

NSW Reference Seminar

Reaching out to Library Non-users

10 June 2026

Ian Phillips
I & J Management Services



See also

- Ian Phillips' ANALibrarYSE blog (www.analibraryse.com)
 - *Who doesn't use public libraries and why?* (17 February 2022)
 - *How do you engage and attract library non-users?* (28 February 2022)
 - *Non-library users, don't overthink it* (26 February 2024).
- Public Library Quarterly
 - *The other half: Who doesn't use public libraries? Why? And what can be learned from this?* (6 March 2025).
- Other sources
 - *Libraries Building Communities*, SLV/PLV from 2005 to 2008
 - *2022 Victorian Public Library Survey and Census*, SLV/PLV
 - Independent research conducted by I & J Management Services for Australian public libraries.

Everybody loves libraries

- Community surveys run by Council's and public libraries universally show a high regard for public library services.
 - Accessible to all and used by a wide-cross section of the community
 - Offer a range of complementary services
 - Generate high levels of user satisfaction
 - Seen as safe welcoming community spaces.

“The library is my friend and intimate companion. It feeds me with knowledge and power. The library is the yardstick to measure the literacy and cultural standards of the community.”

**BUT ... Most of the people who respond to library surveys are library users.
What about the people who don't use public libraries?**

Who are they? Why don't they use libraries?

And what can we do to engage them?



Chasing the non-user perspective

- If we think that libraries are so great ... (and I think we can all agree that they are) ... why don't more people use their local library?
- Victorian research (pre-COVID) indicated that around 40% of the population used a public library in any year.
 - Which means that 60% of the community are library non-users.
- But understanding that non-user group is difficult because (by definition) non-users are not pre-disposed to respond to a survey about public libraries.
 - So non-user response rates in community surveys on public libraries are understandably very low.
- I & J Management Services works with public libraries on service reviews, strategic planning and statistical analysis. AND we run community surveys.
 - Surveys of library users and non-users (few they may be)
 - Asking ... What sort of person is a library non-user? Why don't they use the library? What would have to change to make them a library user?

