INSTITUTE of Museum and Library SERVICES

The Partnership Playbook for Small Libraries

Rob Cullin & Janet Nelson

IMLS Webinar Series

September 2026

Presentation Overview

Offering a small library, focused overview for finding, evaluating, establishing, and maintaining productive, impactful, and sustainable partnerships



Presenter Backgrounds





- **Rob Cullin:** 25+ years of working with public libraries, 20 years of library consulting with the last 12 as a full-time consultant, co-founder of Evanced Solutions (2001), Kimberly Bolan and Associates (2006), and ReThinking Libraries (2020), and founder of LibraryStewards (2026)
- **Janet Nelson:** 25+ years of working with libraries, 17 years of industry leadership at Demco, 7 years of full-time library consulting, and co-founder of ReThinking Libraries (2020)

ReThinking Libraries

RTL is a **nationally recognized Public Library consulting firm** that helps libraries develop facilities and strategies aligned with their communities' needs and wants

Services:
Facility Planning
Strategic Planning
Community Engagement
Space Programming
Design Support
Interior Design Support
Technology Planning

WORKED WITH OVER **200** PUBLIC LIBRARIES

SINCE 2014 OUR TEAM'S WORK HAS COVERED:

1500+

COMMUNITY & STAFF DISCUSSION SESSIONS ATTENDED BY OVER 12,000 PEOPLE

60+

YEARS OF COLLECTIVE PUBLIC LIBRARY EXPERIENCE

50,000+

SURVEY'S COMPLETED

2026 MODERN LIBRARY AWARDS
SERVICE OF THE YEAR

Why Partner?

- It's the responsible use/leverage of community resources
  - Meets a community need the library cannot address on their own
- Library role as:
  - Community Convener
  - Community Concierge/Connector
- Extending offerings beyond library staff expertise
- Reaching new audiences and promoting the library in new ways
- We realize this still takes time and management, so how do you figure out the best opportunities?



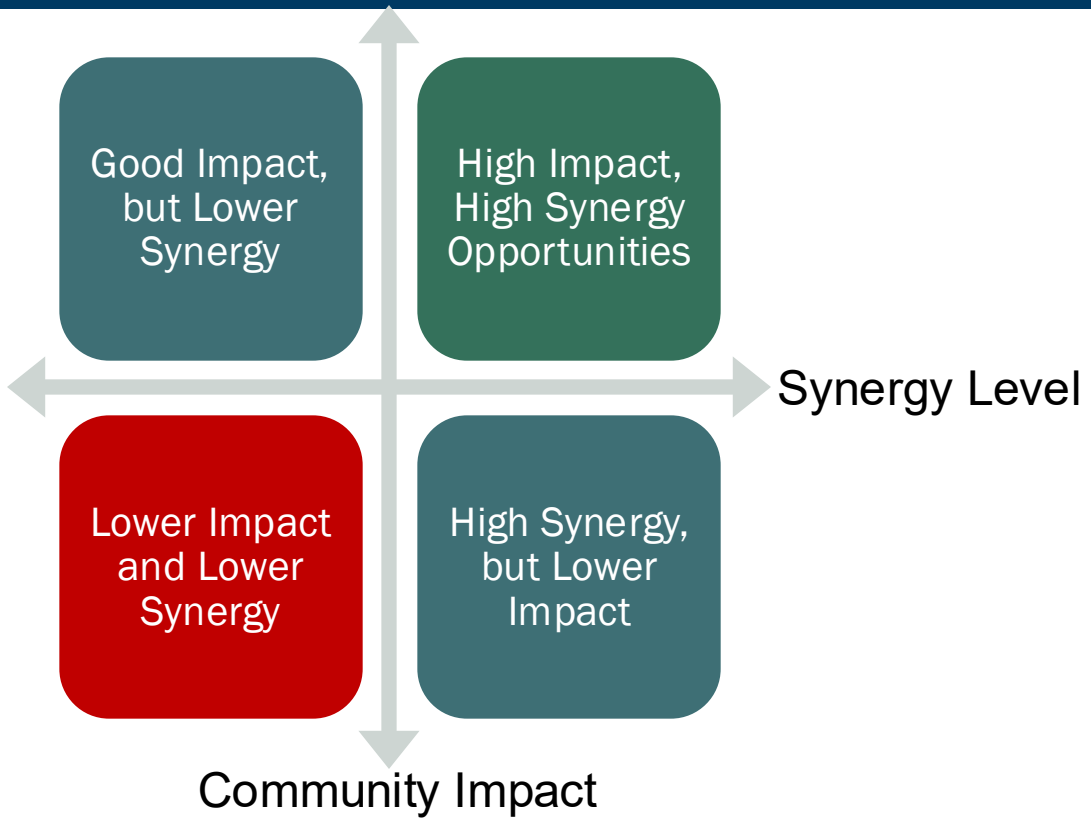
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Engage: Outreach & Connection

