
Marketing and Public Libraries: The Commitment

Charles F. Montouri

There is little doubt that libraries will apply marketing techniques to the development and distribution of library products and services in the years ahead. There is, however, sufficient cause for concern. The concern arises from the experience of the past. All too often libraries have turned legitimate conceptual processes (participatory management, zero based budgeting, etc.) into fly-by-night fads. After introducing a new program or mission, the effort is left to die on the vine, primarily due to neglect and lack of consistent attention. The amount of attention is generally proportionate to the amount of risk the administration is willing to tolerate, but tolerance levels have not been particularly high. When accounting time rolls around and results are tallied the score is, more often than not, a tie. Nothing lost—nothing gained.

Marketing Considered: The Risks

Librarians have begun eagerly to accept marketing practices. In their article in the *Journal of Library Administration*, "The ABCs of Implementing Library Marketing," Andrea Dragon and Tony Leisner comment: "Indeed, the missionary zeal with which articles on marketing are written is indicative of a wide-spread grassroots movement within the profession. This interest in marketing is not the result of a mandate from the leaders of the professional associations nor is it due to any governmental action. This 'bottom-up' interest in marketing has grown out of librarians' desire to find a more appropriate model for relating their professional activities to their community's needs." This statement was written in 1983. Five years have since passed and the marketing momentum continues to increase.

As a legitimate conceptual process, then, is marketing to be the next fad for libraries? Is the knowledge that marketing is a system requiring a total commitment, sufficient reason for librarians to put concern aside? Will there be risks? Without doubt there will be risks because no human

enterprise is risk free. Since marketing is a total management process involving administration and support staff, however, the risks can be minimized and individual responsibility for error can be eased. Administration and support staff will need to enter the marketing process understanding that there are no guarantees for success—only hopes reinforced by sound planning. The sharing of risks will bring the joys of sharing the rewards.

In order to minimize risks, administrators should have a solid understanding of the marketing process. There is an excellent body of information now available in print about marketing and libraries (see the References at the end of this article). Because the implementation of a marketing program will demand total commitment of institutional resources, library administrators should become totally familiar with marketing procedures. When the chief administrator endorses a marketing approach, the leadership he/she demonstrates sets the marketing programs' future course and resultant success or failure.

Moving Ahead

Once the administrator makes a personal commitment to a marketing program, the next step should be to gather support. The administrator should confer with each of the library's constituencies: board, staff, supervisors, and Friends. In the process of gathering support for the program, the administrator will be able to judge the degree of support for the program. This lobbying effort will also allow the administrator to point out the benefits of a marketing program. Some of the expected benefits will be high levels of staff creativity and morale, opportunities for a wide range of publicity, a change of image. The administrator will also need to define the anticipated outcomes, since these represent the justification for embracing a marketing approach to product and service delivery. New users, increased repeat business, high levels of user satisfaction, new product development, a commitment to the needs of individual users are some of the expected outcomes.

Charles F. Montouri is Business/Adult Services Librarian for the State Library of North Carolina.

Gathering support, though, means more than a resolution passed by the Board. Support means that each board member will be willing to make a personal commitment to the process. Gathering support means more than a presentation of the program to the staff. It means that each staff member has a clear understanding of the unique contribution he/she can make to the success of the marketing effort. Gathering support means more than an objective to be met in each supervisor's annual work plan. It means that the supervisors will provide the leadership necessary to surmount the problems which most certainly will arise. Gathering support means more than a monetary contribution from the Friends of the Library. It means that the Friends are out in the community among the leaders and organizations supporting the exciting new developments at the library.

While support for the program builds, a customer orientation philosophy should be developed by the staff. Concern for non-users means that unserved or underserved populations are being identified as potential markets and market segments. A marketing mindset is beginning to form, but it will not form overnight. It will come about through in-service continuing education, marketing strategies and market research, through the implementation of the marketing plan, and through experience.

In summary, the administrator must appreciate the value of a commitment to marketing and the development of a marketing mindset in implementing this type of program and library direction. This administrative support is crucial if the program is to be successful.

Meeting Needs

Marketing has been referred to as an exchange process. As an exchange process, it must meet needs. The library has been looked upon as existing because of the public good, not because of a public need. In times of great social change, it becomes difficult to identify what is the public good. It is not difficult to identify public needs. Thus it makes sense in a period of scarce resources to change the image of the library from one of a public good to one of a public need. Can marketing help bring about this change since it is a process of uncovering and meeting needs?

The critical question becomes: what needs can a library legitimately meet which other agencies cannot? The answer is simple—information needs. Free access to the world's body of accumulated knowledge is available at the library. Retrieval of a rare work of literature from some remote

location is possible through the library. The give and take of a reference interview in order to answer a difficult question can be a prized and valuable experience. How many places offer free, unbiased consumer information? These are but a few of the more obvious services provided by libraries. *ALL* of a person's information needs can be met at one place—the library.

