

GREENWOOD
LIBRARY
MANAGEMENT
COLLECTION

STRATEGIC MARKETING for LIBRARIES A Handbook

Elizabeth J. Wood

with assistance from
Victoria L. Young

Strategic Marketing for Libraries

A HANDBOOK

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STRATEGIC MARKETING FOR LIBRARIES

To Floris, Rebecca, and Katey for their patience and understanding and to the fine library administrators it has been my privilege to work with and to observe.

E. J. W.

Introduction

Marketing is not new. To some extent, librarians and information managers have instinctively exhibited the sensitivity, responsiveness, and flexibility that are its hallmarks. Any early reservations about marketing in the library and information science community were no stronger than those of the business community, some of whom initially viewed marketing as “the black arts of persuading the public to buy what it doesn’t want—or, what may be worse—what it does want but is almost certainly bad for its teeth” (von Auw 1983, 158). Not surprisingly, fears evoked among librarians by phrases like “information supermarket” were relatively quickly dispelled. Few members of the profession bought the idea of marketing as a threat to the existence of the book, to free public access to information, or to Civilization As We Know It. An early landmark in the acceptance of marketing was the 1979 White House Conference’s espousal of training for library professionals in marketing. As early as 1980 an article claimed “rapidly growing receptivity—even eagerness” (Andreasen 1980, 17) to the idea of applying marketing to libraries. A cursory examination of today’s library science literature would turn up a good many articles, some books, a conference or two, and the occasional library school course with marketing as its focus.

Even so, the idea needs further examination. Like other recently disseminated theories, marketing for libraries is only imperfectly understood by some of its disciples—the writers as well as the practitioners. They have caught only part of the marketing idea. Instead of starting with an open mind, they cling to a prescriptive approach (the librarian knows what is good for you) shored up by a high-powered public relations campaign, aggressive selling efforts, and an artful whitewashing job when they cannot deliver what they had hoped they would be able to do.

A reviewer of one book about library marketing notes, “The author focuses almost exclusively on promotion” (Shapiro 1983, 204), suggesting that *Promoting the Library and Its Programs* would have made a more appropriate title than *Marketing the Library*. He notes the absence of references to product lines, market share, and “many other topics which also deserve mention in any overall

treatment of library marketing” (Shapiro 1983, 204). A second work is dismissed as “a superficial introduction to marketing” relying too heavily on Philip Kotler (Dragon 1985, 220). While *Strategic Marketing for Libraries* makes reference to Kotler, Shapiro, Levitt, and other giants among marketing and strategic planning theorists, it goes beyond endorsement of publicity and selling techniques. It offers a thoughtful, practical, in-depth discussion of how marketing techniques fit into library operations and planning.

The fundamentals of marketing theory and practice—described in one instance as “sensitively serving and satisfying human needs” (Kotler and Levy 1969, 15) and in another as “buying customers” (Levitt 1960, 56)—are laid out in Part I, entitled “Library Marketing.” Kotler (1980) defines the four main steps in the marketing process for any organization as follows:

- Opportunity analysis
- Selection of a target market or several target markets
- Determination of the marketing mix strategy
- Development of systems to carry out the marketing effort

He also stresses the absolute necessity of a continuous exchange between the organization and its ever-changing environment, along with the interplay between the strategic planning process and the marketing process. Part I provides a thorough review of marketing principles along with examples of their use in libraries.

The second part shows how marketing can be more than an occasional, haphazard effort. Entitled “Library Strategic Planning,” it treats the relationship of continuous, formal planning to implementation of marketing concepts developed in the first part of the book. It discusses and explains the interrelationships among the key steps of strategic planning:

- Defining the mission
- Setting goals and objectives
- Outlining desirable growth strategies
- Regularly evaluating the “program” of both physical products and services

Combining marketing with strategic planning offers a means of embracing the challenges of library and information science in the eighties, nineties, and beyond. Integrating these two concepts into the fiber of a library organization so that marketing is used in a deliberate, structured, holistic fashion promotes not only strength in the short run, but also the kind of long-term viability needed to work toward each organization’s vision of the future.

Neither Part I on marketing nor Part II dealing with strategic planning gives more than a passing mention to profit-making segments of the library and information science industry—publishers, computerized database producers and

vendors, information brokers, and book vendors. Marketing and strategic planning aspects of such enterprises are amply covered in the general business literature.

The audience for this work will include both students of library and information science and practitioners well grounded in library operations who seek a broader understanding of marketing and strategic planning, offshoots of the general management literature.

