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COMO WHITE PAPER

Reinventing libraries for the next generation of library users

by La Loria Konata

During the early 1990s voters pushed towards "reinventing government." That is, run government like you would run a business. This entrepreneurial approach to management shifts resources from one source to a more productive and effective source resulting in greater profit (Osborne and Gaebler 1992, xix). Like governments in the 1990s, libraries are operating in a new environment and community that forces them to advocate their own relevancy with competitors such as Google. This paper examines how libraries are "reinventing" themselves and discusses key business management principles libraries must adopt to compete in a more diverse and abundant information environment.

The Need for Reinvention

Developing relationships with users is imperative if libraries are to meet the needs of the next generation of users, namely the millennial generation. Millennials are those born between 1977 and 1994 and are the second largest population group after the Baby Boomers (Zou 2008). This group will be the primary group of library users in the near future and our services will have to meet their expectations, as they are accustomed to being courted. According to Walker (2006), there are seven key traits that characterize this generation: "special, sheltered, confident, team-oriented, conventional, pressured, and achieving." Walker further states that "special, pressured, achieving, and team-oriented" are traits that have implications for academic libraries. Since this group is more team-oriented, focusing on collaborative learning, libraries will need more group study space to accommodate this need and more tolerance for a slightly higher noise level.

The Library's Response to Customer Demands

Library users have demanded extended services to fit their busy non-traditional schedules and libraries have responded, albeit slowly, to these demands by expanding services with technology. Chat reference and instant messaging, blogs, federated searching, and Google Scholar are examples of this.

Librarians are also engaged in other "social software" such as wikis that allow users to add and delete information as desired, and MySpace.com (for example, see < http://www.myspace.com/undergradlibrary>) and Facebook which allows users to add or "make friends" with the library by adding the library to their circle of friends. All of these efforts are a result of libraries applying the business/economic principle of "supply and demand." Libraries are reinventing themselves by going where the users are.

This is also evidenced with federated searching, Google Scholar, and digitization projects such as repositories. *When in Rome, do as the Romans*. Libraries have taken this adage to heart and are taking a page out of Google's online book to provide similar services. Google is used 30% of the time to search the internet (Luther 2003). Users like the ease of use and how quickly the results are displayed. Metasearch technology/ federated searching provides this same ease of use, allowing users to conduct one search and receive results from several databases. Google Scholar is also libraries' way of saying, *if you can't beat 'em, join 'em*. Libraries have joined forces with Google to provide higher quality content and in some cases link to their subscription databases.

"*Reinventing*" Customer Service and Reference

"The customer is always right" has long been a mantra and philosophy in the business world for the obvious

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reason of needing customer loyalty to survive. Libraries have not always followed this principle to the same degree because it was not necessary to do so. Resources found in libraries were so unique that there was no other place to find them. The age of the internet changed that and libraries must now compete against other online sources available on the internet. One way to compete is with customer satisfaction and loyalty, and how we resolve customer complaints.

In business, customer complaints are more valued and welcomed than they are in libraries. Businesses use these complaints to improve their services and customer relations. They are probably more valued in business because the bottom line is at stake. Businesses recognize that it is easier to retain a customer than it is to establish a new one. Libraries have to constantly prove their worth to, at the very minimum, keep current library users and retain current budget levels or even increase them.

Handling customer complaints is critical when you consider those who do not complain. According to one author (Jackson 2002), "96% of the customers who do have problems with a business do not complain. 'This means that for every complaint the average business receives, there are 24 silent unhappy customers (206).'" While these 24 silent unhappy customers may not complain to us, they are complaining to everyone they know. Unhappy customers share their experiences with others far more than do happy customers. What this could mean for libraries is disastrous.

What libraries can do and what many have done is to become more open to receiving complaints. Library users want to know that they have been heard and that the problem is being addressed. If several are having the same complaint, then maybe a policy change is the answer. This is why it is important to encourage complaints instead of avoiding them, especially if these complaints may help change or create policy. Make sure the issue has been resolved to the user's satisfaction. Establishing firm policies will ensure that issues are handled in a non-discriminatory fashion, giving personnel justification for their decision-making.

Using the adage "the customer is always right" may make one think of reference in a retail sense. The author is not referring to "retail reference transactions" as defined by Davis as "superficial answers to complex questions (Davis 2006)." Nor, the "face value rule" where you assume the user knows what they want (Ross 2003). But, in the sense that we can use those same business practices, such as having a "mystery shopper," to improve reference service and customer satisfaction by reinforcing RUSA's *Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers*.