Libraries are unique because of a simple concept. The community pools information resources so that every citizen can have access to a rich variety of materials that would be unaffordable otherwise. Undoubtedly, many unmet informational needs of the public remain because of the passive role the library has assumed over the years. There has also been a substantial waste of resources due to library personnel's sometimes erroneous perception of community needs.

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Marketing and modern technology can help change this approach. They can help the library become a visible, active component in the daily workings of our communities. The wonders of telecommunications, at very little cost, can multiply the amount of resources available to local communities—a feat not possible to achieve through published hard print acquisitions. Selection of resources can now be customized to meet the needs of the individual citizen. The librarian's task becomes one of reaching out to these individuals in such a way that they fully understand that the library will work with them in providing the answers they seek. Providing answers is significantly different from providing information.

The distinction between the provision of answers and the provision of information is in the ability of the librarian to uncover the patron's real need during the interview process and, later, to interpret, analyze and correlate relevant raw data. Professional experience marks the difference between providing information and providing answers. Since the librarian becomes the core of the marketing distribution function (delivering the product), it is necessary to realize that this new approach requires something more than passive response. It requires assertive and aggressive behavior. A recommended reading is Herbert Achleitner's article: "Assertive Librarianship: A Means of Customizing Services" in *Marketing for*

Libraries and Information Agencies. Reference librarians, in particular, have always received enjoyment from the challenge to come up with sources of information. Now they have the opportunity to enjoy the challenge and to experience greater pride in the results of their work.

Resource Commitment

Librarians are a pivotal element in the information product distribution function, one of four components of the marketing process. The other components are product, price, and promotion. Professional librarians and support staff are the personnel resources assigned to the marketing effort. These other resources need to be committed:

1. *Time.* A time commitment that allows research, planning and discussion, training, interviewing, assembling publicity, and evaluating all pieces of the total program must be made. Time should be allocated on the basis of priority. Though marketing may be the number one priority, it is important to keep in mind during the analysis that marketing is not a substitute or replacement for existing programs. Marketing will enhance all valid programs. The important need is to find time within those programs that can be applied more effectively.

What needs can a library legitimately meet which other agencies cannot?

2. *Money.* Sufficient financial resources (not counting personnel, space, or equipment) are crucial. It would be wise to commit funds to contractual services such as surveys, annual data updates, and media costs.

3. *Attitude.* As a bridge between the marketplace and the institution, support staff are important to the marketing effort. Their cooperation and participation provide continuity to the program. Circulation personnel, for example, are in a position to test user interests and needs. Their pleasant manner before the public tends to promote a positive library image.

Marketing is not new to libraries. Many libraries have developed marketing programs without a coordinated marketing plan. Bookmobile service is essentially a marketing service that provides products on demand to a known clientele or market segment. Children's programs provide services such as pre-school story hours. Outreach programs are designed to meet individual needs. What library has not done a user study? A user

study is a type of market research survey. In effect, a number of resources have been assigned already to marketing by libraries without any formal or unified plan. The only elements missing are the official commitment and the label.

Strategies

The word strategy indicates a defined goal is present. The strategy is an organized plan to reach that goal. A marketing strategy indicates the tools and techniques of marketing will be applied in the strategic plan to reach the goal. The goal is essentially the mission statement of the library. The goals and objectives and the long range plan have been defined by the library. A marketing strategy must be in tune with these goals.

The library's mission goals and the background and qualifications of the staff will need to be emphasized when developing a marketing strategy. What are the critical elements of the long range plan which must, by necessity, be met by the marketing plan? Will the marketing plan offer an opportunity to revise the long range plan? Will staff have to change behaviors due to new methods of delivery? These are questions to be considered in setting up a strategy. The insightfulness of the chief administrator and an atmosphere of open dialogue are essential in the development of a workable strategy.

The mission statement of the library, in all likelihood, has been developed without the consideration of a marketing effort to carry it forward. It has been generated as an internally based program designed to serve the constituency. If it has been a visionary plan, its content might be broad enough to embrace advances in technology and new information demands. If this is the case, adaptability to a marketing approach might not be too difficult. If, on the other hand, the mission and goals have been established on the basis of traditional library goals and practices, a whole new approach will be needed. Knowledge of the characteristics of the staff will help to determine personal flexibility in implementing the plan. Staff reorientation might need to be followed by a major in-service training period.

The purpose of this essay is not to provide a how-to. Rather, it is meant to provide an overview that produces an internal and external assessment of the existing climate in the library and the community. The assessment should determine the potential for a marketing approach. By completing a thorough assessment of both the external and internal environments preliminary to a decision to implement a marketing program, the

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Marketing Today

It is well established that companies sell products through marketing programs. So essential is this business practice that most companies assign the responsibility for its implementation to a staff-appointed marketing manager. Following the proven success of marketing as a business tool, other organizations have followed suit. Non-profit agencies such as academic institutions, charities, and hospitals adapted techniques to broaden their image and to expand their client base. Philip Kotler thoroughly explores this subject in his seminal work *Marketing for Non-profit Organizations*.

