IMPLEMENTING A TECHNOLOGY PETTING ZOO AT YOUR LIBRARY

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A "Petting Zoo"?

The concept of a technology petting zoo within a library environment is to help familiarize patrons and staff with all the different choices out there for popular new hardware models such as tablets, eReaders, and other handheld devices.

Why bother? Try these six reasons on for size:

1) Helps patrons learn to utilize their new devices or try them out first-hand before purchasing;
2) Great advertising point/press release opportunity which ties in nicely with any digital collection you may have;
3) Get more bang for your buck by utilizing online/digital magazine subscriptions which are often automatically part of your normal print subscription;
4) Utilize ESL/foreign language learning programs and other subscription services without needing to reserve a library computer;
5) Shows library doubters that we mean business when we state we are more than "just a big pile of books";
6) Yet one more reason to visit one's local library.

What can it contain?

Anything! The beauty of the petting zoo model is that you can stick just about anything in there, but just like a real zoo, you'll want to make sure you have enough room for your "animals." Possible hardware includes: Kindles, Nooks, iPads, Samsung Galaxy tablets, Chromebooks, Google Nexus tablets, Microsoft Surface tablets, PlayStation Vita, Nintendo 3DS, .mp3 players, pen scanners, GPS devices, and cameras.

What are the common obstacles? Eight things to consider:

1) **Budget**: Isn't it always? This is not exactly a cheap endeavor, and precise budgeting should take place before anything else is done.
2) **Security**: Proper security cables (usually woven steel) must anchor each device and serial numbers should always be listed in at least two locations for insurance, theft and warranty purposes (pictures of each device would not hurt to have either). Security cases may be available as well, depending on the device.
3) **Location**: Petting zoos should be located within direct eyesight of the library personnel assigned to demonstrate their usage to patrons. It is recommended they should also not be placed in close proximity to a building exit or area known to leak/flood. Placing devices at podiums forcing patrons to stand in order to use the device will be uncomfortable for most people; enable patrons to sit while exploring the petting zoo. If your library's layout situates the adult collection near the children or YA collections, be prepared to also have children using the devices.
4) **Staff Training**: More often than not, the staff will not be familiar with every single device. Be sure each staff member who will be tasked with demonstrating usage understands the basic functions inside and out before unleashing inquisitive patrons upon them.

5) **Maintaining Content/Updating Devices**: The content you wish to feature on these devices will undoubtedly change over time. There will also be a need to regularly download device updates from the manufacturer. Optimally, one or two employees should become "zookeepers" who are tasked with maintaining the devices on at least a monthly if not biweekly basis.

6) **Becoming Obsolete**: In most cases, devices will become obsolete within approximately two years or less. Keep this in mind when choosing devices to put into your petting zoo. For example, the original Google tablet, Nexus One, debuted in January of 2010, while the seventh (some say sixth) iteration, Nexus 7, debuted in June of 2012.

7) **User Permissions**: Not every device is super cooperative when it comes to locking/limiting certain features. The person/department in charge of technology should make themselves familiar with which permissions can and cannot be edited. Nothing is ever completely "hack-proof," but you also want to ensure that major administrative or content purchasing features cannot be accessed.

8) **Limiting Usage**: There may come a time where there are several patrons who have explicitly made a visit to the library in order to use a device yet they are all currently in use. Policies regarding the time limitation of usage can usually be addressed on a case by case basis, but a policy may need to be created if it becomes a recurring problem.

Anything else I should know? Six more thoughts:

1) Petting zoos work best in a public library setting, but it is still possible to create one in a school library media center or academic library.

2) Beware: each device may have different recommended battery usage. Be sure to read each device's battery care section of the manual instead of implementing a blanket charging schedule, otherwise you may damage the battery and adversely affect the devices' battery life.

3) Making your petting zoo mobile, or creating a smaller more mobile petting zoo in addition to your main petting zoo is great for community outreach events and initiatives at common locations such as branch libraries, schools, train stations, senior citizen housing, and homeless shelters.

4) Some devices support large sized fonts which can be enabled for those who normally frequent the large print section of the collection.

5) Putting phones into a petting zoo is generally frowned upon, but if enough features could be locked down, it could potentially work.

6) Problems with cameras and video cameras can occur when patrons purposely store offensive material on them, but most tablets have built in cameras as well, so perhaps they do not pose such a major issue after all.

Additional Resources:

Video from the Orange County (FL) Library: http://tinyurl.com/petzoo1
Denver PL's petting zoo blog: http://tinyurl.com/petzoo3
Georgia Libraries' virtual petting zoo: http://tinyurl.com/petzoo4
University of Maine at Farmington petting zoo libguide: http://tinyurl.com/petzoo5
"Creating a Technology Petting Zoo" by Annette Gaskins: http://tinyurl.com/petzoo6

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