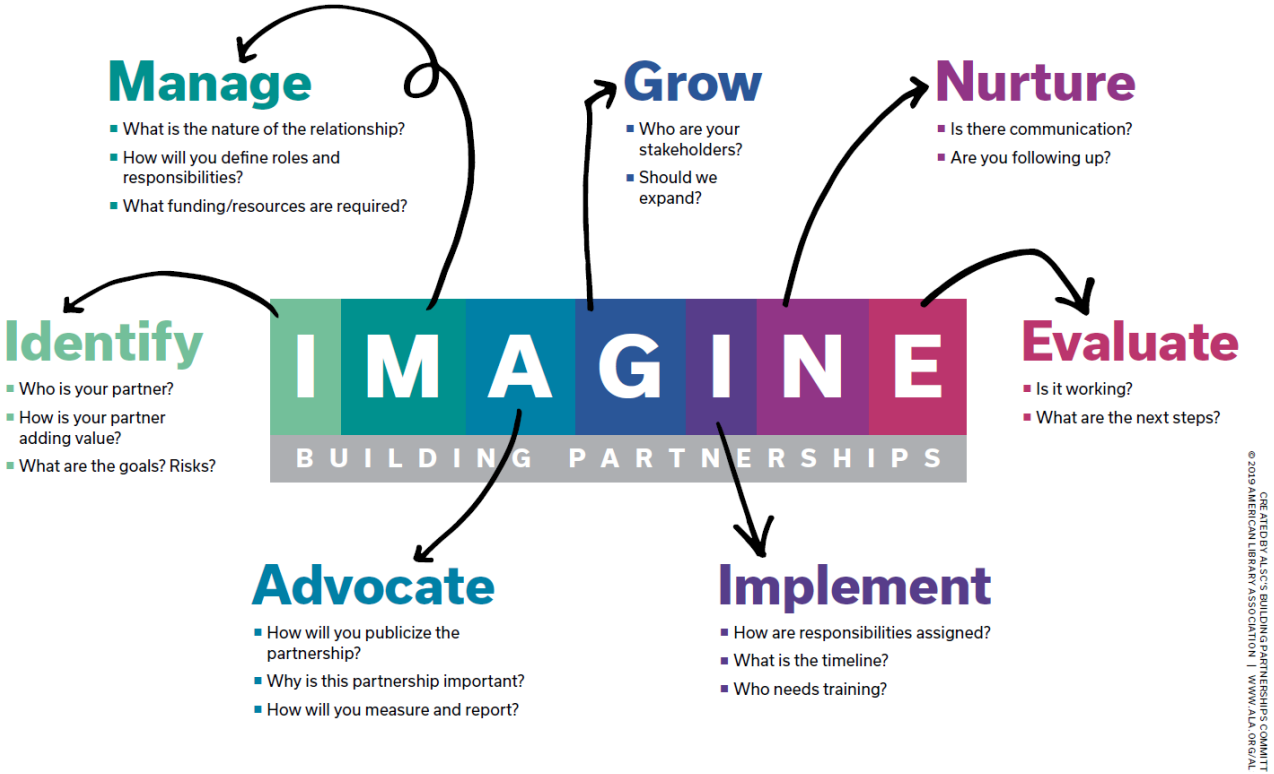
You can think of this a little like “Dating”…. without the swiping

- Local Networking: Who is in the “partnership game” in your area?
  - Understand the potential partners in your community/region
- Best Practice: Engage the Community around what they want and need, providing a way to evaluate opportunities against community needs
  - Community Discussions, Surveys, Intercept Activities
- Determine Targets, Identify Key Leadership, Establish Connections
  - Enter those conversations/connections open-minded; not with a pitch or agenda to start, build rapport first, then dig into the possibilities
- Though it is alright to be more reactive when you don’t have time…
  (instead of the more proactive approach outlined above)
  - Be selective….like in dating ;)
  - Don’t fall into the trap of just accepting all partnerships that come your way.