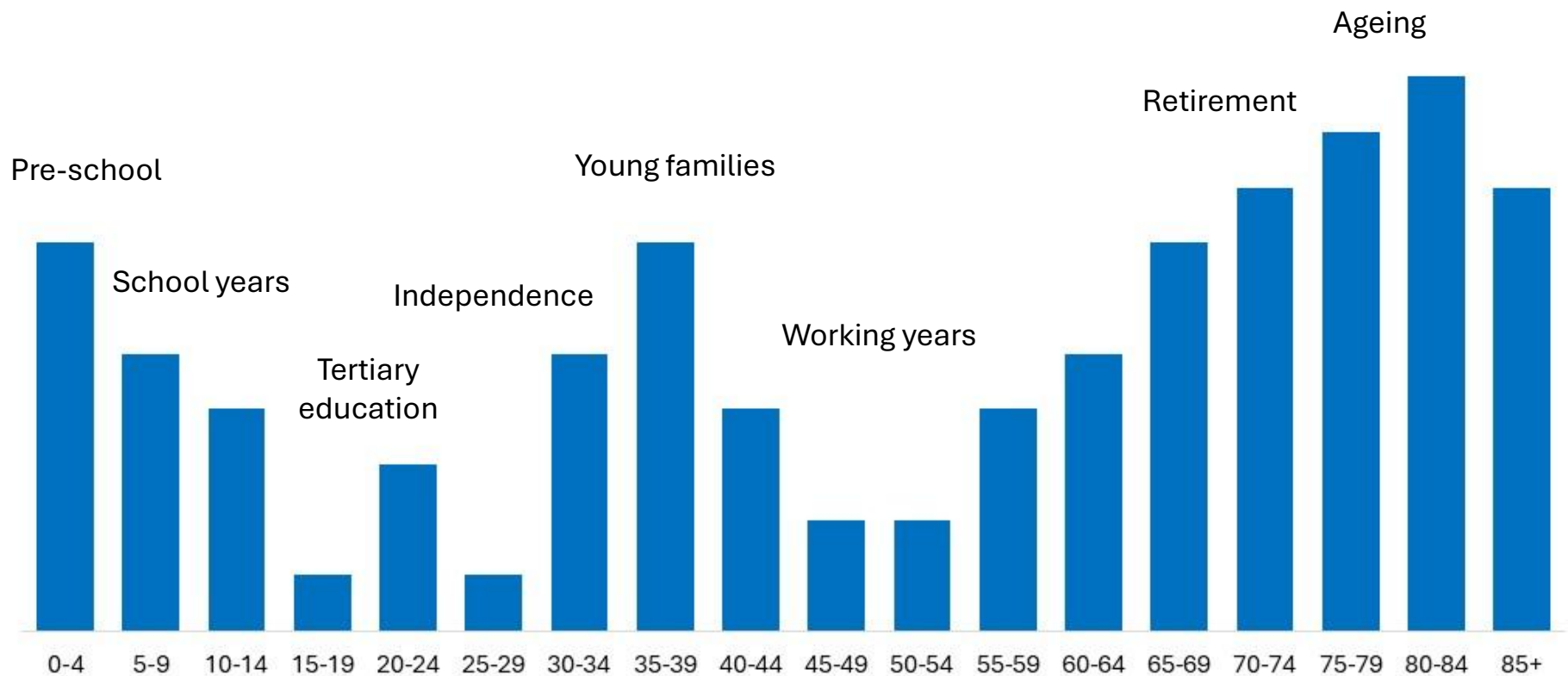


Who is more likely to be a library non-user?

More likely to be library users	More likely to NOT be library users
▪ Females ▪ Pre-school children and their parents ▪ Elderly and retired people ▪ Secondary and tertiary students ▪ Primary school children ▪ People who are unemployed ▪ People who do not have access to computers or the internet ▪ People who find working from home has distractions	▪ Working people ▪ Teenagers ▪ Culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) groups ▪ Aboriginal people ▪ People without a personal means of transport ▪ People who are housebound or living in residential care ▪ People with disabilities ▪ People with low literacy

Who is more likely to be a library non-user?

- Library engagement is influenced by ... access ... inclination ... lifestyle ... time of life. For example ...



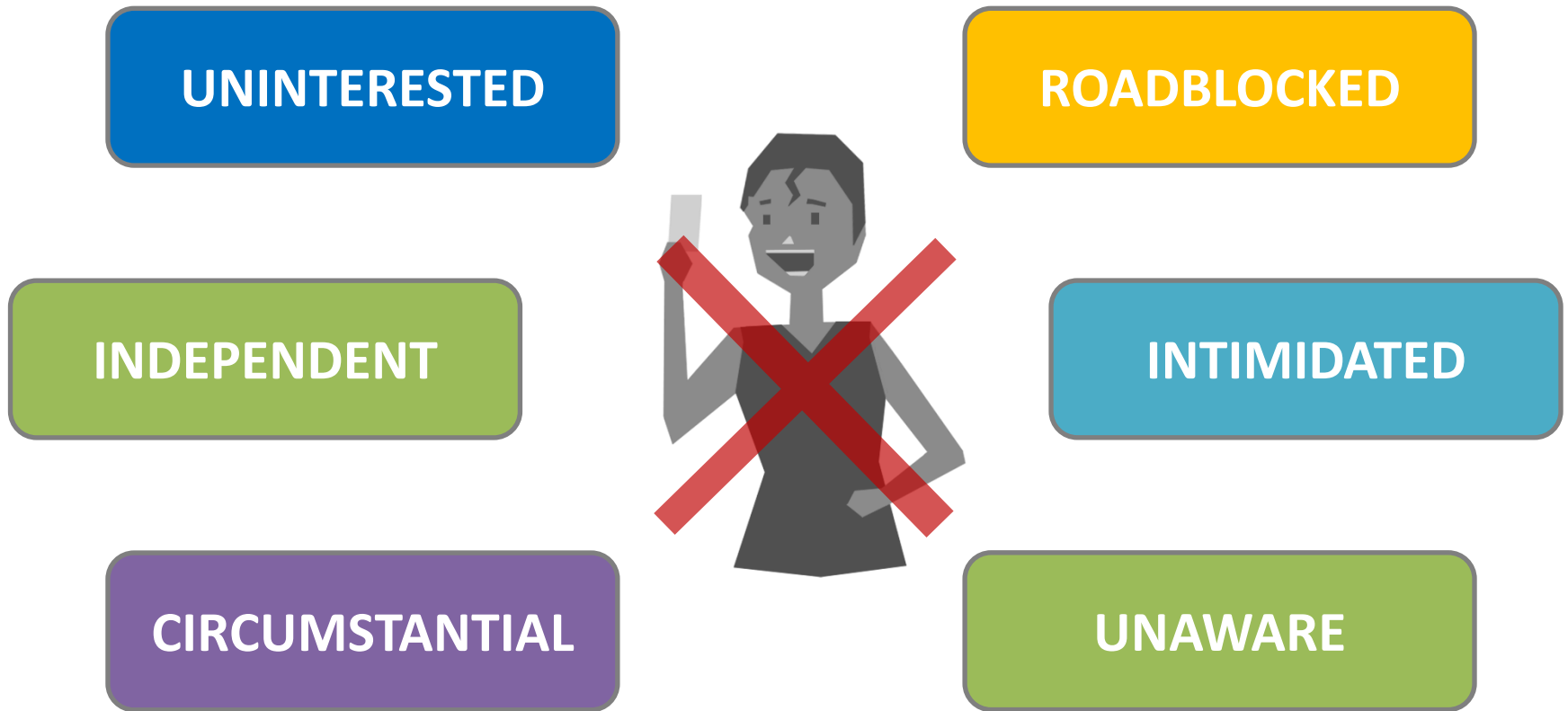
Why don't people use public libraries?

