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Yarra Plenty Regional Library chooses Spydus to build a library service - like no other

Yarra Plenty Regional Libraries (YPRL) builds its strategy on thinking outside the box when it comes to public libraries. For this reason, it came as no surprise when YPRL's entrepreneurial spirit shone through in both its approach to procuring a new library management system (LMS) and creating a flexible structure that could take advantage of any future possibilities.

YPRL is a large regional library corporation that's been servicing the residents of north-eastern Melbourne since the 1960s. Part of its vision is to provide local residents with opportunities for community connection through embracing the idea that a library can become a community learning loungeroom. Another is to offer smaller library services outside the corporation the opportunity to enjoy the benefits afforded to large scale libraries via its hybrid consortia model, flexible enough to take onboard the unique requirements of almost any library service.

At the helm of this innovative library service is Jane Cowell, who has worked within the library environment for 30 years, arriving at YPRL four years ago to take up the position of CEO. In 2020, under Ms Cowell's guidance YPRL carried out a review of its LMS.

"We had the same library management system for 20 years and were quite happy with its performance overall," Ms Cowell explained. "But as a responsible CEO I felt it was time to test the market and compare what was on offer. We didn't particularly want to change; it was more to see if what we had was still best practice and if it was fit-for-purpose to take us into the future."

The decision to go out to market coincided at a time when another library service - Eastern Region Libraries Corporation (ERLC), was also embarking on a similar tender process. A pragmatic approach resulted with both library corporations joining forces – collaborating on both the tender and the EOI, while remaining separate entities throughout the process.

"Making this a joint project with ERLC gave us a broader frame of reference, but one area that was critical to both the CEO of ERLC and myself when assessing potential LMSs was - what does the successful vendor's future roadmap look like?" Ms Cowell said. "It wasn't just about what a vendor can offer us now, it was about where are you heading into the future? What types of innovative features are you working on that will align with where we want to go? What would give library users a similar experience in looking for content similar to popular streaming services?"

When the time came for the short-listed vendors (three in total) to be assessed, a vertical slice of the library's organisational roles formed the basis of the selection committee, including – librarians, branch managers, catalogers, system administrators and an IT manager. Each vendor was given the same list of criteria that would be evaluated and scored against by the selection committee.

Members of the selection committee agreed that all the offerings being assessed were very different from each other. The first one being described as highly prescriptive - tab and Windows-based, while the second contender had a low-price tag but required an ongoing developmental investment with significant IT stafftime to make it suitable for YPRL's needs. Spydus was the only LMS with an intuitive interface that gave users an experience that felt similar to what was offered by popular streaming services.

"During each full-day vendor presentation we had some very lively discussions, which was great," Ms Cowell remarked. "However, many staff who had never seen Spydus were immediately drawn to its browser environment where you didn't have to switch between multiple tabs while its user friendly and intuitive nature completely won over the panel. We were also really impressed with Civica's future focus on innovation, and direction towards personalization, demonstrating how Spydus was going to grow and change. Its active user group

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and willingness to listen and respond with development from the user group feedback was also a plus. The decision to choose Spydus was an easy one, as everyone on the selection panel felt the same."

Implementation

The implementation went smoothly for YPRL, closely collaborating with Civica to make sure all scheduled milestones were met, and the final three-month deadline achieved.

"This implementation gave us the opportunity to think differently about what a LMS can do for a library service," MS Cowell said. "My advice is not to replicate what you have already when you move across to Spydus but take the time to think creatively with your team

and embed any aspirations you have for your library service. Unlike previous implementations, the setup of Spydus, and some of its customisation, occurs during the training phase, so it's important to have the creative thinking time with your team prior to this stage to make sure all your future ambitions for your library service are accommodated. We neglected to do this so did have some changes that needed to be made down the track."

