BOBCATSSS 2010 @ Parma, Italy

Dates: *Monday 25th, Tuesday 26th, Wednesday 27th January, 2010*

Bridging the digital divide:
libraries providing access for all?

Public library promotion in a changing society

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Abstract

The UK Government's ten year strategic vision for public libraries in England notes the investment in the People's Network in 2002 as a significant step in allowing libraries to fulfil their potential in the digital age. The People's Network marked a change in services offered by public libraries with the installation of networked computers in almost all public libraries. This change in provision brought an opportunity to attract new patrons into the library. Since then the electronic environment in public libraries has developed, extending access to electronic resources which was initially more prevalent in academic libraries. Yet a recent report shows that public libraries need better marketing and advocacy. This applies at both strategic and patron levels. Recently, a digital paradox noted by British Library Chief Executive, Lynne Brindley was that we are all web residents but there is nothing like face to face. Thus there has to be online promotion, but there also has to be promotion to encourage patrons to visit online. There are examples of successful library initiatives, but libraries can also draw on the techniques used by commercial organizations. This paper considers the promotion of the value of the changing face of public library services and the need for results of promotion to be evaluated so as to inform future development.

Keywords
Public libraries; promotion; People's Network; digital age

Introduction
The following extract from the *Introduction to New Library: The People's Network* suggests a wonderful opportunity for public libraries to expand not only their services but also their user base.

> "Renewed and reinvigorated by technology investment, libraries will become very different places. They will retain their spaces for books, study, exhibitions and events, but they will gain new learning spaces – interactive spaces – new uses and

new users. The rapid spread of high performance communications will mean that even the most remote rural library will offer access to the same facilities as a large urban library, providing a means to draw in those people who, through geography, are furthest removed from the opportunities offered by the Information Age." (http://www.ukoln.ac.uk/services/lic/new_library/introduction.html)

"Public libraries were created before the internet became a popular activity. Yet in a sign of their ability to adapt, public libraries are at the forefront of devising ways to use digital technologies to promote community and learning." *Framework for the Future* (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2003) defines the UK government's ten year strategic vision for public libraries in England. It notes the investment in the People's Network in 2002 as a significant step in allowing libraries to fulfil their potential in the digital age. The People's Network marked a change in services offered by public libraries with the installation of networked computers in almost all public libraries. This change in provision brought an opportunity to attract new patrons into the library.

Issues regarding the People's Network
OCLC (2005) reported the changes occurring in libraries
> "The findings indicate that information consumers view libraries as places to borrow print books, but they are unaware of the rich electronic content they can access through libraries. Even though information consumers make limited use of these resources, they continue to trust libraries as reliable sources of information."

This indicates that more effective promotion is required to exploit this trust in libraries and to raise awareness of what is on offer.

At the Library & Information Show in June 2009, the keynote speeches focused on digital challenges and the need for fresh thinking in the profession. British Library Chief Executive, Dame Lynne Brindley, provided 6 digital paradoxes. These included
- "There are obvious advantages of large scale national and even global services yet innovation at local and individual level is critical."
- "Google Generation students are technologically savvy but not digitally literate."
And importantly
- "We are all web residents but there's nothing like face to face".
In the question and answer session that followed, there were queries about the People's Network's 24 hour online Enquire service and the lack of promotion of the service.
(The digital paradoxes we face, 2009)

This raises a number of issues.
- First is this a service that people want? - What market research was undertaken before it was supplied?
- What qualitative evaluation of the service has taken place?
- What methods of promotion have been applied?
- How can the trust in libraries be exploited to raise awareness and increase use?

- How have the methods of promotion been evaluated for effectiveness? What was the outcome?

Awareness and relevance of services
The current generation of library users want information to be available in one place at the same time. Some libraries are using iPods for making their electronic resources available. Some libraries are lending iPods, and others are delivering services via mobile phones or PDAs (Stephens, 2005). However, while new products and new methods of delivery are being developed, users and potential users are not always aware of their existence or availability. This is evident from comments by some Shropshire libraries regarding the amount of people who came to enquire whether there was internet access despite the People's Network having been running for a few years. (Barlow, 2009)

A report commissioned by MLA evaluated how well the sector was performing in the era of Local Area Agreement (LAA). Here libraries can demonstrate how they contribute to local priorities.   The report found that the sector showed best in priorities for 'stronger/safer communities' or 'children/young people'. One surprising finding was that the sector frequently failed to prove its relevance to health/wellbeing and to tackling social exclusion. Importantly, many respondents feared that local people use services (virtually) without even knowing that their library is the provider. This report shows that libraries need better marketing, advocacy and promotion. (http://tinyurl.com/knr68f)

Schmidt (2007, p.340) comments that "There is frequently a significant gap between what library staff think users want and what they really want.". Hence market research should be undertaken both to provide the services desired and to ascertain how to promote those services effectively.