- What if a single factor differentiated users from non-users?
 - Families with pre-schoolers vs Families with teenagers
 - Time-poor under 60s vs Retired over 70s
 - People under 175cm vs People 175cm and over.
- BUT library users aren't a single homogeneous group, so why should non-users be.
 - Working people ... because they are time-poor
 - Teenagers ... because libraries aren't seen as a socially desirable location
 - Recent CALD arrivals ... because they are not always culturally familiar with the concept of a universally accessible free resource-filled public space
 - People who don't have access to a car ... because they can't get to the library.
- Ultimately, a range of factors are involved ... personal, practical, lifestyle, cultural and/or historical.



Six types of library non-user

- Survey data suggests that there are 6 broad types of library non-user.



Six types of library non-user

UNINTERESTED

- **Library holds no interest.**
- Little/no experience of a library.
- Don't read for pleasure.
- Recreational/social interests don't involve literary or information-related activities.
- Unlikely to want to engage in a conversation about libraries.

INDEPENDENT

- **Has alternatives.**
- Will buy books.
- Have access to the internet, at home and on the move.
- Have own spaces to relax, study, work or meet friends.
- Can identify and source recreational and learning activities.
- Just don't need a library.

CIRCUMSTANTIAL

- **Not now.**
- Understand what a library has to offer.
- If they had more time, if they weren't so busy with family or work or other things then they would probably visit the library.
- Time poverty often reported by working people 40-60 years.



Six types of library non-user

ROADBLOCKED

- **All about access**, or lack of.
- Would use library if they could.
- It's not open when it suits them.
- Don't have a car or library not well-served by public transport.
- Library has poor disability access.
- Real and insurmountable barriers.

