

BRAVERMAN PRIZE

MARKETING THE LIBRARY? WHY LIBRARIANS SHOULD FOCUS ON STEWARDSHIP AND ADVOCACY

by Sarah Clark

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When discussing the future of libraries, there is frequently clamor about how to stay relevant in changing times. Technologies get more sophisticated every day, and the library struggles to keep up. Libraries are warned to “adapt or die,” to “give ‘em what they want,” and to keep ahead of competition from bookstores and the Internet. In this anxiety-filled environment, many professionals propose adopting strategies from successful businesses. Many fear the library is becoming a “bricks and mortar” dinosaur in these digital times. To counter the library’s certain demise, many libraries today are adopting marketing strategies and customer-oriented practices to secure their future.

Scrambling toward the future without pausing to reflect on the library as an institution is a mistake. The goal of this paper is to consider what it means to “market” the library, and what implications marketing have on the future of the library. By examining the tension between the public sphere and a world driven by economics, my goal is to examine how libraries should market themselves, or better how they should advocate for themselves, without jeopardizing the library’s unique status as a public institution. Rather than focus simply on moving forward and on innovation, the aim of this paper is to reveal the importance of stewardship of the library and the preservation of its democratic roots.

What is marketing?

Most literature dealing with libraries begins by stating that marketing is not just promotion. Many look to Philip Kotler for a more sophisticated definition (see de Sáez and Weingand). Kotler defines marketing as "...the analysis, planning, implementation, and control of carefully formulated programs designed to bring about voluntary exchanges of values with target markets for the purpose of achieving organizational objectives" (qtd. in Weingand 4). In other words, marketing is *much* more than promotion; it is a driving force within a business. Eileen Elliott de Sáez—a "Chartered Marketer" in the UK who has written about marketing for libraries—notes that marketing involves the following: collecting information, forecasting trends, consulting everyone, planning, creating objectives for the future, strategizing, evaluating and communicating a message. She also defines marketing as a "management discipline;" and rather than a branch of an organization, marketing is the philosophy that permeates the organization's goals and practices (de Sáez 2).

Viewed through the lens of marketing, every organization must create a mission statement that answers the following question: "What is our business?" Management strategist Peter Drucker notes that this question "can be answered only by looking at the business from the outside, from the point of view of the customer and the market" (qtd. in Weingand 32). De Sáez answers the question about the business of libraries in the following way:

The core business of the library and information services is the range of products and services that provide benefits for users that answer users' most important needs, whether for commercial intelligence, or education, leisure, recreation or social needs. That core business is information (7).

De Sáez notes that information in the 21st century "is now recognized as a commodity to be valued in all spheres" (3). Rather than see this as a threat, she notes the opportunity for librarians and information professionals to finally get the respect they deserve.

At first glance, it appears logical to apply marketing concepts from the for-profit world to non-profit and government organizations. While promotion is a topic that has been explored consistently over the past fifty or sixty years, "systematic marketing and planning are the two processes that, until recently, have been largely overlooked as managerial tools," according to Weingand (1). The promises of efficiency, better use of funds, and more satisfied "customers" attract even the most reluctant librarian or "information professional." But applying marketing concepts to libraries as a "managerial tool" is not as benign as the language would lead one to believe.

Marketing and the public sphere—why it won't work

Before looking too far into the future, it is important to step back and reflect on the origin of public libraries in the United States. The American Library Association (ALA) offers a set of core values of librarianship. Those values are the following:

- o Access
- o Confidentiality/Privacy
- o Democracy
- o Education and Lifelong Learning
- o Intellectual Freedom
- o Preservation
- o The Public Good
- o Professionalism
- o Service
- o Social Responsibility

From these values, one can see that libraries are about more than efficiency and happy customers. Libraries are fundamentally democratic institutions committed to keeping all citizens informed and educated by providing free and easy access to a wide variety of materials and by promising to preserve those materials for future generations.

In the United States, public libraries became institutionalized for the democratic reasons cited above. Just as arguments for mandatory public education were grounded in the idea that democracy depended upon an informed citizenry, so too were the arguments for free public libraries. Frederick Stielow wrote that "...proponents still had to democratize the image of the library away from an elitist and academic bastion. Instead, it was to be reinvented as a place of advancement for all the people—a physical confirmation of the values of the Revolution" (4). The same dedication to equity and to education continues to permeate the library world and the discussion of libraries today.