The idea of a "mystery shopper" or a "spy" is not a new concept, but what if that concept was frequently applied to libraries. Many retail businesses pay for customer feedback by using mystery shoppers. These "professional shoppers" appear in stores as any other shopper would but with a checklist of things the employee should do and say. It is estimated that there are as many as 50,000 to one million of these shoppers (Heimer 2005). They provide feedback on things such as how they were greeted, whether the employee recommend add-ons (this would be referral of other resources/ databases in the library world), and whether or not there was follow-up.

The main goal in using "mystery shoppers" or "mystery information seekers" is to make sure RUSA's guidelines are being performed in a reference transaction, in person and/ or remotely, in the areas of approachability, interest, listening/ inquiring, searching, and follow up (*Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers* 2006). Other goals of using "mystery information seekers" are to standardize service by measuring the "effectiveness of training" and "testing if customers are treated equally(van der Wiele, Hesselink, and van Iwaarden 2005)." Graduate students can be trained to be the "mystery information seeker" with libraries providing an incentive such as a free lunch. Taking care of our relationship with library users by proper handling of complaints and conducting excellent reference interviews should provide loyal library users who can then be our advocates.

Marketing Success in Libraries

The importance of branding is hitting home in many organizations outside traditional business. The city of Atlanta recently launched a branding campaign that resulted in the tagline, "Everyday is an opening day (*Brand Atlanta Launches Regional Marketing Campaign* 2006)." Libraries have paid some attention to marketing in order to compete. Borders bookstore wants to be the "third place" after home and office for consumers where they can comfortably read and explore while enjoying a latte without any pressure to buy (Dempsey 2004,32). Libraries have responded with major renovation projects that transform the library building into a more inviting place complete with a coffee bar and browsing area of popular books with new age furniture. According to Fox (2004), in 2004 there were 36 such projects in academic libraries.

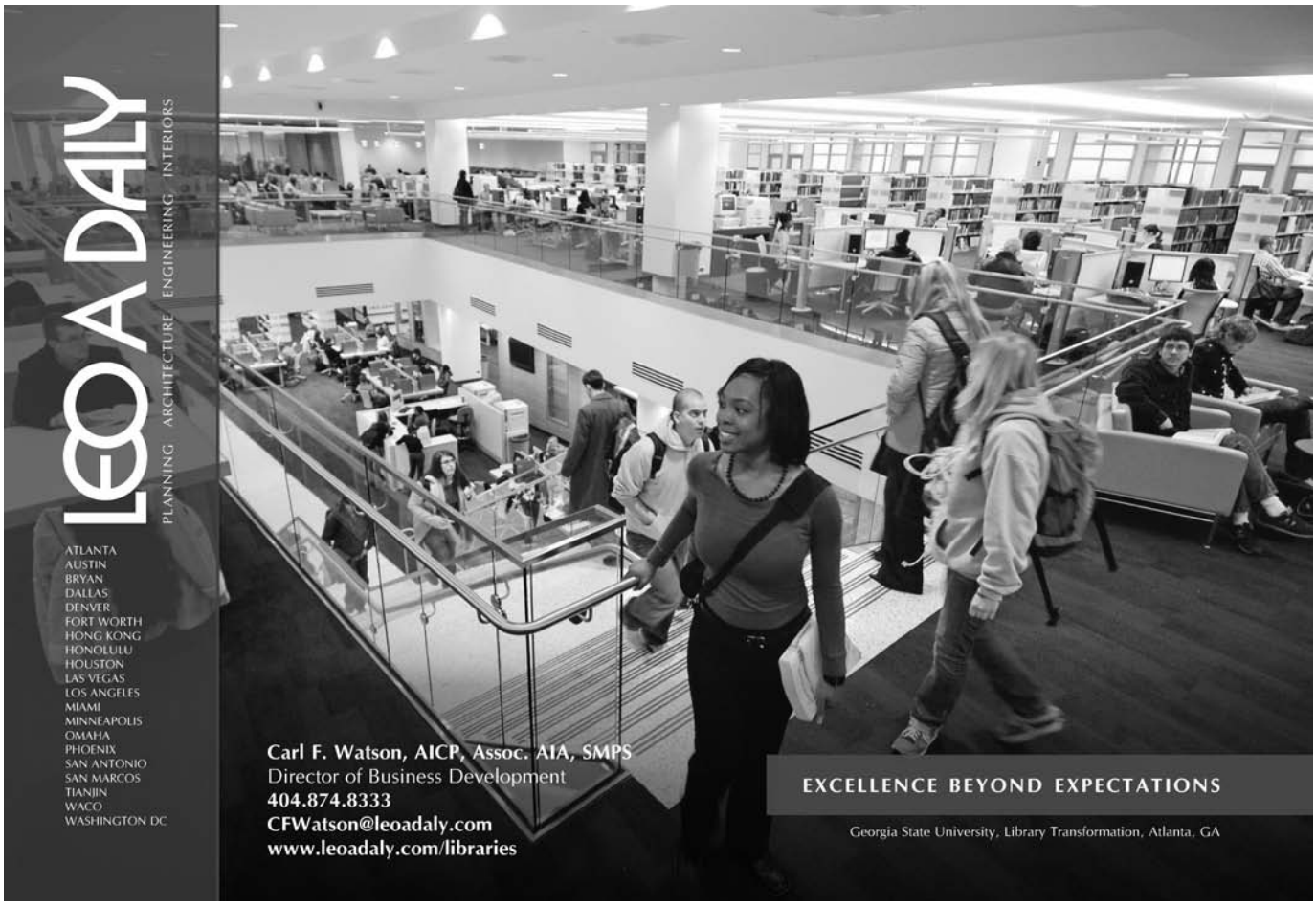
For a sort of hands-on marketing touch, libraries adhere to the liaison model or subject specialist model