INTIMIDATED

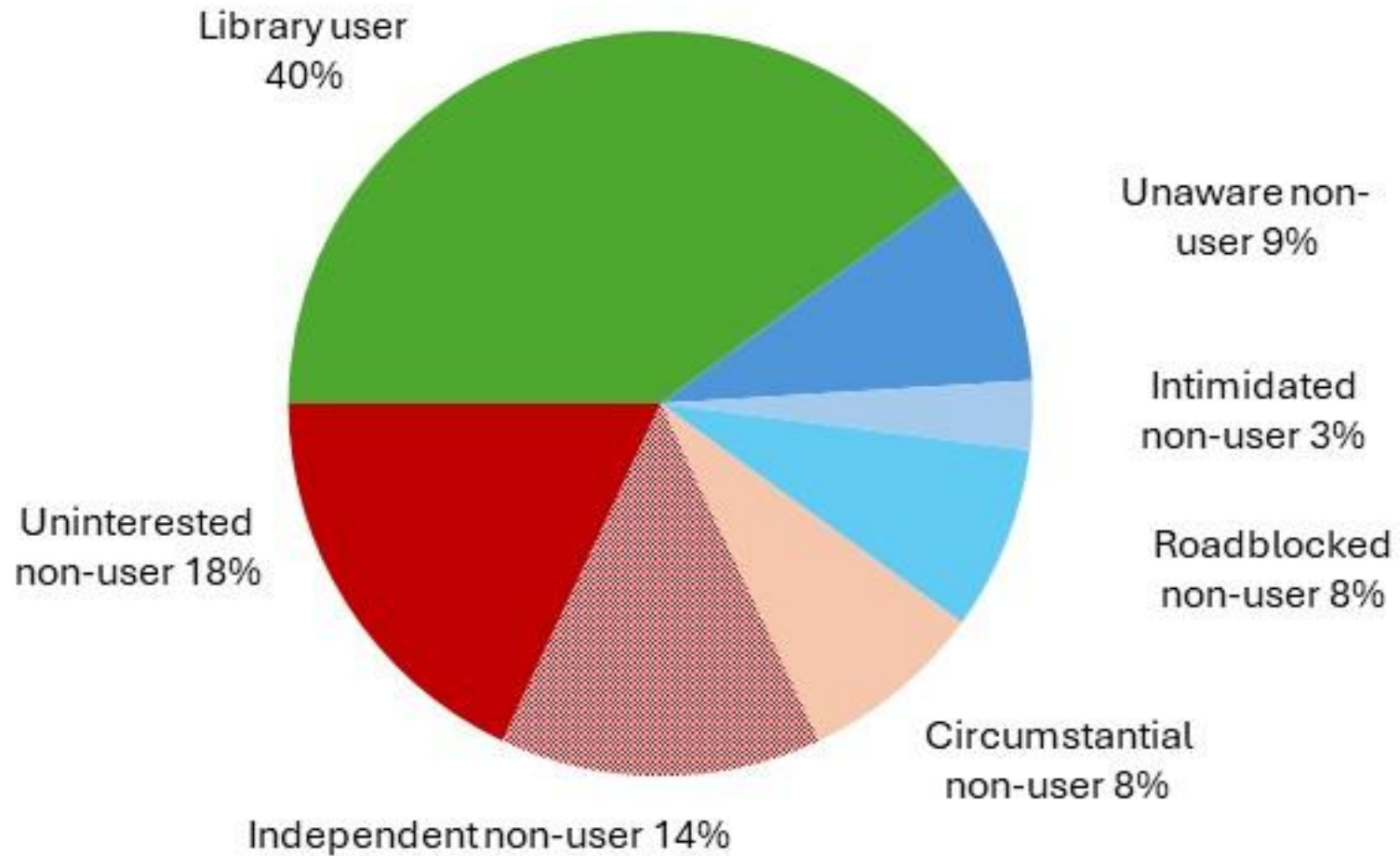
- Had a **bad experience** in a library.
- Had a library fine or 'shush'ed by a librarian.
- Doesn't look like the sort of place they want to go ... young people hanging around, too noisy inside, or too quiet.
- Low literacy, so intimidated by words and books.

UNAWARE

- **Awareness** is the threshold issue.
- Doesn't know what a modern library has to offer.
- Last time in a library was at school.
- Think a library is just books.
- Migrants or refugees who have no concept of a universally accessible free library service.

