"Sell" Is Not A Four-Letter Word

Lessons Learned from the Competitive Marketplace

Helen Causey

I spent five years as a sales representative for a publishing company. I was hired for that job for two reasons: one, I was a working librarian and spoke "libraryese" and two, I seem to have enough chutzpa to make it in sales.

The mindset of the private sector, the attitudes prevalent in large companies, and a produce-or-get-out atmosphere were light years away from the safe and secure world I left in the public library. But I learned how to play their games, to live with the "what have you done for me lately" syndrome. I became accountable for my time and effort, and it paid off. I've returned to the public library world and realize it's not as safe and secure as I once thought. We have our own game to play. And as public money gets tighter, the demands on that money become greater, and the number of competitors increase, the game may turn into hard ball.

In the private sector it all boils down to one thing—the bottom line. It's true in libraries too. We must become accountable for what we do. Just because we are intrinsically good and pure of heart does not mean that the world owes us a living. Our bottom line is determined by how much service we render to the public. Our "corporate comptroller" may be called the Board of County Commissioners or Town Council, but control us they do; and if we want to get their attention, just let our "units-of-service" numbers go down and we'll soon have it. Elected officials are as accountable to the public as the comptroller is to his board of directors. They must show value for the dollars spent and a good return on their investment. They must provide a product that is needed or wanted by the public. With increasing demands for decreasing dollars, which service do you think the public is willing to have reduced—libraries or garbage collection? Those of us dependent on public money, no matter at what level, must make our services more indispensable than garbage collection. If we don't, we are going to lose momentum until we come to a dead stop, and if that happens, we've no one to blame but ourselves.

Look at the private sector's response to this problem. If you are Acme Wax Company and have been making liquid floor wax for years, you had better take a look around and notice that everyone is installing new "no-wax flooring" over old floors. If you take note of this before you go out of business, you'll do what a major floor wax company did. They came out with a product that is "specially formulated to shine your no-wax floors." It may even be the same product they've been selling for years (although in a new bottle), but they didn't lose their business while they sat on their hands and wondered why.

We know the value of our services; we've got to start telling others of their value. We've got to sell our services. It's not hard, it's not dirty, and it's not beneath us. We have to stop thinking that, because we are cultural, because we are valuable, and because we are noble, the all-knowing public will somehow find its way to our doorstep and we'll be there ready to anoint their heads with knowledge. The "all-knowing" public is hardly aware that we exist, and we've got to do something about that. In a continuing education class at a local college, I was appalled to hear the teacher telling a classroom of business people about a wonderful source of information (the U.S. Census Bureau publication) that would give them all the information they needed to do an assignment. This research was available, he said, for a fee from a certain place in town. I couldn't stand it, I had to raise my hand and tell them it was also available at their local public library for free. This seemed to be news to everyone there but me.

More important than the public at large, the powers that be are often unaware of what we're really all about. Someone told me of hearing a local official actually boast in an open meeting that he "never reads." This is a man who controls the purse strings. This is a "corporate comptroller" who brags about not using the company's product. What chance does that product have for increased funding?

We can do something about this. We can

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learn lessons from corporate America and apply them to our own product. Selling service is no different from selling storm windows. I believe the reason we have such an aversion to the term "selling" is the stereotypical view we have of salespeople. It's true there are pushy, arrogant, and unprincipled salespeople, but it is as unfair a generalization of the profession as a whole as the dowdy old-maid librarian is an unfair characterization of our profession. Librarians, of all people, should have an aversion to occupational stereotypes.

The private sector has turned selling into an art form. It has had to. In business if you don't succeed you don't survive. When the stakes are that high, businesses must be critical of all areas of their operation. They must constantly evaluate and re-evaluate. This is true for libraries too. Who are our customers? Notice I said customers. I dislike the term "patrons." A frequent library user recently brought to my attention a sign she found confusing. The sign referred to "library patrons" and she wondered if that meant someone who had given the library money. We have to stop using jargon that the rest of the world doesn't understand. These "patrons" are customers who buy our service with their tax dollars. Each of us has had someone say "I pay your salary," and they're right—they do. If they pay our salary but don't use our service, we are risking unemployment. That's a cold, hard, fact of life in the outside world.

The people who are already using our libraries are not the only customers we have. We must consider the entire public when we consider our customers' needs. Those needs are being met now but not by us. Being in sales gives one the perspective of viewing the entire world as a potential customer base. Everyone to whom you are not currently selling is a future sales prospect. This is an attitude we must foster in the public sector as well. Someone said the support for the public library is two inches wide and ten miles deep—meaning we have ardent supporters, but relatively few of them. We have to make our support system ten miles wide to ensure we have the clout to increase our funding.