with librarians who are "experts" in a field of study and provide specialized service for those in that subject area(s). "The liaison model is not a new concept but what the model provides is a personal contact for students, staff, and faculty and gives them the idea of having someone working for them or their very own advocate/partner. It gives librarians an opportunity to outreach to a small segment of the population and establish a relationship with them. The liaison should have the flexibility to develop an outreach plan that accounts for the personality of the department as well as the liaison.

New Strategies for Marketing Services

Someone had on a shirt with the slogan, "I Google." How do we in libraries match that type of branding/ advertising? ALA still has posters with the slogan "READ." This branding and imaging binds us to the book without allowing for the new dimension of technology that libraries provide. If libraries plan to compete with Google, Yahoo!, Borders, etc. for a sizeable market share in information services, changing the culture in libraries to a marketing culture must be a top priority. Marketing is a concept that usually involves the marketer selling a product to a customer. The library is the "retailer" of information services. "Relationship marketing, recognises that the core of marketing is the relationship between the organisation and the customer, which may extend over many transactions, and several years (Rowley 2003)." Branding is a concept within marketing that can be used to build this relationship.

Singh (2004) defines branding as "a name, term, sign, symbol, design or a combination of these, which is used to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors (Singh 2004)." The "library" is a recognizable brand that conjures up feelings for better or worse of shelves of books and possibly of a little old white lady with glasses and hair bun. The library brand is one that needs better brand management to improve the image and perceptions in a library user's mind. For this to be done, we must first ask the question, "What business are we in?" Many would say that we are in the business of providing information services. This is erroneous and does not help us to compete. Libraries are in the business of "finding solutions" by making relevant information easily and readily available. This shift in thinking is necessary to relate to the library user and to provide what they need,



i.e., answers to questions. Helping users find solutions and answers to problems means they actually have to use the information product. So, it is not enough for us to just subscribe to databases and have them available. Kapoor states that the marketing cycle is complete only when consumption takes place. "Without consumption, your sale is only a transfer of goods. No matter how hard you push the supply chain, unless the customer consumes your product, there will come a time when the supply conduit will get clogged and your product will not move anymore (Kapoor 2001)." For an example of a marketing plan (template), see: http://www.library.gsu.edu/files/research/108L&RS%20Marketing%20Template.docx .

Branding information services is more difficult and complex than branding a product such as a computer or soft drink, but it can be done with proper care and attention. The first step in transforming the image and perception in a consumer's head is to find out what's the current perception held by the user and attributes they think the library has. Next, learn of your own perception and attributes of the library and what attributes are needed by the user (Singh 2004). This step should influence all other activities and goes beyond a catchy slogan and nice graphic logo. This step also assumes that you know who your users are, so if that has not been clearly defined, it will need to be done to gather initial data. Part of the difficulty for libraries to establish a brand, is that users of libraries are bombarded with so many brands and logos such as institutional logo, database brands such as EBSCO, Proquest, etc. So, the library brand has to be a service umbrella that embeds all of the other brands and yet remains distinctive.

Branding does have an impact, but it may be difficult to measure. One way to measure the effectiveness of branding is to internally measure the change in behavior by those providing the service in libraries. The success of branding requires that all employees — staff, faculty, leadership — buy into the same marketing culture and philosophy.

To develop a marketing plan for library services, libraries should hire marketing professionals with an MBA or a consultant firm. Alternatively, libraries can work with graduate MBA students to assist with a marketing strategy as part of a class project if funds do not allow for a professional firm to be hired. ⏭

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