the past year, as newly unemployed people flock to branches to fill out résumés and scan ads for job listings.

Other recession-weary patrons are turning to libraries for cheap entertainment -- killing time with the free computers, video rentals and, of course, books.

Last Friday, there was a particularly long waiting list of 157 to check out the popular vampire novel "Twilight," by Stephenie Meyer, from a branch of the Stockton-San Joaquin County Library here in Tracy. This central California town has been ravaged by mortgage foreclosures, and area libraries report a surge of traffic. Shamika Miller huddled over a laptop at the Tracy branch. Laid off from her job as a bookkeeper at Home Depot more than a year ago, Ms. Miller, 29 years old, says she has visited the library "if not every day, every other day" since October to check job listings with her computer.



Shamika Miller works on a computer at the Stockton-San Joaquin County Library in Tracy, Calif., a town that has been ravaged by mortgage foreclosures.

"I come here, first of all, because it's a free Wi-Fi spot," says Ms. Miller, who supports a 10-year-old daughter on her unemployment compensation. And, she says, "there's something about the library that helps you think, at least for me."



A patron browses the science fiction and fantasy section of the Tracy library, which has seen an increase in the number of people using their materials.

At the Ferguson Library in Stamford, Conn., "it's not unusual for us to have 40 or 50 reserves on a popular book," says spokeswoman Linda Avellar. At the Randolph County Public Library in Asheboro, N.C., a 25% increase in visitors over the past six months from a year ago has been hard on 14-year-old carpeting that officials say needs to be replaced now rather than in six years, as planned.

This isn't the first time library attendance has spiked in a downturn. The 1987 and 2001 recessions saw similar jumps, librarians say. But few people thought that libraries would again be in such favor after so much information flooded the Web.

One big draw: Most libraries have put in free computer and Wi-Fi service. And they've begun stocking DVDs and videogames. With the recession weighing on them, "people recognize what a great value the public library is," says Jim Rettig, president of the American Library Association in Chicago.

Librarians are turning into job counselors -- and even social workers -- as they have to deal with a sometimes-desperate new class of patrons. "They are frustrated, overwhelmed and thought they would not be job hunting again in their lives," says Jan Perrier, head of reference and adult services at the Roxbury Public Library in Succasunna, N.J. "I had one woman just so overwhelmed she sat in front of the PC and cried."

Many jobless people are reporting to the library as they used to report to the office. Career books are in particularly great demand at the Morris County Library. "The shelves are bare," says Lynne Olver, chief librarian there. She says attendance in "Career Resource Seminars" that the library has held for many years jumped to 745 in 2008, from 472 in 2007.

Others come in to escape their troubles for a while. Wesley Martin on Friday tapped his hands to the beat of a hip-hop video he was watching on one of the Tracy library's computers. "This is just a chance for me to get out of my house," said the 33-year-old, who lost his job at a discount store a month ago.

The sheer numbers of jobless visitors are overwhelming some libraries at a time of funding cuts by cash-strapped local agencies. The library in Winter Park, Fla., reports a 25% increase in checkouts of its books and other materials over the past 15 months, even as its budget for stocking new items has been cut 12%.



An average of 230 people a day line up to use the 27 computers at Randolph County Public Library in Asheboro, N.C.

Some libraries are cutting their hours, reducing staff or even being closed altogether because of budget problems. The Schenectady County Public Library in Schenectady, N.Y., says it has had no money to replace four librarians who have left in the past two years. "As a result, we recently found that it is taking up to five days to resshelf books, as just one tiny example of the impact," says Karen Bradley, a reference librarian there.

The Randolph County library in North Carolina can't afford to replace those rugs: "We are just going to have to live with the worn carpet for now," says Suzanne Tate, the library's director. An average of 230 people a day line up to use the library's 27 computers. To help manage the traffic, the library has taken to bumping users off if they try to stay on over one hour.

But the patrons keep coming. "Many times a day there is a line of people waiting to get on one of our three computers," says Mary Wright, director of the Marks-Quitman County Library in Marks, Miss., who says many of the new patrons are laid-off workers from nearby casinos.

Tracy library officials have ordered nine more Internet-access computers. For now, patrons have to line up at a kiosk to make a reservation to use one of the 11 existing terminals, says Kathleen Buffleben, the supervising librarian.

At a checkout counter nearby in the Tracy library, Brandon Perry, 24, and his fiancée, Chardenac Van Rooter, 21, were applying for library cards Friday to aid in their job searches. The couple, who were with their 1-year-old daughter, said they support themselves largely on part-time restaurant work by Mr. Perry, who was laid off as a heavy-equipment operator at a ski resort a year ago. On top of their other troubles, the couple said they were forced to move into a homeless shelter a few weeks ago after a relative's home where they were staying was foreclosed on.

"Now," says Mr. Perry, "we just want to go to Hawaii. We don't have a computer, so we'll start coming here to find a job there."