We've talked about the why of selling. Let's talk about the how. Marketing and selling are not interchangeable terms. Marketing is used to determine what products you need to have, and selling is pushing the products you already have. We must do both in libraries. Do we have the right products for our customers? How can we find out if we do? Of the products we already have, how can we sell them?

In marketing, the first thing they teach you to do is research. See what's going on around you. In the business world, if you are interested in opening a restaurant, you first do some research. You find demographics on what percentage of today's population eats out and how often. What is the population of the service area you are in? How many restaurants are already there? Will the population support another? The age demographics will tell you whether to open a pizza place or a fancy restaurant. What is the average income level of your area? Is there a strong ethnic influence? What percentage of the women work outside the home? These questions and many more have to be answered before you put hard-earned money into a new venture.

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This research is equally important for the public sector. I lived through the last community analysis this state undertook, and no one hestitates more than I to suggest it again. But the fact is that an in-depth survey of our service area—who is out there and what do they want—is exactly what we should be doing if we want to stay in business. Using focus groups to evaluate the public's needs has been undertaken in many locations with some success. The Public Library Services Committee of the Public Library Association sponsored a program on using focus groups to determine needs at the American Library Association (ALA) Conference in New Orleans. This may be a more practical approach than a full community analysis. Those who reported on projects during this program stressed that you must be prepared for what you are going to learn and you must not take it personally. The public has strange and wondrous perceptions of what we can or should do for them.

Research is important, but be careful about asking the wrong questions, or worse, asking the right questions but not listening to the answers. My sales manager used to tell a story about a dog food company that put out a new brand of dog food. The company did research on the most perfectly balanced diet for dogs; they came up with a perfectly designed package; they put out ingenious advertising; their cans were in the perfect shelf location in the stores—yet, the product was

not selling. They held high level strategy meetings to determine what to do about this dilemma, and suggestions were made about package redesign, gimmicks and give-aways. Finally, at the end of a meeting, someone asked, "Does anyone have any idea why this product isn't selling?" A salesman who had been sitting quietly through all this discussion raised his hand and said, "I think I know the problem—the dogs won't eat it."

If we look at the private sector approach to test marketing a new product, we may get some ideas on what questions to ask and what to do with the answers. In the company I worked for, we did a good bit of marketing research. This relates directly to libraries if you substitute "service" or "program" for the word "product." Product development at our company occurred in several ways. One of the most important was to get in touch with potential customers, explain the ideas we had for a product, and ask their opinions. This was an enlightening experience. Many a wonderful idea was struck down in its prime by customer comments. Just because we felt there was a real need for a newspaper morgue collection didn't mean the customers did. That collection never made it beyond the idea stage. This is an important point: don't hold on to something that has no life in it. There are workshops now being planned for national library conferences that deal with how to tell when an existing library program has outlived its usefulness. Those same criteria hold true for programs you should never start. Even if it's the best idea you've ever had, if the dogs won't eat it, let it go. Often we just jump headlong into a project or service without the slightest idea of whether anyone out there is interested or really needs it. Research is so important. Know what your customers want and need, and don't be reluctant to let go of an idea that won't fly.

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The marketing research we did for our company was sometimes general in nature. We would give a customer a subject area such as health care and let him or her tell us what information was needed. We wanted to learn what information was hard or impossible to get elsewhere, how they would use it, how it should be arranged, where they would put it if they had it, and how much they would pay for it. All of these questions helped the people responsible for product development put together the right collection in the right configuration for the right price. Often, while still in the development state, we would call upon those same customers again and review the newly structured product for their reactions. Many refinements were made during this process before the product was ready to market. All of these steps are important for libraries. We have to do more planning and ask the right questions to fine tune our product.

