

Change and transformation: New competition for traditional library services

By Alicia Copp Mökkönen.

Daphne Wood, Director, Planning and Organizational Development at Vancouver Public Library and Scott Hargrove, Director of Information Technology and Support Services at Fraser Valley Regional Library presented at the 2014 BC Library Conference.

Scott Hargrove started the session off on a light note, noting that things have changed since 1989 when users were very pleased to access content on a CD-ROM — accessing information no more than a year old! These days, services offered by libraries are readily available elsewhere. Rather than information, *time*, has become a precious commodity. Libraries are competing for the limited leisure time of patrons and this competition may come from unlikely sources. Competitors we are most familiar with include downloadable streaming video (pay per view or subscription services such as Netflix and Vimeo), downloadable eBook providers (monthly subscriptions such as Oyster and Scribd), and downloadable music (Spotify, iTunes, SoundCloud).

However, we must also consider competition in other areas of traditional library service. For example in terms of free programs and activities companies such as Home Depot have started to offer free building classes for children. In the area of supporting lifelong learning, one competitor is Lynda.com where for 25\$ a month you can access a wide range of online courses. In regards to information services, sources such as About.com or Help.com have gained in popularity. Another powerful example is YouTube because online video presents an increasingly popular way to learn anything from laying floor to trying a new hairstyle.

Case Studies

Hargrove and Wood presented two case studies. First, they discussed Google Helpouts, live streaming fee-based video appointments with a wide range of vetted experts. Google Helpouts is available to those with a Google Plus account, currently reaching a market of 540 million people. When discussing why Google has taken this on, Wood stated, "They want

to be much more than a search engine, they want to be integrated into your life, and they recognize that not all questions can be answered on the Internet." They are in the market to influence the way people learn.

The second case study discussed was "The Goat Who Ate Everything," a book published by McDonalds and co-branded with a very reputable partner, Reading is Fundamental, the largest non-profit dedicated to child literacy in the United States. When discussing why a reputable literacy organization would partner with a fast food chain, Wood explained that this represented an opportunity to get books into the hands of 20 million children. However, Wood questioned the long-term benefits of these kinds of endeavours, asking, "Did children show a renewed, sustained, or new interest in reading?" Regardless, rather than partnering with a library, this organization selected another kind of opportunity.

Limitations & Strategies

Hargrove and Wood went on to discuss how libraries are limited in the ways that they can respond to these kinds of competitive pressures. For example, library costs may be a lot higher for comparable services available in the community. What is the cost of running a book exchange birdhouse in a neighbourhood or a book exchange in a coffee shop or providing programming space or free wifi? When services are looked at in isolation, the library costs can be much higher. Wood and Hargrove recommended considering scope creep and asked us to consider what we do best and then deliver that service, partnering where appropriate. Further, we must measure and evaluate library services in ways that highlight their social value, moving away from a per transaction cost analysis.

In terms of strategies for contending with competitive pressures Wood and Hargrove emphasized the need to communicate value in new ways, for instance, shaping public demand by marketing library services as exclusive and yet accessible. Most subscription

based services for digital content cost at least \$96/year. Hargrove argued that library services don't cost close to that per capita and yet users get much more than one single format of material. Wood stated that libraries need to be vocal about their impact, reaching not just users but considering media and potential supporters. Wood noted that the strongest financial supporters of libraries are often not the ones we see. Even those who don't use the library themselves can understand that it benefits society as a whole.

Gartner Magic Quadrant: A model for discussion

Near the end of the session Hargrove and Wood introduced the 'Gartner Magic Quadrant' which can be found on the Gartner webpage, a leading edge IT research and advisory company. (http://www.gartner.com/technology/research/methodologies/research_mq.jsp)

Each quadrant describes a possible position a competitor may hold in the market. The four quadrants are: Challengers (have a good ability to execute but are unable to envision market) niche players (serve a specific group well but lack vision and expertise in execution) visionaries (have a vision but not the ability to execute), leaders (skills to

execute new ideas paired with innovation and vision).

When asked where we might situate our libraries, some members of the audience thought we would be challengers, others suggested niche players. The question Hargrove posed is "How can we get to the Leaders quadrant?" He noted that strategic plans often fail, perhaps due to operational problems or a lack of inspiration or vision. We may have a compelling vision but lack the nuts and bolts framework for modifying existing infrastructure. In closing Wood asked the audience to consider how we "can serve those whose needs are very sophisticated" further explaining that we serve all patrons but we need to also try to meet the diverse needs of individuals.

The overall message: libraries face diverse competition as other players compete for the leisure time of our patrons. We also face certain limitations in managing these threats, but by combining a vision for where the market is going with expertise in executing certain services, we can reposition ourselves, hopefully, as leaders.

Alicia Copp Mökkönen is a librarian at Vancouver Community College.