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Marketing Library Services:
Strategy for Survival

Marketing is an activity that has relevance not only for organizations within the profit sector of the economy but also for libraries and other nonprofit organizations. The author discusses the conditions necessary for the success of marketing programs within libraries and methods of implementing a formal marketing program. The four factors of the marketing mix are discussed, and administrative decisions are considered within the framework of these four factors. It is concluded that each library must determine the specific marketing mix that will be of optimal value to its patrons.

MARKETING IS AN ACTIVITY that for years has been used successfully within the profit sector of the economy to promote demand for products and services. Recently, however, nonprofit organizations—including libraries—have come to realize that marketing activities are relevant to the management of their operations also.

The term *marketing* refers to the effective management by an organization of its exchange relations with its various publics.[1] The obvious reason for librarians to become involved in a formalized effort of this nature is to improve the satisfaction of the potential library patron.

There exists a very real tendency for people *not* to ask for assistance from someone else, even when it is readily obvious that service is available and that the person who *can* help is *willing* to help. Anyone who has assisted patrons at the reference desk has encountered this attitude with patrons who preface their questions with statements such

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as, "I'm sorry to *bother* you," or with patrons who spend an hour looking through current issues of periodicals before they ask at the reference desk how they can locate articles on a specific subject.

In general, this type of problem is difficult to deal with; however, librarians who are engaged in a serious marketing effort to counter such attitudes can make significant advances in reaching potential patrons who need the information that librarians can provide but who aren't willing to ask for help and therefore aren't being satisfied.

A second reason for librarians to become actively involved in marketing their library's services relates to the emphasis on accountability in today's nonprofit organizations. A number of authors have emphasized the relationship between the actual contribution of a library and the amount of funding received for the library's programs and services. Dougherty and Blomquist, for example, suggest that a library's best defense against budget cutbacks is to become an indispensable source of information and services.[2]

If the library is seen by its clientele and onlookers as vital to the university or to the community, it will be less in the position of having to justify the existence of its programs and policies. If the library does *not* have this kind of support, it will continually

have to fight to obtain the funding needed to support its programs, and, in the long run, its ability to provide service to the patron will be impaired.

By actively marketing the library's services, the library can reach more potential users, encourage use of the library's resources, and work toward becoming an indispensable source of information for the community.

These aren't the only reasons for engaging in the marketing of library services but are among the most important and should be sufficient reason for librarians to consider the possibilities offered by the marketing of library services.

The remainder of this paper will outline the means by which librarians can become actively involved in an effort to market their services. The intent, however, is not to offer specific answers that will be effective in every library, but rather to suggest an approach by which librarians can begin asking the right questions and determine the appropriate course of action in their own library situation.

THE MARKETING CONCEPT

Probably the main prerequisite to the success of any marketing program within an organization is that every member of the organization become committed to what has been termed the "marketing concept." The marketing concept is defined as "a *consumers' needs orientation* backed by *integrated marketing* aimed at generating *consumer satisfaction* as the key to satisfying *organizational goals,*" and calls for a basic reorientation of the organization from looking inward toward its products and services to looking outward toward the consumer's needs.[3]

In terms of libraries, this concept means a change of attitude from that in which librarians acquire the types of materials that they feel are appropriate for the collection, catalog them, put them on the shelves, and assume patrons can find them if they want them. Instead, it must be acknowledged that if patrons need particular items in their scholarly pursuits and they are in the library's collection, the patrons ought to be able to locate them. If an item is *not* in the collection, the library should be able to provide access to it with minimal delay through interlibrary loan or a cooperative agreement with other libraries.

Under the marketing concept, then, the patron is the focus instead of the librarian, and the patron is the librarian's reason for being.

The marketing concept requires integrated marketing; the various departments in the organization must realize that the actions they take have a significant effect on the organization's ability to create, retain, and satisfy consumers.[4]

While in libraries the public services staff generally has the bulk of patron contact and probably does the most to influence the patron's attitude toward the library, staff in other areas do have an impact. Technical services staff, for instance, can promote a patron service orientation by rush processing a book for a patron or by adding *see* references to the subject catalog for instances in which the LC subject headings are obscure. The main focus in promoting integrated marketing within the organization, then, is to encourage *all* departments to center their efforts on maximizing the patron's satisfaction.