Library literature and rhetoric often invokes these democratic roots, but critics argue that libraries and their role in democracy is rarely discussed in a serious way, and "the vast portion of this literature merely rehearses and repeats the basic ideas of Jefferson and Madison from 200 years ago" (*Dismantling* 1483). Libraries may be champions of democracy, but today there is pressure to argue for the library's existence in economic rather than democratic terms. John Buschman ("Democratic Theory") traces this trend through political theorist Sheldon Wolin's discussion of the policies of the Reagan administration in the 1980s. Tax cuts, deregulation, and the reduction of public services led to a new way of discussing the country in purely economic terms. Wolin wrote that in this environment, "that all public questions can be converted into economic terms has no doubt" (Wolin 28). The language of economics is now so predominant that it seems natural to discuss libraries in business terms.

Over time, libraries have gradually shifted focus from the fulfilling a social role to the growing importance customer service, user needs and public relations. In a digital world, libraries are seen as “dinosaurs” and slaves to the outmoded preservation printed materials. Decreasing budgets mean librarians must fight for each tax dollar and then prove to the public that the money is spent wisely. The variety of formats modes of delivery that libraries provide today has exploded (e.g. electronic databases, virtual reference, DVDs, digital audiobooks, etc.). Because budgets don’t grow with each new format added to the collection, librarians necessarily cut staff and materials (i.e. print collections) to compensate. With funds shrinking from every direction, many librarians advocate for entrepreneurship and court corporate partners to increase budgets and enliven services. Examples of revenue-generating activities include the following: renting conference rooms; providing passport services (and thus getting a commission fee); renting new, popular books for a fee; providing business research for a fee (P. Block 106-107).

What’s so bad about a little extra money? Critics like John Buschman argue that taking on business roles and strategies are not only inappropriate to a government institution, but more importantly a business approach to libraries will invalidate the library’s role in the public sphere and ultimately undo its reasons for being. In his book *Dismantling the Public Sphere*, Buschman looks to managerial guru Henry Mintzberg to support his claims. Mintzberg presents a compelling argument against the truism “Capitalism has triumphed” in reference to the toppling of communism. In fact, Mintzberg maintains, “Capitalism did not triumph at all; balance did” (Mintzberg 75). In the United States and in other democratic nations, there is a balance between four types of institutions, each of which play a unique role in society: private organizations; public (or state-owned) organizations; cooperatively owned organizations; and non-profit organizations (which Mintzberg calls “nonowned” organizations) (76). While many call for the government to be “run more like a business,” Mintzberg states, “I am not a mere customer of my government, thank you.” He prefers the term *client*, and goes on, “But, most important, I am a citizen, with rights that go far beyond those of customers or even clients” (77). Just as a citizen has certain rights, he also has certain duties: to pay taxes and to respect the laws of the government for the common good.

Mintzberg also argues that the trend towards accountability for public institutions rests on the “myth of measurement.” Since the passing of the Government Performance and Results Act in 1993, libraries and all other government agencies are now required to show measurable results for their performance goals (P. Block 108). Today it is standard for libraries to use outcomes-based evaluation methods to secure government and grant funding. While systematic evaluation of success does have benefits, the constant need to validate the library’s purpose for economic reasons is troublesome. The real benefits drawn from public institutions, Mintzberg argues, cannot be measured. If the benefits were so clear-cut,

“those activities would have been in the private sector long ago” (79). In short, public institutions are public for a reason. Before rushing to mimic successful private companies, libraries should consider the appropriateness and the implications of such actions.

Solution: Advocacy over marketing

Recently, many librarians have focused on marketing as a solution to the perceived irrelevance of the library. Within the marketing framework, librarians work to secure funds, argue for the library in economic terms, and often showcase their adoption of new technology as proof that they are not obsolete. While there is much pressure to discuss the library in economic terms, this model of discussion is not only incomplete but also undermines the library’s democratic underpinnings.

The solution for the future of the library does not lie in marketing, but in advocacy. Advocacy for the library means doing the following: creating a message that shows why the library is important to democracy; sharing that message; reflecting the democratic and educational mission in all library collections and services; forming partnerships with institutions with similar missions; and reestablishing the library both symbolically and physically as a central locus in the community.

