

# BRANDING AND Marketing YOUR LIBRARY

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**T**he necessity of marketing a library is certainly not a new concept. The value of the Royal Library of Alexandria was probably spread by satisfied customers across the Mediterranean. No, marketing libraries is not new, but how it's done is changing dramatically, driven by shifting circumstances.

If you're unsure whether marketing your library really makes a difference, consider the success of Queens (N.Y.) Library's (QL) branding and marketing campaign. QL is now the highest-circulating public library in the country. With nearly twenty-three million in circulated materials, it was the first public library in the country to reach that record of circulation. In the most recent fiscal year (2007), QL issued more than 100,000 library cards, another record breaker. Nearly half a million people attended almost 22,000 programs over the last year. And the year that QL developed its strategic marketing plan, the library became the first public library system in the country to exceed twenty million items circulated in a single fiscal year. For QL, a targeted branding and marketing plan has been an unqualified success.

In order to develop a successful branding and marketing campaign for your library, you should ask this question: Are libraries, in fact, relevant in the twenty-first century? The answer, I submit, is most emphatically *yes*—now more than ever. Consider these statistics: Forty-four million adults cannot read well enough to fill out an application, read a food label, or read a story to a child (and we all know the importance of reading aloud to kids).<sup>1</sup> Here in Queens, many households speak a language other than English at home. The population of new Americans is continuing to increase, with growing disorientation and even alienation. And nearly 70 percent of recent college graduates perform merely at a basic or intermediate level of literacy, with just 31 percent demonstrating high-level skills such as reading lengthy, complex English texts.<sup>2</sup>

According to the 2003 New York State Assessment of Adult Literacy, the latest assessment available, an astonishing 50 percent of adults were either at or below a basic level of prose literacy, with about the same percentage at or below a basic level of document literacy.<sup>3</sup> An even higher number (59 percent) were either at or below a basic level of quantitative literacy (able to balance a checkbook or understand a bank statement).<sup>4</sup>

Couple these dismal statistics with the following: The growth of Amazon and mega-booksellers, such as Borders and Barnes and Noble, has obviated the need to go to the library. The expansion of companies such as Netflix gives nearly instant access to popular films, concerts, and television series, and people never even have to leave their own homes for books or entertainment.

Even with this reality, people still long for community: witness the surge in online social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook. Everyone, not just teenagers, is looking for stronger connections with other people all the time, and the library gives that sense of community. It attracts an incredible variety of users: individuals, couples, families, kids, teens, adults, and seniors. Perhaps the last and best true democracy, the library not only strives to alleviate the problems of illiteracy described previously, it also brings people of all religions, ethnicities, sexual orientations, and backgrounds together.

## Promote the Library

If we want our libraries to be relevant, what actions do we need to take? Happily, in many cases, libraries have adapted to the changing times. They are providing more Internet connections, programs and services, and materials. They are involved in Web 2.0, and more and more library websites boast blogs and podcasts. Some libraries even have profiles on social networking sites. So why is it that libraries are generally forgotten? Why is it so difficult to get sufficient funding? Why is it a challenge to attract the next generation of librarians?

The answer is twofold. First, our target audiences have forgotten about libraries as they try to navigate increasingly complex lives. More important, though, is this: libraries have made the grave mistake of assuming everyone knows how important and relevant they are. Administrators and librarians have failed to realize that they truly need to *promote* what they have to offer. But how is that done? The first step, long before you develop a plan for branding and marketing your library, is to find out who your stakeholders are.

## Identify Your Stakeholders

The primary stakeholder you need to consider is the group (or groups) that provide your library with its annual operating budget; often, a government agency. Once you identify your key stakeholder group, you need to know who makes the actual funding decisions. If you have merely filled out the appropriate forms and accepted the approved budget, you are not marketing to your stakeholders. You need to develop relationships with these funders so they know who you are. You also need to find out what your key stakeholders expect from the library. If they have no expectations, it is your responsibility to create those expectations in tandem with your branding and marketing efforts.

How do you develop that relationship? E-mail or snail mail your regular library mailing, if you have one, to your stakeholders. Whenever there is positive news about the library, send that along too. Share your calendar of events, brochures, or pamphlets with stakeholders, and invite them to the library to meet your customers. Think about quarterly meetings to build a stronger identity, awareness, and relationship. This will make the entire budget process more manageable and create the positive results you want.