IMPLEMENTING THE MARKETING PROGRAM

Once the marketing concept has been established among the staff of the organization—and that is not an easy task to accomplish—the next step is to analyze the current situation, assess the strengths and shortcomings in the library's current programs and policies, determine the goals that a program of marketing library services should accomplish, and determine the specific methods by which those goals can be achieved. These activities will involve a significant amount of staff time and resources.

The factor of importance is to make certain that all relevant aspects are included in the analysis; Kotler recommends the use of a "systematic marketing audit" to make certain that no relevant aspects are omitted.[5]

Briefly, the first task in such an audit is to look at the environmental factors affecting the organization. It involves questions such as: "Who comprises the organization's clientele?" and "What are the present and expected future size, characteristics, and demands of the clientele?" In a university

setting, for instance, the library might do well to ask what degree programs are being planned for the next five- or ten-year period in order that it may anticipate demands that will be placed on it in the future.

The factor to be kept in mind at this stage is the importance of acquiring *factual* information rather than falling victim to erroneous assumptions.

The second stage of a marketing audit involves an assessment of the organization's current marketing system and centers on the general requirements of a marketing program for the organization, the organization's long-term and short-term objectives as determined by the earlier analysis of the organization's environment, and the optimal allocation of resources—to patron service aspects versus acquisitions, for instance.

The objectives identified in this phase of the marketing audit might focus on increasing the community's awareness of library services, facilitating patron access to the collection, increasing library instruction, or any of a number of other areas. Each library's goals and plans for action will differ because of situational needs and financial constraints.

The final phase of the marketing audit involves a continual reassessment of all factors involved in the general marketing program chosen by the organization, including the continual monitoring of the effectiveness of each aspect of the program and revision of the organization's goals as required.

THE MARKETING MIX

The idea of a systematic marketing audit provides a theoretically sound basis for organizing a marketing program in the organization. From an examination of the activities involved in such an exercise it becomes apparent that the marketing of library services requires a total organizational effort that must originate with top management and spread throughout the organizational hierarchy. It also becomes obvious that a marketing effort involves more than just the advertising or promotion of existing services.

In fact, with the general information derived from an exercise such as the marketing audit, a specific strategy—or what is termed an appropriate "marketing mix" of

product, place of distribution, price, and promotion factors—can be formulated in order to achieve the goals that have been identified. Although on the surface the promotion factor has the greatest application to libraries, product, place of distribution, and price are also relevant.

Product

While libraries are not generally conceptualized as dealing in a product, decisions concerning which books to acquire and which items to purchase in book form versus microform are examples of product decisions made by libraries. An aspect of increasing importance in this area is the determination of those items the library *must* have in its collection and those materials the library can rely on other libraries within the system, network, or area to provide it with on an interlibrary loan basis. Determining what book materials to buy and what subject areas to stress, then, are very basic marketing decisions, and will affect the library's future ability to satisfy its clientele.

Place

A second factor in the marketing mix is the place decision—the decision on the channels of distribution that will be used. In libraries, one aspect of this factor that immediately comes to mind is the decision to build branch libraries as opposed to additions to the main library, requiring consideration of costs, duplication of resources, and convenience for the patron. Again, the decisions that are made will have an impact on the library's future capability to service its clientele and should not be made without full consideration of the effect on the library patron as well as the effect on the library's internal operations.

Price

Price is the third factor in the marketing mix. This factor is possibly the least applicable of the marketing factors, since generally library services are offered at no direct cost to the public; however, more and more, librarians are being called upon to make decisions about whether to charge for services beyond those which are designated as "base level."

Data base services are a prime example—the question of whether a portion or all of the costs involved in an on-line data base search should be passed on to the patron. The decision that is made should be based on a well-thought-out identification of the organization's overall goals and marketing goals. If the library's objective is to provide free services above all and data base service is viewed as another reference tool, then no further consideration is necessary. However, if the library's objective is to make services available in any way possible, charging for the service may be considered as a viable option.

