

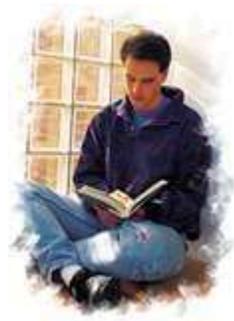
Consult the Cat

Shannon Roy, Continuing Education Coordinator

The State Librarian handed over "Perceptions of Idaho's Digital Natives on Public Libraries," a report funded by IMLS and prepared by Corona Research for the Idaho Commission for Libraries. "See what you make of this," she said. The Cat flexed her claws and dug them deeply into the report. "Certainly," she replied.



For this report, Digital Natives were defined as Idaho library users who had grown up with computers and electronic information. The age range was from 12 to 25, which bothered the Cat slightly. "You don't try to talk to kittens and cats at the same time." A lot of information had to be separated out between younger and older digital natives.



The Digital Natives are sometimes stereotyped as being super-connected, multi-tasking, fast-living and not that interested in interacting with people outside their small circle. These stereotypes are largely unfair.

Many digital natives are far more interested than the Boomers were in having a balanced, socially fulfilling life. They are civic minded and often very interested in community service. And they are very interested in learning and skill building, both for career development and to pursue special interests.



They are usually aware that the Internet, however central to their lives, does not always provide reliable information. Access to vetted information is a library service that they would value highly.

However, what does seem to be true is that the digital natives want life and learning and libraries to be interesting. If they have a motto, it is probably "Don't bore us." They want to be engaged, they want to interact, they want people to be responsive to their needs.

The digital natives also want choices. They take it for granted that the world should offer lots of choices.

They have never lived in a world where people order coffee. It has always been a world where one could order a tall latte with white chocolate and extra whipped cream dusted with nutmeg. A library that clings to old-fashioned, traditional services will quickly lose them.

Digital natives are actually heavy users of libraries. But it would never occur to them that using a library is identical with entering a library facility. They want to be able to use the library and library services from wherever they are. One important job librarians will have is to remind them that they ARE using the library. Otherwise, it might not occur to them that the library needs support.

When a digital native does willingly enter a library, it is usually for one of three reasons:

1. They like the library. Many do, but it is a personal taste and often depends on the library being attractive and welcoming. In spite of their desire for convenience, “many will travel farther in order to go to a library that they prefer rather than a closer library that is not perceived to be as nice.”*
2. There is something at the library that makes going there a good experience. This might be a Teen Center, an event, a cafe, a shop, a quiet, restful environment or material waiting for them that they really want.
3. It happens to be a convenient way to meet their needs.

Digital natives of all ages can be bluntly critical of libraries and librarians would do well to listen:

- There are services for adults and little kids. The library doesn't care about us.
- The library is a cold and unwelcoming environment.
- The library is all about work. They should provide free entertainment.
- It is way too hard to find what you want at a library.
- The library is too slow to get the things you want.
- They don't have enough computers.
- The hours are completely inadequate.

According to this report, much of the library news from the digital native population is good. They use libraries more heavily than other age groups. They value library service. They want libraries to continue changing, not to go away. Their loyalty must be won but the future of the profession depends on winning them.

The Cat's view of this is fairly simple. Well, of course they should enjoy life, at the library or anywhere else. Any cat knows that is more important than anything else. Libraries that can give them what they need certainly deserve a purr from the

Cat.

* *Perceptions of Idaho's Digital Natives on Public Libraries*, page 53.