After public entities, private donations are the largest source of funding for libraries—foundation/corporate grants, large individual donations, and individuals (who can be reached by direct mail, special events, and other vehicles). Donors are vital stakeholders, and marketing to them must be considered in any strategic branding effort.

Mail information about your library to these corporate and foundation contacts, as you do to your budgetary stakeholders. This lets your donors know that the library serves the community in a dynamic way. Another good way of getting your branding message out there is to plan invitation-only director's talks.

You need to know who the affluent donors in your library's area are. Your past and present significant donors should be among the first to be told about your library's branding and marketing initiatives, and may even provide additional support. The more you can engage donors in your branding and marketing campaign, the better the chances are that they will become financially involved.

Beyond these two main stakeholders, the population that makes up your remaining stakeholders includes educational and community organizations, media, staff and volunteers, and customers. Make sure that each one of these populations has a vested interest in your library, whether it's a senior center, public high school, or radio station. Also, your staff and volunteers represent your library to the public, and the success of any strategic marketing campaign largely depends on them.

## Understand Your Target Audience

Before you begin any kind of marketing and branding campaign, you also need to have a thorough understanding of who your audience is. Whom are you trying to serve? There are straightforward methods for identifying your audience. Your library needs to focus on who it serves best and most often, and then address the needs of that population.

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A terrific and free resource for gathering information of this type is the U.S. Census Bureau. You can go to [www.factfinder.census.gov](http://www.factfinder.census.gov) to look up the most recent information in the 2004 profile. From there, you can find a wealth of statistics on sex and age demographics, household relationships and types, and housing. There is also plenty of social information: school enrollment, educational degrees, marital status, and other categories. For economic questions, the Census Bureau yields statistics on employment status, occupations, classes of workers, income, and a variety of economic measures.

After you gather hard data about your library's population, you will need to review your materials, programs, and services and assess whether your library truly is serving the people who live nearby. Do you have many senior citizens? If so, does your collection reflect this? Does a significant portion of your service population speak a language other than English at home? Is there a large population of school-age children in your area? These factors have a major impact on how you might most appropriately position or brand your library for maximum effectiveness or success.

## Ask Your Audience

An ideal way to learn more about your audience is by developing a customer survey, which can be as simple or complex as you wish. It can cover any one or all aspects of the library, such as staff, materials, programs, services, and hours. It can also include a request for demographic information about your user base, and can be passed along when a customer checks out materials or uses a computer.

Remember: These surveys are not representative of your total service population, only of your current user base. If you have a high percentage of cardholders or library users, one survey is sufficient. However, if you have low usage, a separate study may be necessary to find out why more people are not using the library. Hand these questionnaires out at high-traffic locations such as shopping malls or supermarkets. Often, retailers will be happy to set up a table and

space for your staff or volunteers. Be sure to ask! After you collect all the information you need, a thorough analysis of the data should help you develop your branding or positioning statement. It will also assist you in determining who your primary audience should be.

Most libraries do not have the budgets, staffing, or resources to be successful at serving everyone. For instance, it may not be wise to devote your library resources to research if there is a major public university in your area that has an excellent reference library. Alternatively, if there are many primary and secondary schools in your service area, but the school libraries are inadequate, focusing on school/homework assistance can be a positive use of the library. If there is a large new American or immigrant population, offering English-language and job-assistance programs may be the most helpful. To reiterate: Determining how your library can be most relevant to your service communities will streamline your efforts to brand and market your library.

## Create a Strategic Positioning Statement

Once you have a firm grasp of who your target audience is and the best way to serve that audience, you should be ready to write your strategic positioning statement. The strategic positioning statement has two parts. The first is the statement itself, which should be no longer than one concise and clear sentence. The second is the supporting paragraph, also known as the "permission to believe." It provides the rationale, or support, for the positioning statement. The strategic positioning statement is something that every staff member, volunteer, and board member should know. It sets the tone for the library, guiding all marketing and communications for the institution. This is Queens Library's strategic positioning statement:

*Queens Library is the best community resource for all of your informational, educational, cultural, and recreational needs.*

Permission to believe the above statement is based on Queens Library's extensive collection of materials, programs, and services, as well as open access to the Internet and friendly, supportive, and professional staff. Queens Library provides a free, comfortable, and welcoming place for the people of our diverse neighborhoods.