1. *Create the message.* Libraries need to present themselves to the public and to stakeholders as “cornerstones of liberty,” to quote the subtitle of a collection of essays edited by former ALA president Nancy Kranich. Librarians are much more than “information professionals.” Robert McCabe’s compelling essay on civic librarianship discusses the role of libraries not just in the lives of individuals, but in communities and in society at large. In the 1970s, McCabe maintains, revisionist historians criticized the public library’s traditional mission of providing a place for lifelong education as being an elitist affront to immigrant communities (McCabe 66). Instead of providing education, libraries now provided “information,” and focus turned to individuals instead of groups. McCabe’s call for civic librarianship includes a reestablishment of the library’s educational (and therefore democratic) role. Sally Gardner Reed also argues for the importance of political involvement and advocacy for libraries in democratic terms. She states:

If we fail to make the case that libraries are central to a democracy, to individual learning, and ultimately to our future well-being as a nation, then access to knowledge may well become not an entitlement, but a privilege for those who can afford it (xiii).

Reed argues that good library promotion involves communicating not only what the library does, but also *why* it matters. Creating support for the library is crucial not only for funding, but also to “influence information policy and legislation at the state and national level” (xvi). A good

message will be politically powerful, focused, repeatable, and adaptable to a variety of audiences. It shows how the library's services are both unique and critically important (3). The message should center on the library's contribution to democracy and education rather than focusing purely on economic arguments.

2. **Share the message.** Messages need to be tailored to a variety of audiences: stakeholders, patrons, board members, Friends of the library, and staff. Staff should be included and encouraged to be vocal advocates, too. When networking, librarians should not whine about lack of funds, but instead focus on the positive contributions of the library to the community, and why those contributions matter (Reed 12).

3. *Reflect the educational and democratic mission in the library services and collections.* When making decisions, democratic and educational values should always be considered as critically important. Randy Pitman warns of the importance of sticking to the mission:

People's perceptions are shaped by expectations: If you advertise your establishment as an entertainment center, people will come to you looking for fun; if, on the other hand, you tell your patrons that you are here to help serve the community's educational, informational, and recreational needs, they will cross your threshold with very different expectations (Pitman 117).

If libraries rely too much on economics or on popular demand when making decisions, they risk moving away from the core values that form the base of the institution and validate its existence.

4. *Form meaningful partnerships.* Libraries have always known that partnerships are important for building support, sharing labor, and diversifying what the library can offer. Public libraries should form strong bonds with schools. Schools and public libraries both developed in the same historical moment and both are grounded in the idea that democracies can thrive only when there is a well-informed citizenry with free access to information. In addition, libraries should partner with other like-minded, non-profit entities, including cultural and arts institutions.

5. *Make the library part of the community.* Finally, the library should devote itself to being an integral part of the community's fabric, both physically and in spirit. Librarians need to be active and vocal members of local politics and community organizations. The physical library should be valued as a public space that both draws from and adds to the organizations and businesses that surround it. A good model to follow is the non-profit organization Project for Public Spaces that lists four qualities of a good public space: access and linkages (i.e. it's easy to get to), comfort and image, uses and activities, and sociability (M. Block 73). A good library provides both a physical and intellectual commons.

Advocating for the library is the solution to the supposed lowly status of the library in the eyes of the public. By reaffirming the library's unique contributions to society and by stressing its importance in democratic and education terms rather than economic ones, the library not only maintains its historical roots but also stands a stronger chance of surviving as a public institution.

Priorities for the future: focusing on stewardship

If I had to end this paper with one word, it would be this: stewardship. There is so much pressure to innovate, both technologically and in spirit, that the public library has reached a critical moment. While words like "information," "customer," and "accountability" sound benign, they indicate deep shifts that, if left unchecked, threaten the longevity of the public library. Buschman writes, "...without a public, democratic purpose for librarianship, there is no compelling reason/argument in the long run to continue libraries" (*Dismantling* 176). Furthermore, if policy decisions are based on pure economics, Buschman contends, the values of the library, like equal access, also vanish. A library without a democratic foundation would "...further the consumer model of education and learning—where notions of ease and convenience replace democratic notions of inquiry, knowledge and informed decisions" (*Dismantling* 176). Adopting business models and attitudes puts the library's democratic mission at risk, and without a democratic mission, the reasons for a library's existence vanish. For libraries to survive as public institutions, librarians must advocate for the library in democratic terms.

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