

What About A Little Profitability!

by Dwight McInvaill

When some of my colleagues talk of operating libraries like businesses, I see a vision of sheep in wolves' clothing. I hear bleating, bleating, bleating under fake pointy ears and false fangs. In this Clintonian era of conservative newspeak with liberal actions, can one truly expect other than the old adage: "the more things change, the more they remain the same"? Look around you, librarians. What's really so different?

Take staffing, for instance. Great businesses hire the best and the brightest. Do we? Of the twenty-six reference librarians I've trained in the past twelve years, some of the better ones have had only bachelor's degrees. Their diplomas, I might add, were not even in library science.

Did I hear someone gasp out there? Or was that just the gnashing of teeth? Verily, I ask you, what is a business-minded librarian to do when degrees in library science, even from accredited programs, mainly guarantee professors' salaries? Considering the ill-prepared candidates who presently lumber or float forth with an M.L.S., where indeed is one to go for the brightest, the best-groomed, and the most personable individuals?

But let's move on. Let's consider selection of stock. Are we, as a profession, truly responsive to providing materials desired by our main market segments? Or are we all too likely to condemn some small-town library in a conservative community for not readily providing *Daddy's Room-mate* or *Heather Has Two Mommies* on open shelves? Is it good business to antagonize the many for the few?

And now for our buildings themselves. How many rights do street people have? Can they sleep, and stink, and stare, and scream inviolately? Or should there be limits actively enforced as indicated by the court case *Kreimer v. Morristown*? Given such legal teeth, would good businessmen hesitate? Yet how many patrons and staffs continue to languish in libraries both unpleasant and dangerous?

To switch gears: what about a little profitability? To many in our profession, libraries should be rich only in good works. Free library service is sacred ground, and woe be unto him who doth violate it! I guess that sort of leaves us entrepreneurial-minded individuals out in the cold, doesn't it? But what about charges for overdue, for photocopying, and for interlibrary loans? Isn't someone making a few dollars surreptitiously?

At our library, we've charged for videos since 1984. No apologies. We've made a lot of money and provided a low-cost, popular, additional service without hurting our book budget. We can't count on this cash forever. But it's provided us with a number of luxuries from computerization of the book catalog to the ability to redo a subject area in a flash. If this is sinful, then move over Faustus, because here we come! Show me a businessman who wouldn't make a similar pact for profits.

Costs and benefits: that's the bottom line for our profit-seeking brethren who actually do take the time to look every gift horse in the mouth. We also should be cautious in our innovations, but are we? Sometimes, as a profession, we ensnare ourselves unthinkingly in the trendiest stuff. Let's take as an example the much-vaunted Information Highway. At the mere mention of this topic, do I hear a chorus of oohs and ahs?

Okay, maybe I'm a little thick, but I just don't get it — the Information Highway's benefits, that is, for public libraries. Will we hunt down criminals on it, as the police do? Will we offer expert medical opinions, like hospitals? Will we participate continuously in educational teleconferencing, like community colleges? Will we share resources with major institutions without copyright infringements or huge fees? I suspend my judgment cautiously. Do you? Or are you already exuberantly on the bandwagon?

These are just a few points regarding our profession and business-like attitudes. I haven't even mentioned customer service, public relations, or putting all librarians into uniforms. But as for that latter point, many of you are already wearing wolves' clothing, aren't you? Or am I speaking to the converted?

COUNTER POINT



How About Some Dollars and "Sense"!

by Harry Tuchmayer, Column Editor

Perhaps it should come as no surprise that librarians too are enticed by the allure of business. After all, in our endless search for perfection, we are always quick to "adopt" other models of behaviors, casting aside what we know, for the mirage of "the better way of doing things." But is the business model all it's cracked up to be? Can balance sheets and bottom lines, cost cutting and mass production, produce "profits" in the library world that are equal to or greater than those that were ever realized through insider trading or investments in all those wonderfully defunct S&L's?

Call me old-fashioned, but I happen to think that a little hard work and common sense can usually produce the desired results without ever having to masquerade as a sheep in wolf's clothing. We don't need new models as much as we need to make our current models perform like new. And you do that not by copying somebody else but by recognizing your own potential and developing clearly defined goals and objectives for your library.

I for one fail to see the relevance of some business model when faced with poor performance at the reference desk. Perhaps "Suzuki Reference Techniques" offers insights that the Maryland model overlooks, but I personally don't believe that paying my reference staff a commission for each question answered correctly will really solve the problem (although it might increase wages for some employees). Good training and adequate resources for doing a job are standard prerequisites regardless of the line of work.

You're right, Dwight, the list does go on and on. I would hate to think that our selection policy is driven by the "Golden Arches" philosophy of billions and billions served. I like "menus" sometimes and "specials of the day" that aren't normally available. After all, reading taste can't be converted to a drive-thru menu as easily as it looks. Somehow asking for "one latest thriller, but please hold the excessive sex and violence, two raunchy romances and a side order of fantasy, and no, I wouldn't like anything to drink with that" doesn't quite work for my library, even if it does in other parts of the state.

And no, I don't understand how hiring the best and the brightest can't take place if the applicant has worked hard for a diploma. But I do know that I would think twice about using the services of a surgeon who happened to be one hell of a meat cutter at Harris-Teeter. If the problem is poorly trained librarians, doesn't it make more sense to fix the training program in library school than it does to look for promising young telemarketers with good communication skills?

But I do agree that much of what you say makes perfect "cents." Librarians are too compassionate and understanding for their own good. No good businessman would waste his time trying to help someone purchase the product best suited for the customer's needs if that meant losing the sale. So why offer interlibrary loans or photocopies of articles when checking out a less useful title will bolster circulation statistics and help make a case for a bigger book budget? Heck, why let some less sophisticated members of the public even use the newest branch when you can turn it into a much more fashionable "exclusive readers club" and charge a nice membership fee and serve expensive sherry to customers seated in comfortable leather recliners alongside the fireplace. If the problem is disruptive street people, then librarians need to be reminded that they are not running a shelter service; they don't need to model their services after the latest fad in coffee houses.

Business practices and library science share many of the same common concerns with customer satisfaction and timely product delivery. Thus, it is not unthinkable that either enterprise would consider modifying for their own use practices commonly associated with the other. But remember, just because business is not a dirty word, it is not necessarily the sacred cow we would like it to be.

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