
The Public Library at Crisis: Is Marketing the Answer?

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This article explores three challenges that are affecting the ability of the public library to survive and relates their solutions to marketing efforts. It is directed at the trustee who is responsible for the future of public libraries in the United States.

The category "public library" includes a variety of different institutions all bearing a similar title. This paper will focus on small organizations within resident populations of 25,000 or fewer people, here to be considered as "rural" environments. This extended definition of rural (the U. S. Census Bureau's definition considers places of fewer than 2,500 to be rural) encompasses a majority of public libraries in the United States, regardless of location.

For this paper, marketing for nonprofit organizations is defined in the classic sense: a system or strategy that includes data gathering, goal setting, implementing programs, follow-through, and evaluation. These components will be described in more detail later in this essay.

The Crises

Challenges, interestingly, affect people and institutions unevenly. It is significant to note that, in spite of constant crisis management, trustees and public librarians continue to maintain enthusiasm and dedication to their endeavors. Unfortunately, because of a sense of commitment and desperation, these same individuals are burning themselves out attempting to cope with the vagaries of modern public librarianship. While an expenditure of increased energies is admirable, the human machine will quickly arrive at a point when enthusiasm is simply not enough to cope with current problems. Further, there is little hope of reducing the seriousness of the issues to be faced in the immediate future.

It is, of course, an exercise in immodesty for any author to identify challenges and to be bold enough to offer suggestions as palliatives. Further,

while this individual is going to consider three challenges confronting public librarianship, these categories impinge on each other rather than proceeding in parallel. The reader will probably not be surprised by the developments to be discussed. Two out of the three are really not new. The challenge occurs in implementing change.

The information explosion, as we have come to call it, is the first of these challenges. While there is nothing exciting in calling attention to the obvious, what must be considered is the continuing and ultimate extension of this sustained information outburst as a reality of librarianship. No one person or institution can cope with the information produced by our global society. We now understand that the growth of information creates a demand for more information and what we now reap is a "papermore" society as opposed to the predicted paperless existence. An enduring commitment somehow to contain an information-rich world through a balanced collection of library materials was never really achievable. It is less so today. And there is little reason to recount the variety of visual formats that confront the modern public library, including those of the current electronic vintage, particularly, the optical disc configuration.

The second trend is a corollary of the first. It has helped to fuel the information juggernaut. While Alvin Toffler, who informed us about *The Third Wave*, may have been the first to point to the development which he called "demassification," it is arguable whether anyone perceived what this trend would mean in a practical sense. Essentially, Toffler foresaw the decentralization and specialization of the communications industry as it reorganized itself with publications intended for narrower and narrower audiences. The current spurt in the production of regional book publishers, the growth of cable television services, the availability of focused periodicals such as *Working Woman*, *Runner's World*, and *Modern Maturity* are examples of this demassification. Another instance of this trend appeared in a rather inconspicuous newspaper report indicating that *USA Today* will be made available to

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subscribers in a one-page summarized version through telefacsimile transmission.¹ It is the author's view that Toffler underestimated the significance of this "subjective demand." The multi-billion dollar microcomputer industry, coupled with the growth of other home-oriented media such as the video cassette recorder, one million units of which are being sold monthly in the United States, has greatly accelerated proprietary usage.

This "subjective demand" has created a relatively unique situation within public libraries. It has literally refashioned the public library, which has ostensibly been considered an agency of mass communications, into an institution that increasingly must commit its resources to cope with patrons' subjective needs.² Public libraries' lending of videocassette tapes and computer hardware and software is an obvious example of efforts to meet these new specialized demands.

Some would consider the above-mentioned developments to be the results of careful planning and market positioning. While this may be true, it is also important to note that the United States is rapidly becoming a nation of single persons. Since 1980, for example, half of the homes added in America are now occupied by people living alone or with nonrelations. These households now account for twenty-eight percent of the total, as opposed to only nineteen percent in 1970.³ Comprising the one-person home, in addition to those who are unrelated, are those individuals who have never been married, those who are divorced, or those persons whose spouses are dead. This increased percentage of single households is evidence of changed lifestyles which must be recognized and catered to in the marketplace. Likewise the public library, which historically must evaluate the significance of societal trends before transforming itself, has been extended in new directions to meet these challenges.

The third trend deals with the declining amount of money available to support public libraries. Because of the unavailability of current national statistics, it is awkward to attempt to generalize about this situation. It may be accurate to say, however, that public libraries are hurting. Fortunately, this is not true in every public library; but it is an enormous problem which is not endemic to a specific region of the country. Financing the local public library is a similar problem in Clarion, Pennsylvania, and Willows, California.