There are many ways to develop a positioning statement. You should always get as much input as you can from key staffers, volunteers, donors, trustees, and other players. However, keep in mind that the statement should not be an amalgam of different points of view. Send a survey to your constituents. It can be as simple as these two questions: (1) What word or phrase most aptly describes what the library currently is? and (2) What word or phrase most aptly describes what the library hopes to be?

Once you have collected these surveys, a picture will evolve of current perceptions of the library and how it might be improved, providing you with a basis for the positioning statement. After that, it is simply a matter of wordsmithing to get it right. Once you have a prototype statement, go back and check with key stakeholders to make sure they buy in to your statement. Remember, it needs to be single-minded and believable.

## Develop a Marketing Plan

Now that you have your strategic positioning statement, you can develop your marketing plan. At its simplest (and best), a marketing plan is a road map to guide your library's branding and marketing efforts. It can also be the basis for setting future objectives for your library, helping with fund-raising and capital development, and serving as a form of communication for your board and funding authorities. If it is done well the first time, your marketing plan can be updated over time, evolving into a valuable document for your library in the future.

The methods for writing a marketing plan range from basic to complex. Your method should depend on your individual library's needs and wants. Below is a basic, seven-section outline for a good marketing plan. You can adapt the format to your own unique situation. Remember: Any marketing plan you write is better than no marketing plan at all!

- I. **Executive Summary**—The Executive Summary is a brief overview of the marketing plan. It reviews the past fiscal year and highlights any important initiatives or events. It also prepares for the coming fiscal year. The executive summary outlines key objectives for the next year, as well as strategies that have been developed and an explanation of how those strategies will be implemented. The summary should be no longer than three or four pages at most. As you write the summary, think about your audience. Anticipate their reactions, comments, and questions, and try to answer them within the document.
- II. **Statistical Review**—Most libraries have some quantitative means for measuring their performance over the span of a year. This might be by circulation numbers, gate count of visitors, new card registrations, reference inquiries, number of programs or other services, or additions to the collection. Reviewing the past fiscal year quantitatively sets the baseline for future goals and achievements. If your library has multiple locations, these numbers can show where you have had the greatest successes or can highlight where there may be problems or concerns.
 

The statistical review is not a simple collection of numerical charts. You can put those in the appendix at the end of the plan document. Rather, it is a narrative that highlights what happened during the previous fiscal year and should show what you will try to achieve in the coming fiscal year. Making comparisons from year to year is important. If you have the time and resources to compare the most recent fiscal year to past years, that is helpful. Sometimes it's simply a matter of comparing computer printouts. You can also compare your results against similar library systems by using the *Public Library Data Service Statistical Report*, published annually by the Public Library Association.
- III. **Strategic Brand Positioning**—As reviewed previously, the strategic positioning statement states what the library is (or would like to be) or how the library would like to be viewed. It is the *personality* of the library. It differs from the library's mission statement, which communicates what the library tries to do. Make sure the strategic brand positioning statement is embedded in the marketing plan, to keep the overarching document focused.
- IV. **Fiscal Year Objectives**—The fiscal year objectives are a blueprint, or design, of everything you hope to accomplish in the coming year. They can be limited to marketing initiatives, or can reflect all areas of the library. Whichever the case, the

objectives must be quantifiable, not qualitative or anecdotal.

Here are some examples of good objectives: "The library will increase circulation of materials by 10 percent over the previous year." "The library will increase the number of programs for children and young adults by 20 percent." "The library will increase the percentage of school-age children owning library cards to 80 percent." And here are some examples of bad ones: "The library will create a more pleasant environment for users." "The library will increase the size of its collection." "The library will increase the number of people with library cards."

In the fiscal-year objective section of the marketing plan, provide a rationale and support for each objective. For example, look at this objective: "The library will increase the percentage of school-age children owning library cards to 80 percent." The rationale and support for this objective might be that the key to future and sustained growth for the library is based on the constant development of new users, particularly the young.

