
Marketing the Special Library: A Perspective

Barry K. Miller

The marketing of the special library in the corporate setting offers numerous opportunities and challenges for the resourceful information professional. In many types of libraries, marketing is the sign of exceptional leadership. It is the aggressive, proactive library which markets its services and reaps the rewards of that marketing. In the corporate setting, however, marketing is often a matter of survival, for in few other settings is the very existence of the library ever called into question. Few of us can imagine an educational institution or a community without a library; but many businesses can and do survive without them. It is incumbent upon the corporate libraries, therefore, to ensure that the corporate library is properly marketed to serve the needs of the company in such a way that it becomes viewed as essential, as opposed to merely desirable. This type of marketing requires a clear understanding of both marketing principles and corporate priorities. It requires some thought to determine how the library may contribute toward meeting these priorities and the marketing which is undertaken must be vigorous and ongoing.

Marketing principles require that one identify and define both the market and the product to be offered. While this may seem obvious in the case of a library, closer examination indicates that it is not. The market may be employees of the company of which the special library is a part; but it may also include suppliers, customers, an industry, or the public at large. In a large company, it may be only certain groups or departments, not the whole company. The product of the library may be the provision of timely information service, but which subjects will be covered? What kind of information? Are there competing suppliers already within the company, such as management information systems or records management? Are there external information suppliers or external libraries which provide service to the company? These and other factors will define or delimit the services needed and offered by the

corporate library. In most cases, the corporate library cannot be all things to all people. Neither resources nor management support will permit such an approach. As in most endeavors, it is important for the corporate library to understand and define what it does, and to do it well. This does not preclude a broad range of services or a flexible approach, but it does mean that they should be well conceived and attuned to the needs of the market and the opportunity for success.

A key element in marketing the corporate library is an understanding of how the business person within the company might use the library. In my own experience, I have categorized corporate library usage as follows:

1. Project Work—*involving a distinct beginning and resolution, in which information gathering is often critical to the initial stages.* Project work typically involves the expenditure of significant amounts of time and resources as opposed to more conventional reference work. One example might be the client who has a new assignment and needs some guidance in starting to work on it. Another example might be the creation of a merger and acquisition team which requires large amounts of very specific data to make a decision affecting the future direction of the corporation. Project work offers the potential for significant, immediate impact on the client or corporation and thus is a good tool for marketing the library's services and resources. The earlier the librarian can be involved in the project, the greater the service which can be provided. Ideally, the librarian should be part of the project team and be kept up-to-date on the project's progress, at least through the information gathering phase. The ability to become part of such a team establishes the client relationship between the librarian and the business person and elevates the librarian to a level at which peer interaction may develop. The traditional library/patron relationship is a distinct handicap in the corporate setting and implies a passive rather than active relationship between the library and other departments within the company.

Barry K. Miller is Manager for the Marketing Research Intelligence Center, RJR Tobacco USA in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

2. Competitive Intelligence—*involving the gathering, organizing, and disseminating of information on competitive companies to determine their strengths, weaknesses, strategies, present status, and future directions.* Similar in many ways to project work, competitive intelligence usually involves continuing the flow of information to the client, thus developing communication and feedback mechanisms to ensure that information gets to the proper clients and is timely and usable. Competitive intelligence has become a popular buzzword in American corporations during the last few years. Membership in the Society of Competitive Intelligence Professionals has gone from almost nil to several hundred in two years. It is important that competitive intelligence professionals understand the role of library services in meeting some of their needs. Indeed, many corporate libraries direct or work hand-in-hand with the competitive intelligence function. The opportunities for interaction and mutual growth are significant.

A key element in marketing the corporate library is an understanding of how business persons within the company might use the library.

3. Environmental Scanning and Current Awareness—*in which the library assumes responsibility for keeping key clients informed of developments in their areas of interest and responsibility.* In most other libraries, the responsibility for accomplishing this current awareness objective lies with the client. In the corporate library, it may be the responsibility of the librarian to learn the client's interests and to be proactive in providing information to him or her. The use of selective dissemination of information profiles with online data bases is one useful tool to provide this kind of service without its becoming overly labor intensive. As a cautionary note, it must be remembered that the busy executive usually has limited time to read, so the information provided must be concise and targeted.

4. Fact-checking and Reference—*in which the special library acts much like a reference desk in any other library, providing relatively quick answers to specific questions.* This kind of fact-checking is frequently involved in the development of press releases or company publications. As any newspaper library in particular knows, this can be an extensive responsibility

requiring rapid response to a high volume of inquiries.