Librarians have become increasingly receptive to the idea of applying marketing techniques to the library setting. Marketing seminars and workshops draw overflow crowds. A new publication, *Marketing Library Services*, has been an overnight success, finding a need and filling it. As Sharon LaRosa, Editor, states "Perhaps because of the need to ensure the library's continued existence, or a desire to enhance our own professional image, more librarians are recognizing that marketing can help them achieve the success they desire."

Authors addressing the specific needs of libraries are Cosette Kies, and Darlene E. Weingand, Professor at the University of Wisconsin. *Marketing and Public Relations for Libraries* and *Marketing/Planning Library Information Services* are the respective titles they recently published. The former is a theoretical approach to promotion of libraries and deals with some of the issues involved. The latter work is a more specific approach to structuring marketing information service delivery. Another excellent work is *Strategic Marketing for Libraries A Handbook* by Elizabeth J. Wood. Increased interest in marketing information services also seems to be on the ascendancy because of the burgeoning competitive environment facing libraries.

Public libraries in North Carolina have undertaken several basic marketing efforts. *Community Analysis, The Planning Process, Output Measures, and Planning & Role Setting for Public Libraries* have all been useful tools for auditing the community and the library. Marketing requires such auditing. Those libraries that have utilized these tools are in a much better position to move on to a full scale marketing program.

Marketing is a positive force in the distribution of limited resources. Marketing, at its best,

determines the customer's need and fills that need with the right product. Wasteful dormant resources can be eliminated. In retailing, turnover and shelf space are parts of the equation for bottom line profitability.

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Library Promotion

While it is an accepted fact that the media generally treat libraries favorably at every opportunity, the opportunities only arise because they are created by the library. Media do not aggressively pursue libraries for news of feature material. Thus, it becomes necessary for the library, in order to have a consistent publicity and public relations program, to appoint a public relations manager. This person establishes proper relations with the media and is familiar with deadlines. It is unfortunate that a coordinated public relations program of this type is rare in small and medium sized libraries.

Library promotion has been a marketing mainstay for years. Library promotional efforts have linked programming activities with publicity. When the promotional effort does not result in appreciable gains in new users or increased circulation of materials, interest wanes. Promotional activities, however, tend to rise and fall when administrations change. In many libraries each department is responsible for its own publicity, thus creating an uneven image of the library. This uneven approach, lacking in focus, can do little to improve the library's image in the community. Internally generated, without a clear idea of the targeted audience, this method seldom generates a sizable or loyal following.

Often interchanged with promotion is public relations. Kies in *Marketing and Public Relations for Libraries* sets forth some distinctions regarding closely related terms including public relations, promotions, advertising, publicity, selling, community relations and, of course, marketing. A word about public relations and its relationship to marketing is needed. The emphasis in public relations is on the image, while the emphasis in marketing is on the needs of the customer. When the library has satisfied customer needs it has also built loyalty and has improved its image.

A word about selling and its relationship to marketing also is needed. Once referred to as the salesman's salesman, Arthur "Red" Motley, former president of the National Chamber of Commerce

and president and publisher of *Parade Magazine*, operated under this personal credo: "Nothing happens until somebody sells something." If things are going to happen in libraries, somebody had better sell something. The director sells the county manager on the proposed budget. The department head sells the director on the need for additional staff, and so on. Persuasion is selling in sheep's clothing. There are soft sell and hard sell approaches. Marketing tends to emphasize a soft sell approach. Libraries, by providing the products and services the public needs, sell themselves when it comes to budget time.

In Summary

This overview of marketing in the library environment has attempted to call attention to the totality of the marketing process. To market or not to market is a decision to be reached only after much consideration of cost-benefit factors based on a full understanding of what is involved. This article, hopefully, has created a greater awareness of the administrative role in implementing a marketing program. Marketing is not simply an assignment or delegation. Administrative commitment and involvement are imperatives. Peter Davis states in the *Journal of Library Administration*, "Libraries at the Turning Point: A willingness to take risks can only arise out of confidence in the process, in the ability of someone to manage the process, and a good sense of what ought to be done when complexities arise."

The basic steps toward implementing a successful library marketing program are:

1. Acquire a full knowledge of marketing processes.
2. Adopt a marketing mindset.
3. State the commitment to the marketing program.
4. Coordinate the long range plans with the marketing process.
5. Gather support.
6. Introduce the plan and enlist assistance.
7. Oversee, evaluate, and change.

One parting thought. Remember twenty-six percent (the percentage of the public who are library users) is not a majority. They might be loud but they are still not a majority. The problem needs attention. Remember Proposition 13 or a more recent event—the closing of Shasta County Library in California!

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