Once we have our customers' wants and needs determined in a certain area and a product (or service) developed, the next step is selling. If we have developed the best widget in the world and no one knows it we've wasted our time, effort, and money. Our company's selling effort was divided into two parts—promotion and sales. The promotion department was responsible for creating printed pieces and brochures. That department did a first-class job with our printed materials, producing professional, quality work. Those of us in libraries need to pay more attention to the quality of the promotional materials we distribute. If we show the public sloppy, amateurish, mimeographed work, how can we expect them to take us seriously? Peggy Barber of the ALA Communications Office recently said at a public relations lecture that she was so tired of seeing library pieces and brochures that looked like they had been cranked out on the copying machine. She said libraries should have their major promotional materials produced professionally. We need to plan our style and to be consistent. It may be "cozy," "academic," "thrifty," or whatever, but we must stick with it. We need to hire a graphic artist to help us set up that identity. A professional who knows how to project the image we choose will save us money and countless hours of future planning. That money will be well spent and will give us a look of professionalism. One of the secrets that sales representatives have is to look successful. A "rep" I used to know always wore her full-length mink coat and diamonds to the ALA Midwinter Conference because it gave her and her company the look of success. It's all image. Would you take the advice of a seedy-looking stockbroker or doctor? Image is so important to professionalism and salesmanship. That also makes it important to librarians. If we want to be treated as professionals and sell our services, we must look the part. We don't have to have a large budget to look stylish in print or in person, but we do have to plan, get professional help, and be constantly aware of the image we project.

The other half of the marketing department

in our company was sales. We were responsible for direct contact with the customers. We hustled the product. Everyone who works in the public services sections of our library is a member of our sales department. Everyone. The sales department's responsibility is to know thoroughly the products it sells, be able to describe them accurately, and show the customer that a product is something that will make his life better and easier. How is this different from what our circulation staff should be doing every day? Sales people are hired to be outgoing, friendly, aggressive. Public service people should be outgoing, friendly and, yes, aggressive. Approach customers and ask them if they need help; don't wait for them to get up the nerve to come to us. Many people come into a library, walk directly to the card catalog, look for a book on "Queen bees" under "Q" and, not finding one, leave without ever speaking to a soul. That's not service; it's just warehousing materials. When our company exhibited at national conventions like ALA, the sales staff needed to be in the aisles in front of our booth talking to people, not waiting at the back of the booth for someone to come in and ask a question. The next time you go to a library conference, stroll through the exhibits and see how many sales representatives are cowering in the back of the booth waiting for someone to come in. Any that are, are not successful salesmen. (Those at the backs of the booths are usually corporate vice-presidents.)

Each of our sales reps had an extensive file on every customer. In it we noted when we talked with them and what was said. This included tidbits like, "parents moving to Florida," "child sick," or "building new house," in addition to business information like "applying for grant for history materials," "expects increased budget next year," or "will make decision on this in June." Every sales rep we talk to on the phone or who comes into our office does the same thing when he hangs up or goes back to his car. Then, before he calls or comes to see us again, he reviews those notes. He can start up a friendly conversation with "Have you moved into your new house yet?" and work his way into "Have you found out about your grant?" As customers, we must admit it makes us feel special that he cares enough about us to remember things about our lives. But a big part of sales is making the customer feel comfortable and at ease with you. Again, the public services staff should emulate this technique. That is what readers' advisory services should be all about. No matter how busy the circulation department, you can't work the front desk day in and day out without getting to know the regulars, finding out that Mrs. Smith's grandchildren are coming to visit and that Mr. and Mrs. Jones are going on a cruise to Alaska. Suggest some children's books for Mrs. Smith to read to her grandchildren and travel books on Alaska for the Joneses, along with a few paperback mysteries for the trip. "Sell" those books. If people come to the desk with a book by Isak Dinesen, ask them if they've seen the new biography of her life.

We must involve ourselves in what we're doing. It will help us do a better job and keep us from getting bored. We could hire robots to check books in and out, but that's not what the front desk should be about. The strongest people in the library should be at the front desk (and I don't mean physically strongest either). That desk is the hub. It's the perception the public has of "the library." We must put our outgoing, friendly, aggressive sales people at the front desk and let them sell.

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The other thing a sales rep does in the outside world is to build a customer base. This is the challenge of sales. It's much easier to sell to a customer we already have, those people that are already using our library. The harder part is getting those customers who don't use our service. Remember—they are already customers, they are just getting their needs met elsewhere. These customers are critical to a company if it expects to grow. Just as in private business, these customers are critical to our needs. If we are to grow and prosper, we must have these non-users as part of our customer base. How do we attract the non-user? This goes back to market research, focus groups, and product development. Who are these people, what are their needs, who is now fulfilling those needs, and how can we let them know what we can do for them? We have to ask these people the right questions.

The owner of a local bookshop told me she had asked people why they came to the bookstore to buy things that they could get at the library for free. A good question. The responses included "I didn't know the library had it" or, if they knew we had it, "It was easier to find in the bookstore." This told me two important things: one, we needed to concentrate on public awareness, and, two, libraries have arranged a system of filing and storing that only we understand. This is the kind of useful information we get when we ask the right people

the right questions.