- V. **Fiscal Year Initiatives**—Once you outline past activity, objectives for the coming year, and a strategic positioning statement to guide efforts, the next step is to outline the strategies and specific tactics or initiatives that will be conducted to achieve or surpass objectives. The initiatives should be organized broadly, such as what you plan to achieve in the areas of promotional materials, advertising, website, and public relations. In developing initiatives, it is most important to be realistic. Do not try to do it all. It is better to succeed at five initiatives than only partially complete ten or fifteen. Try to determine which initiatives are the most important, or which will provide the greatest return on the time, cost, and staffing investments that you've made. And remember: Whatever initiatives you develop must be measurable.
- VI. **Fiscal Year Initiatives Budget**—All good things come at a price. Once your stakeholders are excited and enthusiastic about your initiatives, you have to give them the bill for these initiatives, which should be placed in priority order. Assume that the cost for each initiative will be greater than you are estimating; it's always better to finish a project under budget. If funding is limited, it is not always better to have many initiatives instead of one or two really important ones. Also, if projects can be funded from grants,

donations, or other underwriting, highlight that fact. It will keep the impact on your operating funds at a minimum.

- VII. **Appendixes**—These are not always necessary. An appendix is a good place for detailed quantitative charts, graphs, timetables, schedules, or research results. It is also a prime place for data or information you will refer to frequently.

## Use Available Resources

It can be expensive to put your marketing plan into place and complete your initiatives, especially if your operating budget is slim. But there are many ways to develop and execute a marketing plan that can significantly reduce both manpower and resource costs.

For your marketing plan, a great place to start for help is your board of trustees. Your members should include a few local business people who have some knowledge of marketing and promotion. See if one of your trustees is willing to work with you to write a marketing plan or to chair a volunteer marketing committee to draft a plan.

If no board member is available or willing to help, contact a local college or university. A business professor or teacher might be willing to have his or her class execute a marketing plan as a semester homework assignment or project. The students can be divided into teams and make presentations to library staff "judges."

Virtually every area of the country has a local advertising agency, marketing services company, or communications company. Often, such companies are willing to provide pro bono services in exchange for being perceived as good corporate citizens. If you have any large corporate headquarters in your area, you could approach them to see if they might be willing to donate a marketing staffer to provide some assistance.

For creative development and creative services, there are plenty of resources to tap: volunteer students from local colleges (particularly art or advertising majors), local artists, advertising agencies, marketing services companies, or communications companies that are willing to take on pro bono work. Also, media companies themselves may be willing to provide creative services—newspapers, billboard companies, local television and radio stations, weekly coupon mailers, and other resources.

It is also useful to find resources in media placement and promotion. Many library staff members think that media advertising is expensive, and it can be—but it doesn't always need to be. All mainstream

media should have a rate card indicating what paid advertising might cost. The first thing to do when you look at the rate card is to throw it away. Often, media companies have special rates for nonprofit or community organizations. Again, once you receive that rate, disregard it.

Ask for a special library rate. At worst, the rate should be no more than 50 percent of the best rate the media company is offering. Once you negotiate a reasonable rate, see if you can get color added at no extra charge. This might seem like hard negotiating, especially if you don't think you have the leverage, but here's the reality: A newspaper is going to publish with or without advertising from the library, as will a television or radio station. Therefore, any media dollars that come in are found money. Don't be afraid to be bold.

Negotiations with billboard or transit companies are a little different, but you can still negotiate. How many times have you seen a billboard or bus or train advertisement that is out of date? That simply means there has been no paying advertiser to replace the previous one. If that is the case in your area, you can often pay just the printing or posting charge and get the media cost for free. Frequently, the company would rather run a current advertisement than have an out-of-date advertisement or worse, blank space.

If you absolutely have no money for advertising, you can always ask for some pro bono public service advertising. Virtually all media will provide free advertising as part of the licensing agreement. You might also have a local community cable television channel that can provide free media/air space and free production access. If you have a budding media star on your staff, you could produce a monthly or weekly television show about what's happening at the library. Other inexpensive media you can use to promote the library include coupon mailers and pensavers. Be creative.

Apart from paid mainstream media, you should develop a close and friendly relationship with all of the media in your area, particularly local media. That way, a regular press release about upcoming events, staff news, board of trustee meetings, and other library activities will invariably be published or mentioned on-air. If you do pay for media advertising, particularly print, you should be able to place feature stories about your library on a regular basis. As always, the press releases and stories should reflect the strategic marketing objectives of the library and support the library positioning.

