Library Marketing: From Passion to Practice

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Library Marketing: From Passion to Practice

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Abstract

As discussed in the *Charleston Briefing* entitled *Library Marketing: From Passion to Practice*, successfully marketing libraries requires more than a sound communication strategy. Marketing is, in fact, all of an organization's activities that deliver a product or service to its intended customers. This distinction means that library organizations need to expand their views about what it means to "market" themselves to encompass all of the touchpoints users have with their services. In the process, librarians are challenged to reconcile marketing practices from the business world with their public service ethos, as well as ensure their missions are well defined and executed throughout their services.

The following proceedings highlight the key points of the *Briefing*, which is available in full and open access via Michigan Publishing and ATG Media (Stover Heinze, 2017).

Aligning Marketing with Library Values

Fundamentally, marketing is a business concept whereby organizations create goods and services for people with the aim of generating profits. Libraries, of course, fulfill a much different purpose. Librarians strive to make information resources available to everyone as a societal good. As a result, there is an inherent tension in applying marketing tactics to library ends. In addition, despite the fact that librarians increasingly recognize that marketing is an integral part of their work, many librarians still tend to embrace marketing with reservations. In order for marketing to flourish in libraries, professionals need to understand and address this reluctance where it exists so that staff can feel fully committed to incorporating marketing in their workflows.

In order to reconcile marketing with librarian ethos and increase its chances of adoption, it is important to understand what marketing is and that modern marketing practice is a good philosophical match for libraries.

As the American Marketing Association defines it, marketing is "the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large" (AMA, 2013, para. 2). In other words, marketing is expansive. Every action one takes to plan, develop, distribute, and communicate services is an element of marketing practice. Typically, librarians and even marketers focus their marketing energy almost exclusively on the communication aspects. While necessary,

communication is only one of many marketing considerations that librarians need to make. Excessive focus on "getting the word out" about what libraries provide distracts from the critical work of ensuring services are well designed to deliver value to people. The first step in aligning library work and marketing practices is to balance communication activities with the broader array of marketing imperatives.

Influential marketing thinkers and practitioners define the value marketing creates in ways that are very similar to how librarians view their service role. Understanding how marketing has evolved conceptually to better marry with librarians' values can increase adoption of the practice. For example, marketing expert Philip Kotler has advocated for a version of marketing he labeled Marketing 3.0 that "aim[s] to provide solutions to address problems in the society" (Kotler, Kartajaya, & Setiawan, 2010, p. 4). In Kotler's view, marketing is about more than a transactional exchange, but a recognition of how companies must seek to address a range of human and community needs. In this way, companies embracing contemporary marketing have much in common with librarians' goals as their purpose extends beyond monetary returns.

The Importance of Mission in Marketing

Every organization must make choices about how to spend its limited resources. In creating and executing a well-rounded marketing strategy that includes service design as well as communication, every user touchpoint is an opportunity to fulfill one's mission. Each time librarians and users interact, they are

co-creating a service and bringing it into reality. A reference transaction, for example, takes place and “comes to life” through a dialogue. The quality of that dialogue and the manner in which the need is addressed is a form of executing a mission. A marketing plan should be a means of anticipating how to translate a lofty mission into practical reality. Importantly, doing so implies that librarians not only have to clearly understand their missions and what’s unique about what they have to offer, but that they also diligently adhere to that mission in all that they do. This is one reason why ad hoc communication activities can dilute or obscure a mission—if communications promise users one thing but the service they receive delivers something different, the dissonance can confuse users about what an organization stands for.

Prominent marketing professionals regularly cite this mission focus as key to their successes. Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz, for instance, faced moments of extreme pressure in his career to stray from his company’s relentless focus on quality coffee and compelling in-store experiences for the sake of maximizing profits. He resisted making many such concessions, asserting, “Every brand has inherent nuances that, if compromised, will eat away at its equity regardless of short-term returns” (Schultz & Gordon, 2012, p. 175). Schultz’s view is echoed by top marketers, such as those recognized by the American Marketing Association New York’s Hall of Famers, who were characterized as “[sharing] the awareness that, in order to remain relevant . . . organizations must have a guiding purpose above and beyond what they do or sell; organizations must remain true to their values” (Adamson, 2017, para. 4).

Librarians are not immune to pressures to short-change their missions. They regularly confront budgetary pressures, technological upheaval, and evolving user demands that require them to revisit how they express their mission. One example of how a library is adapting its mission to new demands is the Hayden Library renovation at Arizona State University (ASU). ASU librarians are rethinking their service model, staffing structure, and organization in response to the popularity of e-resources and space demands. They are also embarking on a reexamination of print books—how they can function as objects of engagement rather than mere decoration. This scenario is common in today’s academic libraries, and it is a prime opportunity to apply mission-oriented marketing to preserve libraries’ special value to their users, even as the external environment changes dramatically.

One way to increase clarity and help ensure missions resonate with their intended beneficiaries—a key marketing goal—is to co-steward missions with users themselves. Cooperating with users to design, test, develop, and evaluate the services and value they receive helps to ensure missions do not stray from user needs.

Librarians have made strides in opening their services to user input, but there is evidence much more needs to be done. On the one hand, service innovations like demand-driven acquisitions (DDA) grant users expanded access to the acquisitions process by allowing them to order needed works directly. In turn, this access enables librarians another glimpse into what users are demanding.

On the other hand, recent studies reveal that there are some troubling disconnects between librarians and their users. Ithaka S+R’s most recent U.S. Library Survey of academic library directors uncovered significant gaps, including the fact that faculty members rated the role of buying needed resources as the library’s most important function, while library directors cited their role in supporting undergraduate research as most important (Wolff-Eisenberg, 2017, p. 14). Also concerning, only half of directors reported having clear collections strategies that drove decision making, and less than half reported that their library had a clear, broadly accepted vision on campus for the use of its spaces (p. 44).