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PART I

Library Marketing

1

Principles of Marketing

MARKETING: SATISFYING NEEDS

Marketing has been described and explained in many ways by different authors. Virtually all definitions are variations on a single theme: marketing means satisfying human needs. Such needs arise from the conditions (economic, social, and other) and the value system of the consumer of goods or services. Since value and satisfaction are not absolutes agreed upon by all members of any society, the consumer's needs may be interpreted by but not prescribed by the marketer. All individuals are the ultimate authority on what will satisfy their needs, according to marketing theory. Many librarians have failed to understand this marketing precept. One of the greater ironies of the library profession is that many, conjuring up an image of crass commercialism, reject the marketing concept. Yet the prescriptive approach to promoting the library, leaning heavily on public relations and selling techniques to entice a wary public into accepting what *librarians* have decided is good for them is uncomfortably close to the mentality of the poor fellow out there hawking encyclopedias.

Explanations of marketing often describe a historical progression from a “product” or “production” orientation to a “selling” orientation and finally to the marketing approach.

PRODUCTION ORIENTATION

Definition

The essence of a production orientation (a concept now largely discredited in both profit and nonprofit organizations) is the belief that quality is its own excuse for being. Put another way, it is the belief that people will always like, want, and seek out a “good” product—one that is well designed, well made, and suitably priced. This belief rests on the faulty assumption that another person (be it librarian, parent, social worker, product engineer, or other authority figure) can determine what any given individual needs without consulting that individual.

Example

In libraries a good product is usually equated with some optimal combination of collection and services. For example, a preoccupation with designing “better information systems, better periodical retrieval processes, more attractive interiors, faster check out, more parking, and so on” (Andreasen 1980, 18) without determining the degree of user satisfaction with current materials and services and without gathering data to assess unmet needs of users and potential users illustrates a product orientation. Failure to consult patrons can mean missing some component of library materials or services that would dramatically influence usage or fiscal support of the library: physical security for inner-city facilities; shopping-mall accessibility for suburban users; books by mail or large print books for handicapped or housebound patrons; or any one of a dozen other considerations. Another prime example is collection development. The library collection assembled according to a librarian’s notion of quality or a librarian’s interpretation of what is good for the public may reflect that public’s needs very little or not at all. Neither gothic romances nor home-fixit books nor even the classics can be defended without evidence of user need for them. On the basis of user surveys or a focus group, one branch of a public library may be able to drastically limit the number of reference books on its shelves. Another branch whose patrons are unable or disinclined to utilize the main library’s reference resources may need to invest a large portion of its funds in reference material. Any library’s resources will be better used in supplying items and services valued by its patrons than in acquiring and attempting to push down their throats what library personnel want them to have. No special library that fails to discover and satisfy its public’s expectations is likely to remain in existence for long.

SELLING ORIENTATION

Definition

A selling orientation is characterized by the belief that customers can be induced to use any product if they are made aware of its existence. It is a company-centered rather than a client-centered approach to the conduct of business. As “good” mousetrap, buggywhip, and automobile companies have fallen by the wayside, the for-profit sector has come to realize that quality alone without promotional activities is not guaranteed to bring about success. By the same token, most librarians now recognize that “customers” must be made aware of the range of available products and services and must further be made to feel that such offerings are worthwhile. Exit the production orientation; enter the selling orientation. Fully convinced that they know what is good for their patrons, such librarians set about planning special events, finding clever ads, and drafting public announcements to “persuade a recalcitrant public” (Andreasen 1980, 19) to accept what the library is willing to provide. While selling what the organi-

zation has to offer is a necessary and desirable part of marketing, it cannot be the totality of the library's orientation toward patrons. Nor should it occur before other marketing tasks have been done. Two popular and respected marketing theorists point out that "properly seen, selling follows rather than precedes the organization's drive to create products to satisfy its customers" (Kotler and Levy 1969, 15).

Example

An example of the selling concept in the library field would be the head of a library network developing and advertising a course in state law reference, not because members express a need for such training, but simply because staff at the network headquarters have the expertise to conduct such a course. In both the production and the selling approaches to delivering goods or services, the focus is on the producer or purveyor of the thing rather than on the consumer. The hapless consumer is viewed as incidental to the organization or, in the extreme case, as an impediment to conducting business as management would like to conduct it.

MARKETING ORIENTATION

Definition

The marketing approach, in contrast to the other two orientations, centers on the consumer's needs. It sees the proper conduct of both profit-making and nonprofit business as an exchange process where customers offer something they value (usually money) in exchange for something else they value (a product or service), often paying indirectly for goods or services from nonprofit organizations.

Examples

In the example of the library network's supplying support for legal research, a marketing orientation would involve polling member libraries as to their needs and perhaps offering referral to the state library or to a large university library as alternatives to educating each small library staff in the intricacies of state law questions that they are seldom likely to encounter and that their collections ill equip them to pursue.

In time a marketing outlook may influence academic libraries to join the ranks of public and special libraries in offering answers to complex research questions as well as suggesting sources to consult and demonstrating their use. Librarians alone among professionals insist on teaching clients to perform the very services for which their help has been solicited. Beyond a basic awareness of what constitutes good nutrition and sensible exercise, medical doctors do not expect