5. Personnel and Management Development—*through which the library's services and resources are available to the client to improve that client's managerial skills and career development.* This is an issue whose importance to the client should not be forgotten by the corporate librarian, who will almost always want to develop friends with bright futures in the corporation. The ability to assist in solving a time management problem or learning the latest thinking on a management technique may be quite important to the client. While the same information may be available from another type of library outside the corporation, the ability to provide it reinforces the idea of the corporate library as a source of one-stop shopping to meet the needs of the business person for work-oriented information.

6. Document Delivery—*through which the library provides access to specific articles, books, or reports, either from its own collection or from external sources.* In the typical corporate setting, this work usually means the establishment of rapid delivery systems, as the corporate client often needs the information quickly or not at all. My own experience shows that, generally, business people need specific documents, and scientific or research and development personnel simply want answers. As a result, there is heightened emphasis on the ability to identify and contact outside experts to obtain answers rather than focusing on documents. While one does not wish to diminish the value of documents, be they internal reports, journals, books, or data bases, it must be remembered that the corporate library's product is within the limitations of its market—information—in whatever form that might take, including the spoken word of an expert in the field. The presence of both an adequate long-distance telephone budget and a solid awareness of the expertise of people within the librarian's own company can be as important in providing information to a client as a reference book or an online data base.

It is the aggressive, proactive library which markets its services and reaps the rewards of that marketing.

Several adjustments in library practice may serve to improve the librarian's ability to market the library in one or more of the above ways. First, the librarian may wish to emphasize services

rather than resources when marketing the special library. Few special libraries are self-service; few clients receive much bibliographic instruction. Rather, the client of the special library may call or inquire for information itself, not just guidance in locating it. The librarian is thus in the role of mediating between the client and the resources. In our library, we often illustrate this point with the admonition that our role is to find the information as quickly and thoroughly as possible, while the client's role is to use it to make decisions.

... the librarian may wish to emphasize services rather than resources when marketing the special library.

Secondly, the corporate librarian should be prepared to package the information obtained so that it is as useful as possible to the client. Such packaging may include preparing executive summaries and annotations, highlighting key points or especially pertinent citations, and generally ensuring that the client does not simply receive a pile of data or citations. The transfer of information from corporate librarian to client should be made as convenient and useful as time and resources can permit. If the information is unintelligible to the client, it is useless. Seen in this light, the carefully compiled company dossier is clearly more important than a bibliography of articles on the company.

Third, the corporate librarian should segment the market. That is to say, one must determine which clients can best be served by the library and serve them intensively. Some corporate functions simply need the library function more than others. In general, strategic functions such as executive management, planning, new product development, research and development, and marketing will need the library's services more than tactical departments such as the building office, shipping, or warehousing. As the corporate library itself often falls under tactical functions, it is particularly important that the librarian develop sources of support, as one's own management may have comparatively little need for library services. Unlike the public library, for example, the corporate library is not under a responsibility to serve all people equally. Rather, it has the freedom to segment its market and seek the niches in which it can render the greatest services. Those niches vary from company to company and from time to time.

Finally, the corporate librarian must respond quickly and remain flexible. The current business environment requires that corporations be as adaptable as possible. Organizational structures change, as do the people to whom the library reports, and it is important that the corporate librarian not become too enamored of that which he or she has created or of a particular organizational pattern. While many business people seem not to expect librarians to have it, the characteristic of flexibility is one which modern corporations value highly.

In summary, the marketing of the special library is not simply one of a number of things which the librarian does, such as personnel selection, budgeting, or writing the annual report. Rather, it must be integrated into the entire structure of the library's operation. Brochures, presentations, tours, orientations, office visits, surveys, library committees, and other such techniques are certainly part of marketing the library; but one must recognize that a marketing philosophy really must drive the library's operation. Just as a marketing-driven company integrates that philosophy into all areas of the company, from research and development to manufacturing to personnel, so too must the special librarian allow marketing considerations to develop the library itself, from what services are offered to what resources are bought to what kinds of people are hired to work in the library. The successful company always keeps in mind the wants and needs of its customers—it does not often simply develop a product and then try to figure out who might buy it. One must remember that the special library does not exist to preserve and store information which is not useful to the corporation. However significant the role of archives of learning may be for other libraries, the corporate library must always be aware of the company's needs in order to survive.



Book Week

November 14-20, 1988