Unintended benefits during the implementation

"One very worthwhile exercise that libraries don't do often enough is collection mapping," Ms Cowell remarked. "It usually only happens when a library changes its library management software. There were many unintended benefits to remapping our collection. Creating new data maps that covered old and new collections has greatly improved the discoverability of our 20-year-old catalogue for both borrowers and staff alike. It also gave us an opportunity to clean up the system, creating cut off dates for lost items, relieving our borrowers of the that annoying scenario - trying to reserve an item that was lost 10 years ago."
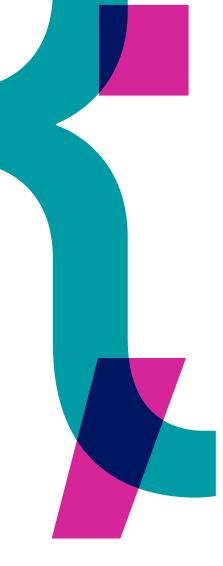
Website and other services

Spydus APIs have overhauled the functionality of the YPRL website, adding many more features such as customised event bookings, making sure users find the events that are specific for their taste. While rolling carousals automatically pick up dust jackets of new books and displays them, freeing up librarians from having to manually load up new titles as part of their daily routine.

"It's a little thing, but now having our catalogue under our own URL makes a big difference, Ms Cowell remarked. "We now have - yprl.spydus, not the LMS name first, so customers identify YPRL with our library catalogue and not the vendor."

"Our blogs can also be linked to the catalogue, for example our blog titled: 5 space novels that deserve the Dune cinematic treatment, can now be linked to those novels in our catalogue, so they can start reading an online version of the book or reserve a hard copy. With the open APIs we can link anything to each other if we choose and this is part of the flexibility we were looking for so we can creatively think of ways to engage our users to our content."

Training

"We're very proud of how we rolled out our Spydus training across the organisation, our staff have been very complimentary about how well it worked," Ms Cowell explained. "The training structure recommended by Civica is tried and proven. Our core trainers - trained by Civica, set up branch champions, who have become our branches' go-to experts. Developing training tools from the initial Civica training, we decided to record the training over MS Teams and this is now part of our onboarding for new staff. This did require the Core trainers to be totally focused on the Spydus implementation for the 3 months. Remember that you do need to resource this type of system wide change."

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Flexible consortia model

Most public libraries around Australia that have a simple structure, involving a single library service with several branches. YPRL chose to head in another direction, not only offering other libraries the opportunity to join their consortia to reap the benefits associated with larger scale libraries but the possibility to retain their identity through choosing a structure that works for them.

"Another reason we needed customisation and flexibility is because we are a regional library service that uses different consortia models for our current partner library services," Ms Cowell explained. Murrindindi Library Service shares our collections and LMS because as a neighboring local council area this is practical and the Council is quite small with a population of less than 15,000 and has been in place since 1996. Our other partner Council is Warrnambool City Council which has recently onboarded with us. Warrnambool is too far away, making daily collection sharing impractical. YPRL has a service level agreement to supply Warrnambool with the library management system and manage their library collection and procurement.

The Library App - Solus

The library App we use is the Solus Library App which is fully integrated with the library management system.

"The Library app allows our customers to check out a book on their phone," Ms Cowell said. "During COVID this was

great, so many benefits for the customer, especially as hygiene was a concern for everyone. We have designed the Spydus events module with ten event streams so they can look at a stream such as – Local and Family History and see what's coming up soon for their topic of interest. The kids' stream is great for parents looking for events that will not only entertain their children but have an educational component too. This can be easily searched through the Library App as well."

Conclusion

Lateral thinking is part of YPRL's DNA, which is why this library service will continue to grow and thrive, leaving its door always open to explore ways to provide greater collaborations with other libraries through its expanding consortia model.

"Reviewing your LMS should never be feared," Ms Cowell reflected. "It's good to find out what's out there even if it just confirms that what you have is the best option. We believe that Spydus' advanced features lets us focus on a level of personalisation that we didn't have before and is exactly where libraries need to go."