Promotion

The final factor in the marketing mix is promotion: communicating with current and potential clientele to make them aware of services that are available. Three major means of communication libraries can use to promote their services are advertising, personal contact, and what has been termed "atmospherics."[6]

Advertising refers to the effort to stimulate demand for a product or service by conveying significant information to the community through various means such as mailings, use of the media, etc. Libraries are already involved in this activity: having the campus newspaper run articles on upcoming student orientation tours, posting signs to make patrons aware of policies and services, and sending out newsletters to patrons. These are effective means by which a library can say, "Here's what we can do for you." If there is a problem in promoting library services, it is that this aspect of promotion is relied upon too heavily, while the importance of personal contact and atmospherics is slighted.

Personal contact can be an effective method of marketing the library's services, particularly in the case of college and university libraries. This effort could involve staff members getting out of the library and talking to faculty and administrators about services that are available. It might also involve the assignment of librarians as liaisons with departments on campus to assist faculty members in information-gathering or problem-solving.

Not only does this type of personal contact allow librarians to provide better service to faculty members or administrators, but it also provides an opportunity for librarians to be aware of developments in campus academic departments, such as new subject areas of concentration being developed. Communication through personal contact is also an excellent means for technical services librarians to acquire an understanding of the kinds of problems that patrons are having.

The rewards can be great, and the amount of favorable public relations on campus that can be derived as a result of faculty members making their own personal contacts once they have begun to use the library's services can also be great.

Atmospherics is the final area of promotion to be considered. The term "atmospherics" refers to the attempt to design the library building with consideration for the people who will use it. The goal is to make the library a pleasant place where patrons will want to spend time (or, at least, where they won't *mind* spending time). The factor of importance is that if the library isn't a comfortable place to be, if it is not conducive to study, if it doesn't "feel" right to the patron, or if the layout is such that users have to run all over the building to locate needed materials, they are *not* going to spend any more time there than they absolutely *have* to.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

The discussion above has considered acceptance of the marketing concept by library staff members as a prerequisite to the success of a marketing program and has emphasized the importance of identifying the library's current situation, the goals that its marketing program should achieve, and the optimal strategy for realization of those goals.

The broad range of activities involved in a marketing program was described, and it was indicated that each library must determine in its own situation the mix of product, price, place, and promotion variables that can best lead to the achievement of its objectives, within existing constraints.

An important factor to be kept in mind is that the current policies and practices of a library weren't necessarily formulated with

the patron in mind and that they are not unalterable. Simply because things have always been done in a certain way is no reason why they have to be done that way in the future. An endless range of possibilities exists in library operations, and each library must determine the product and service mix that will be of optimal value to its patrons.

In closing, there is one caution to emphasize. The services provided by the library *must* be everything that they have been claimed to be in the marketing program. If the library has publicized that items will be received through interlibrary loan within three days but it consistently takes at least a week to receive them, or if the signs say "We're Here to Help You" but the public services staff through its attitude says something else, then, although people may have come through the door once to try the library's services, the odds are that they will not return. The moral is, above all, "Don't promise what you can't produce."

Libraries today are in the same position as many other nonprofit institutions when facing the question of whether to use resources in marketing their services. Daniel Fink recently discussed the marketing of hospital services and concluded with a statement that expresses the spirit of the preceding discussion:

When physicians and administrators learn about health-care marketing, they frequently comment that they were already doing marketing—they just didn't know it. But effective health-care marketing requires a coordinated effort, at all levels, to understand and meet both community and individual patient needs. This effort is not easy, and, as in the consumer products field, will often be unsuccessful. But the goal to truly serving the patient is of such importance—especially in these times of increasing competition and rising consumerism—that the question is not 'Can hospitals afford to market?' Instead, we must ask, 'How can they afford *not* to?'[7]

An assessment of the position of libraries today leads inescapably to the same conclusion: How can libraries afford *not* to market their services?

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