## Evaluate Your Efforts

As important as any marketing or branding program you may develop is, it is only successful if it has met or surpassed your goals. Therefore, evaluating your efforts is essential. As explained prior, fiscal-year objectives are key components of your marketing plan. Use the following criteria as a way to create objectives; most of these criteria consist of numbers, so you can keep your objectives quantifiable.

## Circulation

This is certainly one of the easiest goals to set and evaluate, and an industry number that many professionals believe is the most important evaluation tool. Before you set any goals, you need to analyze past and current circulation trends for your particular library or libraries. You need to look for any event or seasonal factors that may skew a particular month or quarter.

If possible, it is best to evaluate several years of past data on a monthly or quarterly basis. Make note of any significant factors that may have happened: major storms or other events, important changes in days or hours of operation, or closings and openings of facilities. Create a three-year circulation chart by month, quarter, half, and full year with appropriate notations. Now, look at the branding and marketing program you have planned and determine appropriate goals. How long will the branding and marketing program last? Are immediate changes expected? For how long? What is a reasonable expectation of success? What about collection, staffing, operating hours, or loan policies? Do they help or detract from your objectives?

## Visitors

Many people who come to the library have no intention of borrowing materials. They may want to do research for any variety of needs: employment, school, or vacation. They may want to use the library's computer and Internet services. They may be attending a program or viewing an exhibit. Do you have a means of counting all your visitors? Using the same caveats as have been suggested for circulation, do you have a historical base to compare intended effects?

## Reference/Information Inquiries

One of the primary benefits of a library is that there is a professional who is experienced in helping people answer or find answers for their questions. Tracking this can be as simple as keeping a log at the reference desk. And again, once you know these numbers, you can set a percentage for increasing them.

## Awareness

Many industry professionals assume that constituents are aware of their libraries' locations, hours, services, and materials. This is simply not the case. Research surveys can be very surprising. Awareness can vary by age group, ethnicity, location, or any number of different factors. Unfortunately, evaluating this area requires some investment in money, staff, and time. However, the information that's uncovered can help set the future of your library. Using available resources, as outlined earlier in this article, can help minimize your investment cost. A survey should be done on a regular basis—certainly at least once every few years and definitely before and after a major branding and marketing effort.

## Satisfaction

Akin to awareness research is constituent satisfaction or "needs" research. Early in this article, I wrote about the importance of understanding your target audiences. If your library has a customer service focus, it is important to be able to evaluate how you are doing. New service initiatives, staffing, and other key topics need to be evaluated to ensure they are meeting the desired objectives.

## Conclusion

Developing a branding and marketing plan is a key component of promoting your library, which is more

necessary than ever in today's competitive marketplace. And the best place to start developing your library's brand is with your key stakeholders. Reach out to them first in an effort to develop strong relationships. Next, after you identify your target audience and the best ways to serve them, you will be ready to write a strategic positioning statement and strong marketing plan. Outline your objectives and quantifiable initiatives. Use easily identifiable methods (circulation counts, for example) to keep track of your initiatives. Finally, when it comes to paying for your branding, marketing plan, and advertising, use all the free resources you can. Now go and promote your library! ■

## References

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2. Justin D. Baer and Yung-chen Hsu, "Highlights from the 2003 New York State Assessment of Adult Literacy," American Institutes for Research, [www.wxxi.org/education/adulted/nystateassessment.pdf](http://www.wxxi.org/education/adulted/nystateassessment.pdf) (accessed Sept. 10, 2008): 10.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.

## American Library Association Launches Redesigned Website

Here is what site users can expect at the new ALA website ([www.ala.org](http://www.ala.org)):

- A homepage banner, with dropdown shortcuts to frequently requested areas of the site.
- A highlights section featuring images and timely information "above the fold."
- A news section with a three-tab structure that guides users to information about the ALA, library-related legislation and advocacy, and news affecting libraries (updated frequently using RSS feeds).
- Eye-catching highlights in the right column area of many pages provide "see" and "see also" references to on- and off site resources.
- A new information architecture that doesn't require users to be familiar with internal ALA structure in order to browse successfully.

"Accessibility and usability are our new watchwords, and although we have a long way to go, our progress should be more and more noticeable during the course of the year," said ALA's Senior Usability Officer Louise Gruenberg ([lgruenberg@ala.org](mailto:lgruenberg@ala.org)). ■