We must be creative in the ways we inform the public that we have the product to fulfill their needs. We need to look around and see what services we already have and how we can better inform the customers of our product. The first place to start is with the hand that feeds us. What do the county or town administrators think we do all day, check out romance novels to little old ladies? We would probably be surprised if we really asked them. The answers would include something about "reading material" and "homework for schoolchildren" but not much else. We should start with the local government administrator. If we have the *General Statutes of North Carolina*, we tell him. If we see information from the County Commissioners Association on our computer network, we send him a copy and ask him if he would like to see more to pass along to the county commissioners or other department heads. If he's looking for a place to store regulatory code books, we volunteer to take them. We ask for a set of state contracts on fiche for our library, so local government employees can make copies of the information on our reader/printer instead of having to copy all the information by hand. Thus, we make ourselves useful to the local government administrator. Soon he'll be calling us with questions, and we'll never again have to explain to him what we do all day.

Our profession should not be merely guardians of mankind's knowledge, but dispensers of it as well.

This applies to other departments in the local government also. Someone called our library one day and asked what the symptoms of a certain type of spider bite were. When I suggested calling eh Health Department, the caller said, "This *is* the Health Department." We can let the Register of Deeds and County Clerk's office know that we have copies of old county records, and that we're willing to take the genealogists off their hands—they'll love us for it. If the purchasing office is having a hard time locating a company from which to buy replacement parts, we find the information in our Thomas Registry. The Economic Development office will be delighted if we can find company addresses, phone numbers, and management names for it. Anyone who thinks any of these things is really not our job is in the wrong business. If these people haven't asked us for any of this information yet, we should volunteer it. We can make the first contact. In sales this is called "cold calling," and it's hard to do. To approach a stranger and initiate a sales call takes practice and nerve. Start with these friends and colleagues; it's easier.

After the cold calling technique is mastered, it should be put to good use. We can send flyers to all the lawyers in the county and let them know about some of the legal, business, and professional resources we have. (We had better not send a three-page bibliography; no one will read it.) We can let doctors and care-givers know that we have some new books on the psychological aspects of cancer or dealing with the families of Alzheimers patients. If there's an automotive mechanics class at the community college, we can let them know we have Chilton's Repair Manuals. All we have to do is look around our libraries. What do we already have, who would use it, and how can we let them know we have it? We mustn't be afraid to sell our product. We should call on the Chamber of Commerce, ask them what their needs are, and then fulfill those needs. Take the initiative.

Just as the private sector is profit motivated (the more business you do, the more money you make), we have to be funding motivated (the more service we render, the more support we get). Try to justify additional funding to a Board of Commissioners without showing an increase in usage. We live and die by our numbers, and the only way to increase our numbers is to serve the needs of more customers. The only way to serve more customers is to sell our service. Let's take the lessons taught by the experts in private business and use what they do best—selling—to give more service to our customers. Our profession should not be merely guardians of mankind's knowledge but dispensers of it as well. Let's open up these information warehouses and let the light of the outside world in.

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by Joni Bodart-Talbot

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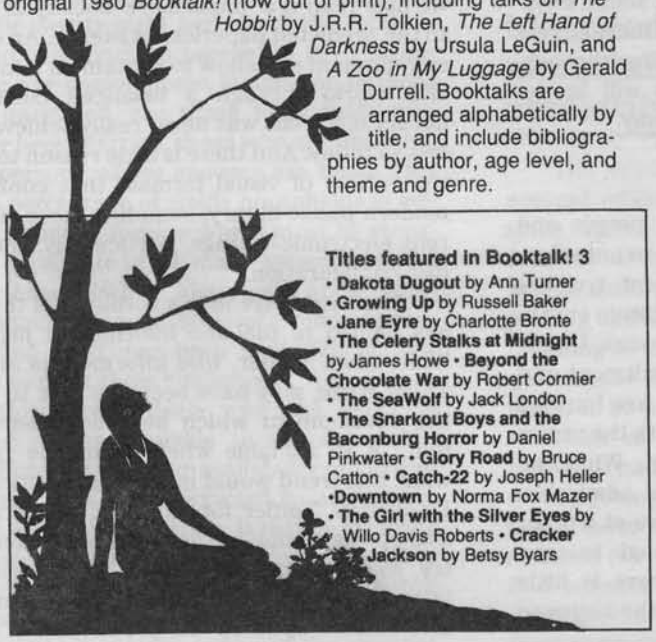

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