

# Marketing for Dummies

By Shannon Lang

Last fall, I took several directors of small and rural libraries in Wisconsin to visit some small but not so rural libraries in the Columbus Metropolitan and Worthington Public library systems. These visits allowed the directors to see the marketing and merchandising principles I had been “preaching” and to interpret them for their own libraries.

When we shared our experience with other participants at the Small and Rural Libraries Conference, all agreed that they would like to learn more about these principles and see them in practice. Since it was not practical for all of the participants to visit these agencies I volunteered to present a program with photos.

In *Everything Business Planning*, by Marlene Jensen, marketing is defined as “the steps of making a product available for sale and closing the sale.” This definition gives us a new way of thinking about our libraries and what we need to accomplish. Public libraries are often considered as service agencies—providing books, Internet, story times, summer programs, book clubs, copy machines, etc. When we investigate why we provide these services, we realize that our services make our product available for sale and close the sale.

In marketing, one of the most important steps is understanding the product. Our product is the items we circulate and access to information. For most of us, our books remain our primary product. Our other services such as story times, book clubs, reader’s advisory and reference attract customers and grow library users. We are attracting people to our “store” to “buy” our product.

We make our products available for sale in many ways. First and foremost we do this by selecting materials that our customers want. In a small or rural library, we cannot afford to own items that do not circulate. It is essential that we spend our limited budgets on the items our customers will check out. If we have a lot of items that our customers want, they don’t mind waiting for that Interlibrary Loan item they need for a special project be it craft instructions or research materials.

Although we may not give much thought to processing as part of marketing, it is. The appearance of materials is vitally important. We must be certain that our materials are clean and attractive. One issue of appearance is the preservation of materials. Many libraries in years past succumbed to the “pay a little more and it will last forever” philosophy and bought pre-bound books—especially picture books. These books’ covers—although they were ugly—last forever, but the paper deteriorates.

We must be certain that our materials' covers are attractive to customers. Replacement covers and cases take more time than cash and make a world of difference in attracting customers to our product.

Libraries are noted for organization. We use the Dewey Decimal system to classify our materials, but we must see that we use this system to our customers' advantage. Within shelving, signage is important. For example, location categories in the catalog need to match our signs. Even if our library is tiny, we need meaningful, attractive signage. We must also consider things like traffic patterns and allowing items to be shelved face out to attract customers to the items. When we approach our libraries as customers, we can learn the obstacles we place in our customers' way to success.

Our hours also greatly affect the usage of libraries. Customers' convenience should be a priority in establishing hours. Depending on your customers' schedules, it may be necessary to be open some early mornings, close through the middle of the day and open again late afternoon and evening. We can check our use patterns by counting heads every 15 minutes every three days for a month or two. This will tell us when we are most busy and should remain open. Next, we must be certain that our hours are easy to remember. This sometimes contradicts trying to have the library open when we are most busy, but consistent opening and closing times are just as valuable to a library customer as they are to a grocery store customer.

The image that we project is also an issue to be considered. We've heard the stereotypes about librarians. Librarians stereotypically don't like people. If that is true, we are in the wrong business. We are supposed to be avid readers. This is important. This is how we "test" the products that we are selling. We need to be certain that we know our jobs well. We can only coast for so long. Part of being competent professionals is continuing education. Learning keeps our skills and our outlook fresh and attractive. Finally, we need to be identifiable. We know that in a small and rural library there is not much chance of people not being able to identify us, but we can still use things like name tags and logo clothing to designate us as the person to look to for assistance.

Accessibility is a vital part of marketing our libraries. We must make our facilities easily accessible for all patrons. For example, if our libraries are not fully wheelchair accessible, we will lose an important customer base. We should strive to achieve that goal. For example, we should see that our shelves and tables are 36 to 42 inches apart. Even if we have no clients in wheelchairs, we need this much space for our customers to move around.

To market our services, we must see that they are known. It always amazes me that people do not know what libraries provide. We can let people know about our services in many ways. We can go out to nursing centers, homebound, schools and businesses to tell them what we have to offer. We can also invite Sunday school classes, card groups, merchants and individuals to tour our facilities. This gives us a chance to show them every nook and cranny. I know, you're thinking it's 500 square feet, they can see it all from the door!, but we need to make sure that they see all that we offer. They may be there, but you are their guide to the product. We all have our "teachable moments." It is important to use those to gain customers.

Finally, we need to make our libraries places where people want to be. We can make them inviting and attractive in many ways. If all we can afford is lawn furniture, we can still make it comfortable. We can eliminate obstacles. We can be friendly, greeting customers and smiling. We can also make the library a fun place. Libraries have such a reputation of being serious places. We can be serious about selling our product but have fun doing it. For example, we can dress up to promote a particular subject. One day, we might wear Hawaiian shirts to promote materials about the Pacific, warm vacation spots, or different cultures.

Another way to make libraries places where people want to be is using the technology available. We must learn to harness the incredible power of our computers. They are so much more than toys. Take advantage of your computers. They will not only provide information for our customers, but they will also be a great resource for us.

Unfortunately, I cannot show you the slides of the libraries that use bookstore shelving and illustrate the points in this article. However, if you will check out our website at [www.london.lib.oh.us](http://www.london.lib.oh.us) you may review them online.

Pick up a camera and shoot a roll or two of film in your library. Examine the photos with your co-workers, board and friends. Use the ideas in this article. Believe me, you'll either be patting yourself on the back or creating a strategic plan. I guarantee your circulation will increase!

*Shannon Lang is the Director of London Public Library in London, Ohio. London Public Library began its life as a very small Carnegie in 1905. An addition was completed in the 80's. In the early 90's, a tiny medical clinic next door was annexed. She continues to seek a balance between space and products.*