Available statistical data from the Center for the Study of Rural Librarianship suggest that budgets for small public libraries are actually

increasing. While this may be true, a national average of \$69,000 for libraries in populations of 2,501 to 25,000 people, and an average budget of \$22,000 in towns with populations below 2,500, certainly cannot be considered extravagant financial support.⁵ There simply is not enough money available to accomplish all of those responsibilities perceived as functions of the community library, whether this institution is a function of city government or a part of a county arrangement. In the latter instance, the structure of political life in the United States is being changed by the growth in significance of county government that increasingly is expected to provide additional social support—only one of which is the library—for its citizens. Unfortunately, it appears that eighty percent of all county administrators are politically and fiscally conservative.⁴ Further, in some states the county government is precluded from raising sufficient taxes to support required and necessary services because state legislatures will not permit tax levels to be increased.

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The fiscal dilemma is not limited to the amount of dollars available to local libraries. In some cases, the library staff has never conducted a survey of its users and consequently has been able to accomplish little in the way of what today is being called "strategic planning." In short, little planning of any kind has been done. As a consequence, the library staff has no sense of priority needs to be translated into services. The effect of this lack of planning is not a casual matter. Rather, it has caused staff members to attempt to do everything out of a sense of duty. Additionally, the presumed insatiable community appetite is satisfied (or salved) with more and more diversified services. While this is not true in all small libraries, the pressures are widespread and come from suggestions made at professional meetings, from the library literature, and from the community itself. Further, speakers from far away places exhort audiences of trustees and rural librarians with the theme that more and more must be done to meet professional responsibilities. This author admits his guilt. The problem is that we infre-

quently consider limitations which should be placed on services. There is now little alternative but to consider what the library can afford to provide—a question of interest to all types of libraries.

In institutions where budgets are remarkably narrower than expenses, librarians and trustees are attempting additional avenues of fundraising to keep things solvent. Bake sales, dances, book and stationery sales, and grant proposals are among the techniques attempted. What has now created a siege mentality relative to these actions, and justifiably so, is that fundraising is no longer a matter associated with additional library programming or extra services. Ingenious and time-consuming projects have become obligations of the trustees to keep the library ship in the water. The typical nature of the situation can be perceived in the following comment.

The (anywhere) Board spends most of its volunteer time on fundraising events; that may be a raffle, bake sale, book fair, government pleas with 'cup in hand,' etc. This year the Board went all out, holding golf tournaments, food stands at tourist attractions, and private house parties to keep [the library] afloat.⁶

This "hand-to-mouth" approach of providing for the fiscal needs of the library is degrading as well as impractical. Will a point soon be reached when the entire library budget consists of revenues gathered from self-initiated projects? What are the alternatives? While there are a variety of choices, marketing is the key. This will be the focus of our discussion for the remainder of this article.

The problem is that we infrequently consider limitations which should be placed on services.

The Relevance of Marketing

It is fair to say that, with the exception of the product itself (and American society is often treated to illusion as opposed to substance), marketing is a prerequisite activity in any organization. The fact that the library community does not always recognize this is undoubtedly one of the reasons for this issue of *North Carolina Libraries*. The difficulty is to transform marketing from a cliché that one assumes will mitigate all library difficulties into a practical endeavor. In reality, marketing occurs constantly in any organization, including the library, sometimes as a surprise to the staff. For example, every institution has an "image," which is a major concern to marketers.

The challenge, however, is to know what kind of image your organization projects and to facilitate change, if that is considered desirable.

This is a crucial time for public librarianship. While undoubtedly a quick check of the library literature would yield an historical record of other authors sounding a similar concern, the survival of rural America—whether agricultural, industrial, or resort based—is being confronted as never before. Community well-being is such a pervasive concern for non-metropolitan people and agencies that services, including the library, will continue to be challenged. While applying marketing skills in desperate economic situations will not always ensure success, the only way for the library to remain competitive is for the library board to facilitate the awareness that there is no alternative to marketing the library, if the library is to survive in some form.

It is of some import to discuss the meaning of marketing for nonprofit organizations. Too often our subject is inextricably related only to public relations. One will often hear individuals talking about marketing in relationship to newspaper ads and radio spots. Without question, public relations—in whatever form—becomes a key element in the marketing model. It is important to remember, however, that marketing is a strategy, that is, a methodology. The components for this strategy comprise analysis of the problem; program formation; timetable; implementation; follow-through; and evaluation. Conceptually, as a paradigm, marketing is similar to a variety of managerial techniques (e.g., management by objectives).

At its fundamental level, marketing is simple. Ensuring its acceptance and use, however, takes some effort. Marketing is also complicated by the fact that the library deals with multiple publics, or markets. Children, senior Americans, the non-literate, and others compose our audiences. Marketing strategists remind us of a fundamental principle: not all publics or audiences can be served simultaneously. This vital fact is only slowly being appreciated among those responsible for library management. The public library cannot be all things to all people. There is neither enough emotion nor money to do everything. It is the author's view that libraries have been organized to provide too many services out of a sense of commitment to the public.