Identify/Evaluate: Possible Partner Mapping



Evaluate: IMAGINE Checklist : by ALSC



IMAGINE Building Partnerships Checklist

Designed to help libraries assess, plan and manage community partnerships

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AREA	ASSESSMENT
Planning Partnership	
Partner has been researched and deemed acceptable	○ ○ ○ ○
Partnership provides significant added value/impact, such as: ▪ Creates opportunities with resources, goods, services, intellectual capital, etc ▪ Improves programmatic reputation/visibility ▪ Reduces conflict ▪ Advances shared objective ▪ Enhances impact through resource sharing	○ ○ ○ ○
Collaborative goals strategically support the library mission	○ ○ ○ ○
Partnerships form at many levels. The determined nature of the relationship is acceptable by library and partners. ▪ *Coordination* - more formal communication and the roles of each agency involve providing separate but parallel programs ▪ *Cooperation* - agencies join together in areas of mutual work, with shared resources, to address a common issue ▪ *Collaboration* - ideas, expertise and resources merge and are connected to a common mission ▪ *Sponsorship* - receipt of goods and/or services through grant-funded programs, donated dollars and matching gift programs ▪ *Affiliation* - demonstrated support from an agency that provides a program in exchange for payment	○ ○ ○ ○
Roles and responsibilities of library and partner are clearly defined	○ ○ ○ ○
Costs are acceptable in relation to the value gained	○ ○ ○ ○
Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) or other necessary contracts are complete	○ ○ ○ ○
Timeline established	○ ○ ○ ○
Measurable goals established	○ ○ ○ ○
Train staff and volunteers	○ ○ ○ ○
Purchase plan in place	○ ○ ○ ○

[ALSC Handout-PRINT-Link.pdf]

https://www.ala.org/sites/default/files/alsc/content/professional-tools/190619-alsc-imagine-building-partnerships-handout-PRINT.pdf

IMAGINE Building Partnerships Checklist

Designed to help libraries assess, plan and manage community partnerships

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AREA	ASSESSMENT
Managing Partnership	
Communication is ongoing and transparent	○ ○ ○ ○
Relationship has trust and respect	○ ○ ○ ○
Ground rules and protocols are clear	○ ○ ○ ○
Mechanisms for conflict resolution exist	○ ○ ○ ○
Stakeholders are identified and understand their roles and responsibilities	○ ○ ○ ○
Research and determine if additional outside support is needed for success	○ ○ ○ ○
Publicity plan is in place with media and other agencies	○ ○ ○ ○
Agencies and community know the value and reasoning of the partnership	○ ○ ○ ○
Evaluating Partnership	
Plan developed for measuring and reporting impact	○ ○ ○ ○
Risks and repercussions have been considered, mitigated or accepted	○ ○ ○ ○
Evaluation of feedback and data clearly leads to decision on future of partnership	○ ○ ○ ○
Future plans for partnership are evaluated	○ ○ ○ ○

Decision status as of date:

KEY

○ Need more info ○ Decline ○ May be acceptable ○ Go ahead

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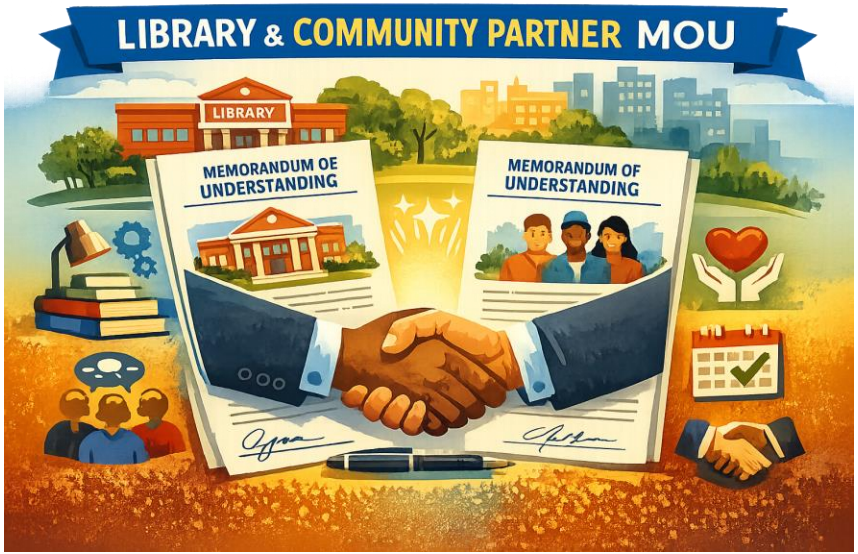
Engage: Making Choices, Ensuring Success

- Once you've completed your evaluations and defined the best opportunities, work with that connection to craft the **best win-win approach** you can.
- BUT It is OKAY to say "No"
- Not every opportunity is a good opportunity for you/the Library
- It's also OKAY to **start slow** and not jump ALL IN.
- Perfection can be the biggest hindrance to progress



Engage: Defining Ground Rules

- Any partnership that is beyond a one-off really needs an MOU (Memorandum of Understanding).
- Larger one-off events probably do as well
- Boilerplate agreements are fine, but remember, as with any contract, it's more important to define what happens when things don't work out than how things will work when it's good.
  - Though it should absolutely define the expectations of each side, try not to assume too much. If it's a critical element, put it in writing, even if it seems to be assumed.
- TONS of good examples out there; use your library research skills to find the right example/base to start from then tweak it to meet your needs.