Disconnects like these are ample evidence for why a narrow focus on communicating about libraries falls flat. Marketing should be applied first and foremost to aligning missions with our users through a variety of means including involving users in how we define and apply our mission, and by designing services that execute on those principles. Only then can communications have the best chance of resonating with their audiences.

Putting Marketing Into Practice

Fully embracing marketing ideas, principles, and practices is not the function of one or two library departments, but a full organizational commitment to orienting all library activities toward creating user value. In business terms, this user orientation is called the “marketing concept.”

Few libraries embraced the marketing concept as thoroughly as Northern Kentucky University’s Steely Library. At Steely, library dean Arne Almquist

restructured the organization to revolve around two permanent work teams: a marketing work team (MWT) and an assessment work team (AWT). The MWT staff conducts market research and communications, while the AWT staff collects and analyzes data from operational units. These two groups work closely with each other and also with the library's service units so as to create the proper channels to ensure all of the library's activities are accountable to users and their needs.

As librarians commit to a robust approach to marketing like Steely's, they will find a number of marketing concepts important to understand.

Segmentation

Most librarians would respond to the question "Who do you serve?" with an emphatic "Everyone!" The reality, however, is not as straightforward. It simply is not possible to serve everyone equally all of the time, despite best intentions. For instance, public academic libraries are open for use by community members, but academic librarians focus their efforts primarily on serving their schools' faculty, staff, students, and scholars. Marketers also know they cannot appeal to all in the same way, and so they make an intentional decision to divide their customer base into segments. Marketing segmentation is the practice of grouping people who are likely to respond in a similar way to an offering so as to tailor services accordingly.

Segmenting user bases may seem counterintuitive. After all, librarians have a responsibility to be as open and inclusive as possible, but the notion of selectively targeting users seems exclusive. On the contrary, by identifying the characteristics and needs of users who are receptive to your services, you may uncover hidden opportunities to expand your user base while also making purposeful use of your limited resources. Consider, for instance, if you were to tailor your services to accommodate the particular needs of people who are new to your university. Regardless of whether they are faculty, freshmen, transfer students, or visiting scholars, they may all benefit from a similar service that orients them to your libraries and campuses. By engaging newcomers early and making a great first impression, you may also enjoy subsequent positive word-of-mouth that converts nonusers to users. In the end, this seemingly narrow approach can have a broad impact on library usage.

Measurement

In the corporate world, marketing today is much more like a science than an art as success is often measured in click rates, conversions, and return on investment (ROI). Librarians too are no strangers to the importance of measurement and data analysis as stakeholders apply increasing pressure for public entities to prove their value to users. A useful way for librarians to view marketing measurement and metrics is as guideposts that help us keep on course in achieving our mission. Librarians practicing sound marketing are sure to define meaningful metrics that are reliable success indicators. For better or worse, librarians do not generally have measures as precise as profits to evaluate their work, but it is possible to adapt some business metrics for librarians' ends.

One useful business metric that librarians should incorporate into their marketing plans is the notion of return on investment (ROI). As noted earlier, marketing is an exchange of value—customers trade something to get something. A marketer's job is to make the exchange mutually beneficial by ensuring the service is priced correctly. In libraries, users and librarians are exchanging value, albeit in a less concrete form than dollars and cents. Users, for example, must give up something of value in terms of time, emotional energy, effort, and so on. In turn, librarians must expend time, effort, salary, and the opportunity to do other things as they create services. Users will only be interested in a service if its perceived value is worth the price. Importantly, it is the users, not the librarians, who determine whether the service is worth it. It is likely that librarians and users would assign very different prices (value) to services, but it is the users' view that matters. Because of this, it is all the more important to include users in the development of services, so that librarians ensure the right value is delivered at the right price.

For librarians, ROI can aid in determining whether a service is worthwhile for them to continue, but only if they carefully plan to acquire the appropriate data points and success criteria as they market it. For instance, if 50 people show up to a workshop, librarians need to be able to determine if the turnout is acceptable based on the time and effort to deliver it, the proportion of the target audience who attended, and how much value users report they received. In addition, librarians should also assess which communication channels accounted for the attendance,

which can be accomplished by Web metrics, registrations, and participant surveys.

Competition

Librarians are obligated to compete for users' business by understanding and expressing how their offering is superior to others. The world is full of library alternatives, from bookstores to coffee shops to search engines. Marketing effectively requires librarians to carefully evaluate precisely how what they do is superior to competitors' offerings, and expressing that competitive edge in their services and communications. As nonprofit marketer Peter Brinckerhoff (2010) asserts, "Competing means continuing to be there to do good works" (p. 25).

Conclusions

Much of the library literature about marketing contains a wealth of information about marketing tactics and how librarians can apply them in their day-to-day work. What is missing, and what the *Charleston Briefing* is intended to address, is a discussion of the more philosophical marketing considerations that librarians ought to make, which is in many ways harder and requires a more substantial organizational commitment to making user value the central concern.

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Communicating with users is important, but much more important is making sure that the things one is communicating about are worth sharing. This shift in mindset makes a number of important demands on librarians. They should:

- Understand that good marketing is not deceptive or inappropriate, but well aligned with librarians' values.
- Make an ongoing commitment to evaluate, refine, and reaffirm their guiding missions while ensuring they permeate all of their work.
- Create organizational structures that place focus on generating user value. (Steely Library is one example of this.)
- Be sure to collect the right data to define success and ensure that users have a voice and a place in service design and delivery.
- Expect, welcome, and accommodate ongoing change to keep pace with users' evolving needs.

Encompassing the true intent of marketing and all that it entails is difficult work, but worthwhile as a proven way to transform mission statements into reality.