

# We've Moved Beyond Books and Forgot To Let Anyone Know

By Jess Dafoe and Melanie Wilke.

As librarians we know that Modern Libraries are innovative and exciting places, but are we letting our customers know? Libraries are still advertising they lend books! This antiquated idea is akin to restaurants advertising they serve food. We need to take a fresh look at how we are selling the perception of libraries and break out of the stereotype to show customers how the contemporary library meets their needs.

The words customers and selling are not being used here by accident. Although there is no money changing hands, libraries are in the business of selling services and products to customers. This economic perspective requires libraries to take a proactive, business savvy role in marketing. Without seeing money being exchanged on a per service basis, we often forget that we were hired to provide products and services, and that it is every bit as important for us to "sell" as any other retailer.

An economic reality is that many libraries are facing tight budget constraints. However, this does not mean that we should eliminate advertising from our budgets. Instead, it should spur us on to continually develop innovative ways to sell ourselves. There are many inexpensive and even free ways for libraries to meet this goal.

## Using Programmes as Marketing Tools

Programmes are one of the most effective ways to spread the word about the latest services and products available at the library. To capitalize on this advertising device, libraries must keep the goal of marketing the library in mind, because it will influence the programmes, or elements of the programmes, which they are offering.

An example of this philosophy was Girls Get Real at the Terrace Public Library. Three ideas came forth that we wanted to promote: a book launch for *Cleavage: Breakaway Fiction For Real Girls*, the Teen Health and Wellness Database, as well as to provide a venue for the community nutritionist to offer a lecture on adolescent body image. Brainstorming how to sell these opportunities (and recognizing that some of them would be challenging to sell), we

created "Girls Get Real". This was a one-day venue for adolescent girls to gather together and share their concerns; learn from experts and from each other while celebrating their growth and development.

The day was comprised of a presentation and discussion on body image, facials and skincare tips from the local spa, a book reading and journaling exercise, relaxation yoga, and a display from Public Health on teen sexuality. How was the database marketed? After a few hours of group discussion and relationship building, we explained the how important it was that the girls get reliable answers to their many questions. With their agreement, all we needed to do was point them in the direction of the computers. Throughout lunch, teens took turns on the stations getting dependable answers for their tough questions.

Was the day a success? It was such a success that we had to offer it twice to accommodate the waitlist. Actually, it was so successful that when mothers came to pick up the girls and saw the excitement, they asked why there wasn't a similar programme for mothers so "Mothers' Day Out" was offered the following month.

What did this experience teach us? Mix popular and hard-to-sell items together, include value-added experiences to programmes and respond to what your customers want. These are marketing strategies that we recognize from retail, but often fail to implement in the non-commercial library environment.

When asked to plan a 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary party for the public library, a brainstorming session led us to 40 hours of continuous programming. This media spectacle included an adult sleepover party, a liquor license, quiz night, a poetry workshop, yoga sessions, BBQ, 40-hour novel writing contest, a trustee tea, live music, and a family sleepover. This is not your typical library fair but the idea was to create a community stir and to use the stir to celebrate the library while generating a fresh image. Throughout the 40 hours, we invited the mayor and city councillors to the library to work as guest librarians (what a great way for funders to see the vibrant library).

### Maximize Your Advertising

If you are going to do formal advertising, think about your goals and audience in order to maximize your efforts. During the quiz night for the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary party, we looked at the event, who would be interested in attending, and who we were interested in attracting to the library. For this event, we quickly saw that teachers met all of our criteria and we began an aggressive marketing campaign in the schools. We capitalized on the natural tendency toward friendly competition that we had seen between schools in our district and gave the teachers a venue to outdo each other. Our instincts were correct and 80% of the sold-out quiz night participants turned out to be teachers.

### Use What You Already Have, But In A New Way

Libraries are set up to perform certain functions. Brainstorm to see what other services the library could perform using the current venue and resources.

Northwest Community College did this when we began using the ILS to sign out convocation caps and gowns, when we started producing not just library cards, but student ID cards (compelling every student come through the library), and by using the space, long hours and connection to the college computer system to operate the student food bank.

These unusual uses for the library space bring in potential customers with very little cost by using the existing infrastructure. They serve as advertising for your library and help to broaden the image of the library as a centre in the community with more than books to offer.

### Be a Part of Your Community

If libraries are hoping to fill a need for their communities, they must know what it is that their community needs. Develop relationships with other community organizations, use outreach with your library's goals in mind. Be creative in looking for partnerships with others who could benefit by the success of your library's program. Be passionate about your library and your enthusiasm will resonate with powerful results.

### Don't Give It Away

Wanting to give every participant of a sleepover party in the library a reminder of the event, we wondered what we could offer that would not only be appealing, but would also allow us to continue spreading the word that the library offered fun activities like sleepovers. Answer: T-shirts with "I slept over at the Terrace Public Library" printed on them. There are now over 150 of these walking billboards in our town.

When offering any sort of prize always get something in return. If it is a community event, do the draw back at the library – and make the winner come to you. Remember that each time someone walks through the door of the library you have a potential customer.

Budget cuts and changes in information seeking behaviour are forcing libraries to rethink the importance of self-promotion. Libraries have the tools, services and products to move forward, they just need to let the public know that they have exactly what the customer needs.

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