Clearly, however, the rural public library must focus its assets, human as well as physical, to meet its current challenges. Also, it must be prepared to direct its services to meet community needs in the light of a potentially dwindling econ-

omy. Marketing is an essential tool for the library trustee not only because of the inherent (and in some places, legal) obligation to maintain the library's solvency, but to reduce the emotion and frustration currently related to endless book and bake sales, dances, and other efforts at raising money. Unfortunately, it is not a panacea for the overall lack of funding. What it helps to ensure, however, is that the library's funds are channeled into purposeful library activities as determined by the community's representatives, the trustees.

Marketing's Lack of Popularity

If marketing is such an important contribution to the United States, why is it not applied more frequently? The next section discusses why marketing is just developing as a library strategy. The final section of this paper will present some "how to do it" suggestions.

While this author may be accused of too often commenting on the fact that education is the key issue in library development, the frequent lack of trained staff in America's rural public libraries is a vital concern. Non-academically trained staff, regardless of their commitment, are often unaware of the meaning and application of marketing. As suggested elsewhere in this paper, marketing is typically related to public relations. To verify this point, The Center for the Study of Rural Librarianship recently conducted a study to ask rural librarians if they participated in marketing activities. More than half of those surveyed answered in the affirmative. When the Center inquired about the marketing examples, however, virtually every respondent indicated instances of newspaper articles, publishing bookmarks, and so on.

If the library board finds itself unable to augment its academically trained staff (or hire an academically trained librarian), one would offer the obvious alternative of supporting attendance of the current staff at local workshops or conferences where marketing matters are being considered. It is anticipated that trustees would also attend. In the absence of workshops or conferences, this author would like to suggest a book that the Center for the Study of Rural Librarianship publishes, which is a remarkable bargain for \$5.00: *Developing a Marketing Program for Libraries*.⁷ This practical guide to marketing is a no-nonsense approach to the subject.

Another reason for the "measured" application of marketing in libraries is the fact that marketing for nonprofit organizations is only a relatively recent pursuit among specialists. Philip Kotler, the guru of marketing, was among the first

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to publish a text on the nonprofit aspects of this subject, and this work dates only from 1975.⁸ Historically, marketing has been primarily associated with for-profit organizations and has been slow to adapt for the not-for-profit sector. While libraries, museums, orchestras, and other organizations are now attempting to apply the aspects of marketing that pertain to the nonprofit sector, many individuals in this sector continue to have a rather negative impression that marketers bowl over people, persuading them to consume products that are really not necessary or desirable.

A third reason for a disinclination toward marketing relates to that hateful trio composed of the lack of money, time and staff. Ironically, this mentality may be related to the fact that a marketing approach is not taken in providing library services. Because the staff is attempting to do everything at the same time for all library clients, there genuinely is not time for yet another activity, marketing. One is quick to acknowledge, however, that since a majority of libraries are staffed by only one person, even the best planning must recognize the practical limitations of what can be accomplished. Parenthetically, this author commiserated with a librarian who was attending a recent workshop relating to the development of

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literacy programs and lamented the lack of time for this "new" endeavor despite its importance. A thoughtful marketer might indicate that perhaps a literacy program was not feasible at this time.

Using the above literacy program as an example of a marketing strategy, the marketer or person responsible for the planning would consider the following steps. He or she would attempt to identify whether or not a literacy project is needed. Such questions as whether there are other literacy providers, or whether there are significant numbers of persons in need of training might be asked. If there is a need, one would then establish goals and objectives, identify who is to be in charge, plan a budget, and define methods of public relations. Establishing a timetable is the next step. Implementing the program and follow-through are the next ingredients; followed, finally by evaluation of the project. The lack of evaluation tends to be a weakness in projects of all types. In judging the success of a marketing program (*remember the emphasis in marketing is on an organized series of activities*), one wishes to determine, among other things, how effective were the efforts at attracting students (as we continue to use our literacy example), or whether the tutoring was offered at times that would attract adults in need of education.

At the outset of this section, the author indicated that lack of time was one reason for ignoring the marketing approach to library services. One would be less than candid, however, not to comment on the obvious—planning and implementing marketing programs do take time. It is much easier to start something and hope for the best. Unfortunately, this latter approach brings us back to the reality that the public library must be operated as a business—nonprofit, of course. And it is the trustees' responsibility to ensure that efficient planning is characteristic of the library, regardless of its size.