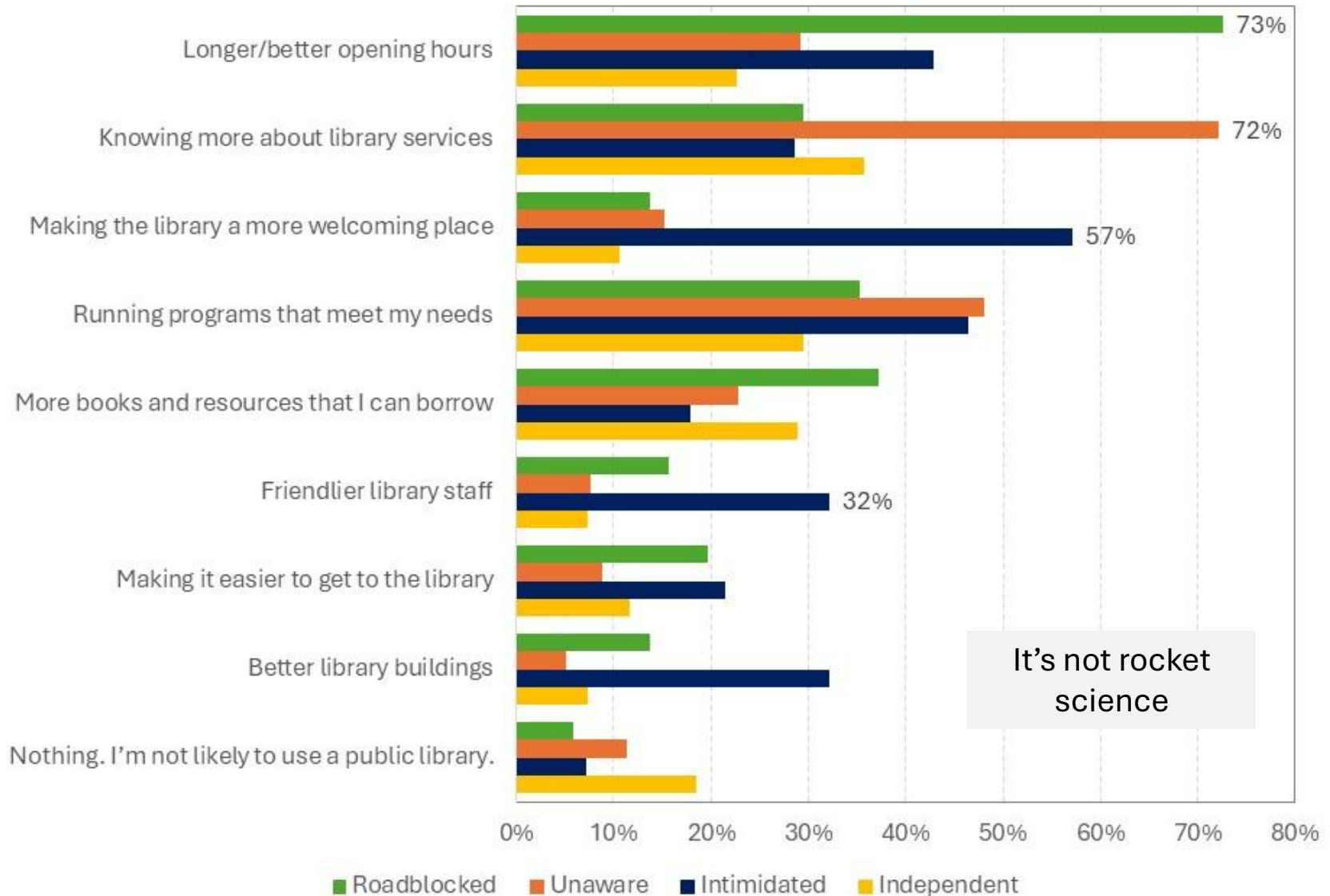


Six types of library non-user*



* Estimated distribution based on amalgamation of survey results

What would change non-user behaviour?



So what can I do to engage non-users?

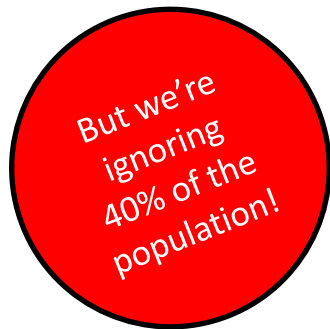
- Marketing 101
 - Who do we want to engage?
 - Why? What benefits or outcomes do we want?
 - What do we want to say to them?
 - What response are we looking for (behavioural, attitudinal)?
 - How do we most efficiently reach them? And communicate that message?
- REMEMBERING that the answers to these questions will be different for ...
 - Different non-user groups
 - Different demographics
 - Different potential service groups (readers vs participants vs tech users vs visitors).
- AND that it is highly unlikely that any one person in your organisation knows the answers to all of these questions.



So what can I do to engage non-users?

UNINTERESTED

- ~ 18%
- Leave them be



INDEPENDENT

- ~ 14%
- Maintain general awareness and recognition of library offering (they may come one day if things change)
- Soft mass market messaging: Council newsletters, presence at community activities

CIRCUMSTANTIAL

- ~ 8%
- Open to library use (but for now just bide your time)
- Maintain general awareness of library offering
- Soft mass market messaging (see Independent)

So what can I do to engage non-users?

ROADBLOCKED

- ~ 8%
- ~~Revamp public transport~~
- Opening hours
- New service models (open libraries, lockers)
- Disability access
- Outreach (take the library to the people)
- Promote developments via community channels

INTIMIDATED

- ~ 3%
- Hard to find, hard to change attitudes
- ~~Dump overdue fines~~
- Enhance library look and feel
- Diversify workforce profile, customer service approach
- Use community-based library champions (to promote positive library experiences)

UNAWARE

- ~ 9%
- Raise library profile (talk of the town)
- Work through partners (schools, community groups, welfare agencies)
- Community information sessions
- Targeted marketing campaigns (social media, newsletters)



Final words

- Public libraries are for everyone, but will never be used by the entire community.
 - Just as library users have different motivations, non-users are different people too. So the approaches taken to engaging non-users should also be different
 - Strategies that respond to the different reasons people don't use their library
 - Targeted marketing and communication.
- And accept that you're never going to get everyone.

“The library is central to community life. It is a source of knowledge, a meeting place, a symbol of community strength and open to all.”

“It (the library) costs me lots of money paying my rates for something I don't ever use or will never use. Make it support itself financially by subscription. Why should my rates be used so lazy teenagers can sit and play video games at the library?”



Want to know more ...



www.analibraryse.com