Advocate: Promoting the Partnership

- Work in conjunction with the partner on the promotion planning
- Identify how you might be splitting up the promotional targets based on strengths of relationships and credibility on the topic of the partnership with various constituencies
- Think multi-modal: email, social media, local news, radio, billboards, mailers, community events, in-program announcements, posters, etc.
- 7 times and 7 ways (a marketing idiom) reminds us that it is hard to get the word out and into people's minds
- Talk about the promotion but also follow up on sharing the success and if there are plans for future similar events/partnerships/activities



CUI

Nurture: Ongoing Communications & Check-Ins

Rhythm and cadence

- At a minimum, there should be annual check-ins
- Better: Set a predictable touchpoint — a standing quarterly call or coffee beats an annual scramble, and it's realistic for small staffs
- Put a light agenda behind each check-in — what's working, what's stuck, what's next — so it isn't just a social visit



Nurture: Ongoing Communications & Check-Ins

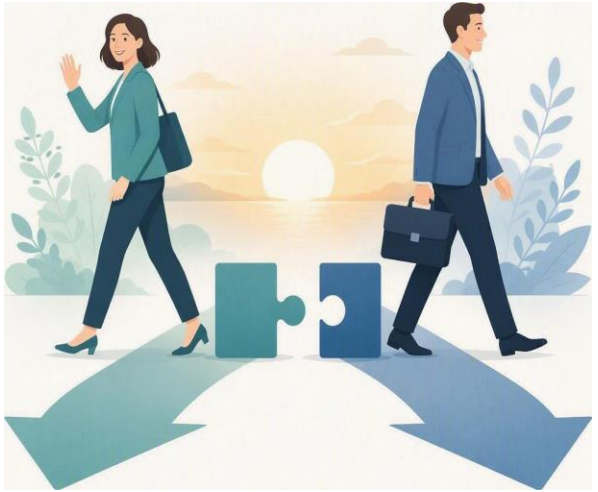
Keeping it healthy between meetings

- Share the small wins as they happen — a photo, an attendance number, a patron comment — not just at year-end
- Surface problems early while they're still adjustments rather than grievances
- Say thank you publicly — a board mention, a newsletter note, a shout-out to their funders costs nothing and buys goodwill
- Re-introduce yourselves after leadership changes on either side rather than assuming the relationship carries over
- Revisit the original goals annually and adjust scope as community needs shift
- Connect them to other partners in your network — being a convener deepens your value to them



Evaluate: Knowing when to say when

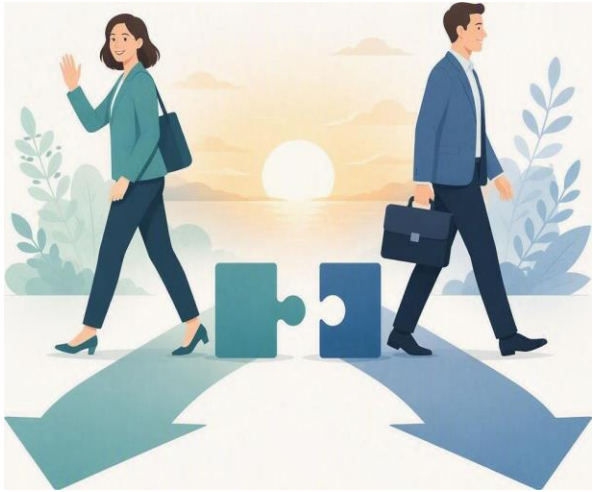
- When necessary, know when to bring things to a close
- Most partnerships will not be permanent, and even when long-term, may go through phases and have “off times”
- When it isn’t working for both organizations it’s likely time to talk about going your separate ways, but work on the **amicable split** and try to leave the door open to future opportunities that may emerge



Evaluate: Knowing when to say when

Closing Thought

- NOT ALL partnership opportunities need to go through this level of thought and evaluation.
- This is a best practice and not realistic in every situation.



Thank you!!

Questions/Feedback:
RTL@ReThinkingLibraries.org

File Share URL: https://shorturl.at/VnLNH