While this next commentary may appear to be tangential to the subject, the author believes that the lack of national standards for public libraries is another reason that marketing strategies are not more prevalent. The emphasis on community mission statements is fundamentally important since public libraries are different. But

a basic error, in my view, was created in the public library movement by abandoning quantitative standards in an effort to be totally community oriented. This is related to marketing in the sense that there may not be the pressure to "measure-up" with one's library service, since there are no guidelines by which to make a comparison. Individual state agencies and organizations, notably in North Carolina, have attempted to overcome the absence of standards with the development of state measures. Even though we recognize that independence is associated with rural America, much is to be gained by having at least a rough sense of what is occurring in other communities.

The reader should now appreciate the fact that the author will not persist in enumerating additional reasons why marketing is not more often utilized. The previous review was written with the idea that one would recognize some of the reasons for marketing's infrequent entry into library administration and attempt to hurdle them.

Facilitating Marketing

The title of this paper posed a serious question: can marketing overcome the current crises facing rural public libraries? The answer is "yes," without question. Further a premise behind this paper is that most libraries must reevaluate their services in the light of available resources. This examination is extremely difficult without a marketing approach to library management. For example, while we relate the public library to the image of a community information center, it must be understood there are definite limits to what can be provided. This is a simple theorem, but it has yet to be put into practice in most communities. The opposite tendency (to attempt more and more) seems to be symptomatic. The literacy example that has been used before in this paper is certainly a further example of expanding library services. Presently, for example, there is considerable concern that American workers cannot function at a literacy level to perform job-related tasks. The question becomes, why should the public library take on the responsibility of overcoming this deficiency? Should business itself not provide this service?

The difficulty, as noted earlier in this paper, is that the public library has a variety of audiences to recognize. We simply must remember that not all levels of the community can be provided with the same level of service at the same time. This does not mean abandoning children while serving the senior American. By using a marketing approach, libraries may focus on special services

to children one year and to older Americans another time. It is assumed that the library will continue to maintain "normal services," while targeting programs on a selected basis. *Marketing is not just another gimmick. It is a way to manage the library and enable it to survive.*

Where's the Beef?

The author intentionally left a loaded gun at the end of the previous paragraph. It is characterized as "normal services." The intent was to emphasize the fact that it is the board of trustees who ultimately must reconcile what is meant by the library's standard services. Logically, libraries loan materials, answer reference questions, and so forth. The options may be limited, of course, if state or regional standards specify expectations. But loaning videocassettes, providing literacy training, and providing computerized information services, however desirable, are not etched into stone. If the public library is the community's library, then the people must decide the services. This does not necessarily mean that all matters are judgments left to a town meeting. Rather, the responsibility is vested in the trustees assisted by the library staff and the library's friends.

The author now senses the perspiration forming on the reader's forehead as one contemplates the future of the public library. It is not assumed that the trustees (unless they wish to) will be directly involved in implementing marketing strategies for the library. The expectation is clear, however, that the board must encourage and be vitally interested in the library's development, or the library will founder as an institution. The board must facilitate the use of marketing, or there is little hope of coping with the stress of a changing rural society.

The following brief section, in conclusion, suggests techniques of "locating the beef" while recognizing the inherent limitations of most rural libraries:

1. The obvious first alternatives for planning and implementing a marketing program are members of the library staff or friends of the library. A less often utilized approach is to encourage the involvement of individuals such as representatives from the Cooperative Extension Service, Soil Conservation Service, Grange, Chamber of Commerce, Rotary Club, and others. The library community has not been as active as it should be in soliciting assistance from other community participants. A third method would be to ask help of staff from the state, local, or regional libraries.

2. The author intentionally omitted a discus-

sion of the costs of marketing activities. It has been our experience that funding is not a crucial problem. Programs can be implemented on the proverbial shoestring. Obviously, if one is distributing T-shirts to the kids who come to story hours, somebody has to pay for these. But, in the author's view, using the lack of funds as a reason not to implement planning is sometimes an excuse for inaction. One also sympathizes with the fact that someone must pay for the stationery, postage, and other supplies.

3. Finally, marketing strategies do not have to be of grand design, implemented over a protracted period, to be effective. The concepts of marketing can just as easily be employed during a one-day interval. The key is action. It is not meant to be condescending to the reader to ask one to remember that, while marketing is a popular concept at the present, it is only a label for effective library planning.

Admittedly, this essay has rambled over a variety of different thoughts. One hopes the reader will judge this commentary in the light of the author's assignment. This discussion was not meant to be a technical expression of marketing principles. There is plenty of text dealing with that. Rather, the message was to indicate that trustees face challenges as never before. The recent notice that the Shasta County Library (California) will be closed because of the lack of funds is a reminder of reality. And circumstances are going to become worse. Our concern is the growth of the rural public library and the continuation of the American dream. Can marketing, itself, ensure these? No, but it is of fundamental importance.

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