Brand
The old library brand involved keeping books, storing materials, seating readers and servicing people from desks.   "The library constituted a knowledge store and the librarian's adage was "come and get it". (Schmidt, 2007, p.341) Today the library brand is a gateway to real and virtual resources, both physical space and cyberspace, storing materials and computers and providing in-person and online help. This is reflected, for example, by OCLC describing itself as "Window to the world's libraries" (www.oclc.org/worldcat/) and by the British Library slogan "The world's knowledge" (www.bl.uk).

There is a major question about how to promote a service that offers to do so many things for so many different groups of people. The approach taken by the sports lobby got it right with the simple message of 'sport = health' which they focused on embedding across all partners. Public libraries, despite the People's Network, have failed to establish a cohesive message.

Websites
While many commercial businesses have used their websites as significant promotional tools, this usage is not that evident in the websites of public libraries. There are various

approached to public library website design, with no overall design principle apparent. Some are designed around different types of users, some around their collections or services. "Some web sites appear to have no clear focus for their design and presentation of either information or access to information." (Schmidt, 2007, p.343)

On the theme of 'Invisible libraries' during Internet Librarian International 2009, Tony Hirst spoke about search engine optimisation and web analytics. He raised questions about how many web pages your library has, and how are they used. He pointed out that you pay for each web page you publish and need to know its return on investment. If all users only ever click on the same single link on a web page and never dwell, perhaps they are just using that page as a stepping stone. If most users are searching for the same item from the library homepage, perhaps there should be a link to the resource they are searching for. For most people Google is the starting point for a search. (Internet Librarian International 09, 2009)

Are public library websites dull? They should be easy to navigate and attractive. Many online retailers have well designed, attractive websites. They want their customers to find what they want and to order with ease. Current promotions are displayed prominently to attract customers' attention. Visits to websites are frequently followed up by emails to customers to confirm purchases or to respond to questions. These websites are designed so that the visit is a good experience, and one that customers will want to repeat. Some public library websites would benefit from adopting some of the design techniques of good commercial websites.

Promotion
MLA Chief Executive, Roy Clare pointed out that it was important to inform the public about how they could navigate to the library information they need by just 'googling' the name of their library. He pressed the need for innovation and urged library professionals to 'get out of a rut' in their thinking. (The digital paradoxes we face, 2009)

The American Library Association developed a different approach with its '@your library' programme, which was designed to increase awareness of and support for libraries and to update the image of libraries and librarians for the 21st century. This provided a range of practical ideas and tools, such as slogans, powerpoint presentations and ideas about internet use. (www.ala.org/ala/pio/campaign/campaignamericas.htm)

However, when using the internet to deliver services care is needed regarding use the right terminology. As Henderson (2005, p.342) points out

> "Virtual library,", "digital library", "electronic library" are all terms used to describe library and information services delivered via the Internet, but these can mean different things to different users. Therefore the issue of marketing these services is problematic since, as LIS professionals we must ask exactly what we are trying to market and to whom. ... And this is not to mention the different user groups which may require different marketing techniques."

Market segmentation remains important. It is "the process of breaking down the community into more manageable groupings, which in turn enables communication to be tailored to the different needs of each group via the means most likely to reach them"

(Ashcroft, 2003, p.240). Furthermore, the most appropriate means of communication needs careful consideration not purely to reach each group, but also to attract them to what is on offer and the environment involved.

Academic libraries

The University of Huddersfield demonstrates an example of use of promotional techniques in the online environment. People can contact the library at in many ways, including face to face, by telephone, email, web and virtual enquiry service via QuestionPoint. A recent development was to exploit mobile technology as inhouse research indicated that students are more likely to respond to phone messages than to email. They considered that text messaging seemed the ideal way to reach more of their users, including part-time and distance students who may rarely be on campus, and introduced a text service branded 'Text a Librarian'. Expansion of mobile phone service is planned, and feedback is being sought so as to consider future improvements. (Walsh & Barrett, 2009).

Another example comes from Xia (2009), who discusses whether Facebook Groups are helpful for library marketing. He analysed facebook groups at two US universities regarding their effective promotion of library visibility and found that libraries can extend their services to more users by effectively organising Facebook Groups as useful social networking. He also found that Facebook Groups should target faculty and staff as well as students in support of their research and teaching.

Whilst the target audience for university libraries might be more clear-cut, identifiable and more captive, some of the promotional and communication techniques could be applied to some public library market segments.

Public libraries

A study in Shropshire public libraries examined the userbase to determine how far the People's Network is used by the 'socially excluded'. While 46% of the sample investigated had no Internet access elsewhere other than at library premises, the userbase mainly comprised people from reasonably affluent areas, with little evidence of use by people in deprived areas. In order to reach these very different market segments, the libraries put press advertisements in the Shropshire Star, and in smaller villages, librarians put notices in newsletters and circulated leaflets. One library carried out different promotions at different times, for example, producing leaflets and leaving them in doctor's surgeries, sports centres, veterinary surgeries, etc It cannot be assumed that all will want to access to the Internet via the People's Network, and there must be some motivation, for example a belief that it will add something to life (Barlow, 2009).

Thus promotion should not just be of access to the Internet, but of the various benefits that such access can bring.

In the US, an example of promotion to demonstrate benefits, is the use of the Digital Bookmobile, which has travelled 18,000 miles and hosted more than 150 events with library customers. This does more than promote services as this community outreach

vehicle creates an engaging download experience with the host library's website and digital collection of ebooks, audiobooks, etc during which visitors can learn how to download and to test compatible devices (Digital Bookmobile, 2009).

Thus there has to be online promotion, but there also has to be promotion to encourage people to visit online. There are many examples of libraries going out into the community to take information about library services directly to the public. Hampshire libraries as well as producing press notices and advertising on the library website, produced promotional literature in hard copy, including posters, flyers and leaflets. Communication channels that were exploited included public notice boards, community centres, doctor's surgeries, naval establishments and the local ferry. The personal touch was deemed most important. Personal calls were made to businesses neighbouring the Gosport library. They also ran a dedicated stall on market day for direct contact with the public and to encourage them to look afresh at what the library service had to offer. This event had its own promotion, with helium balloons and posters to draw the attention of passers-by. There was also coverage by the local radio station. (Denyer et al, 2003).

Commercial organisations
Libraries could use Customer Relationship Marketing (CRM) to promote digital services to users, by using data from existing management systems to target particular customers and promote specific services. This takes market segmentation further, even to customer level, by using personal data to make predictions about individual needs and offering services or making recommendations about services they already use. Customer loyalty ties in with CRM. Broadly CRM is about developing and maintaining good relationships with existing customers. However, it can move further than existing customers. Satisfied customers will tell others about good service, and so promote the library by word of mouth. This may then reach some potential users.

This technique is employed by some of the budget airlines, who use data to target particular customers and promote specific offers. For example, they can target a customer base who use a particular airport regarding new destinations or special flight offers from that airport.

However, it is important to note that while satisfied customers will tell others about their experiences, so too will dissatisfied customers. One unhappy patron can result in many others avoiding such experience.

Evaluation
The Tavistock Institute's (2004) report into the People's Network found that libraries worked hard at outreach, but found a problem in that most library services were unable to provide data on the profile of their users of open access People's Network services.

Evaluation of the promotional techniques applied is vital in order to formulate effective future means of promotion. The leaflets left in various locations by Shropshire libraries had vouchers, which revealed where users had found the publicity material. These vouchers provided a valuable insight into the effectiveness of the scheme and

demonstrated that all the non-traditional locations had yielded new users to some extent (Barlow, 2009).

Hampshire libraries wanted qualitative information to evaluate their promotion, but wanted to avoid using a questionnaire, which demands time and attention for completion. Instead they asked visitors to put comments in a visitors' book. Entries in the book revealed that the library had reached beyond its regular userbase to a wider cross-section of residents (Denyer et al, 2003).

Conclusions

Brindley (2006) explored the challenges facing libraries in the digital age, considering ways in which they need to reshape and rethink their service in order to remain relevant. She identified seven themes as central to redefining the library in the twenty-first century, which included ' integrate marketing into the organisation' and 'know your users and keep close to them'. Promotion needs to adapt continually in tune with the changes of the digital age, and evaluation of promotional techniques is vital in order to keep close to users.

Libraries need new ways of outreach. Online services must reflect user needs, and good website design is important for both promotion and service provision. However, librarians need to be out among their communities, creating an awareness of the services available and ensuring effective use of resources.

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