

Branding for libraries: communicating your value to increase reader awareness and usage of the library service

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The library service has undergone a revolution in recent years and yet current perceptions of libraries and librarians seem to be firmly rooted in the past. How has the library 'brand' got left behind? What can libraries and librarians do to update perceptions and increase usage of the library service?

This article explores how the library service is currently perceived and provides thoughts on how brand strategy could be used – individually and collectively by the profession – to help update perceptions and to build awareness and recognition of the value that libraries offer their users, institutions and society in general. Finally, we propose a 'brand idea' for libraries that would reshape the service they provide and change the way in which they communicate with users and other stakeholders.



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Introduction

When I was asked to put together a briefing session – on the role of 'brand' in helping libraries better communicate their value – for the UKSG annual conference, I did not realize what a fascinating journey this would take me on. I have worked with a range of academic and educational organizations in helping them understand and express their unique personality and values through their brands, but this was the first time I found myself faced with a whole industry that seemed to be suffering from outdated perceptions.

It is challenging enough to move perceptions of a single organization in a favourable direction, but a global profession and service? It was an intriguing challenge to explore how 'the library' is currently seen, and then to look for opportunities to develop and focus this through brand strategy, based on a reappraisal of the role of the library in the highly charged and ever changing information environment.

What is a library?

I began my appraisal by looking at a dictionary definition of the library. I was disappointed with what I found. The description was flat and uninspiring: 'a building or room containing a collection of books and periodicals for use by the public or members of an institution'. This did not even begin to cover for me the intellectual wealth and opportunity that libraries offer their readers. I have been fortunate throughout my professional life to have met and worked with some great and progressive thinkers. Michael Keller, the Director of Academic Information Resources at Stanford University, is one such individual. His view of the library is much more ambitious. In a speech¹ celebrating the reopening of the Bing Wing of the Cecil H Green Library, he described the library as 'a kind of celebration of the ideas of mankind'. This, to me, was certainly getting closer to expressing what a library is and does. But how representative and widely shared were my perceptions of a library as an inspiring and dynamic learning environment?

My next step was to see if any actual research had been undertaken to better understand how the library brand is perceived. I came across a very detailed study² that was commissioned by the Online Computer Library Centre (OCLC) on the perceptions of libraries and information resources. Within this report – which took in the views and perceptions of some 3,300 information consumers in Australia, Canada, India, Singapore, the UK and the United States – were some worrying findings.

OCLC discovered that while information consumers say they still use the library, they are actually using it less, and reading less, since they began using the Internet. They still used the library most often for borrowing print books. Awareness of the wider range of services offered by a modern library – particularly those online – seemed low. I turned to the British Library to see if they had a view on the changing role of the library. Their documented strategy³ for 2005–2008 shows a clear awareness of this problem. In their opening comments they discuss the traditional role of a library being to: ‘collect and organize information, make access to knowledge more democratic, and preserve the record of ideas for future generations.’ They go on to highlight how the information environment is changing: ‘Now information is ubiquitous: 500 million web pages are just a keystroke away. Their content mutates constantly and is subject to no structure. Google and other search engines have revolutionized the way people expect to access information.’ Finally, they raise an important question that for me summarizes the challenge in developing the library brand: ‘How do we redefine the role of the library in such a changing context?’

Who needs a library?

OCLC concluded in their report that librarians, their collections and the library itself appeared to be increasingly less visible to today’s information consumer.

Key findings included:

- 84% of respondents use search engines to begin an information search
- 1% begin an information search on a library website
- *Quality* and *quantity* are seen as the most important factors, with *free* a close second

- Respondents do not trust purchased information more than free information
- Search engines fit the information consumer’s lifestyle better than physical or online libraries and they trust them about the same.

Personally, I found these results surprising. Knowing something of the complexities of the information environment, I imagine that the need for expert help and guidance has never before been so critical. It is a time of expanding access to information resources, of varied and uncertain quality, with increasingly complex technologies available to help manage and personalize the learning experience. Who else is going to harness and channel this for the benefit of researchers and their students if not the library and its staff?

Having discovered the problem of visibility for the library service, OCLC went on to test for intangible traits such as familiarity, trust and quality – the real beginnings of understanding the library brand and its values and personality. They found little difference between these traits applied to libraries and search engines. They did, however, find that perceptions of the library brand were dominant on one category ... ‘books’ is the library brand.

It is clear from OCLC’s report that they found this disappointing. To begin with, they wondered if the idea of ‘books’ actually encompassed the intangible qualities of information familiarity, information trust and information quality. They looked hard to answer this question, reviewing thousands of responses, and while they found words and phrases that include mention of ‘trust’, ‘quality’, ‘knowledge’, ‘learning’, and ‘education’, they were relatively few in number. ‘Books’, however, dominated across all regions and age groups.

I am not suggesting that ‘books’ is necessarily a bad thing – there are thousands of years of history that have gone into connecting books to libraries – but it is a restrictive perception, and underestimates the full role and value of libraries. The OCLC research went on to discover that people have strong attachments to libraries as places, but most of these positive associations are nostalgic in nature, with a focus on books. The concern for libraries today, raised by OCLC towards the end of their report, has to be whether or not this attachment will extend to other kinds of information resources (particularly those online) or influence

information consumers' choices of information sources for the future.

Libraries now operate in a vastly different world from that of even just a decade ago. The library service has evolved and developed to respond to this changing environment, but the library brand still seems rooted in the past. So, how has this happened? Librarians are extremely good at communicating with each other to refine and develop services, but how is this being communicated to users? Can one institution make a difference or do libraries have a collective brand problem that can only be solved by working together?

About brand

To understand how brand strategy might be used to better communicate the unique value proposition that libraries offer their readers and society in general, it is important to understand what is meant by 'brand'. The idea of branding is nothing new – commercial organizations have used brand for many years to provide strategic focus and communicate clearly to customers and staff the differentiating personality, vision and values of the organization. Recent years have seen brand becoming ever more important in the academic environment as well as more commercial product-based industries (such as soft drinks, fast food, etc.), where we tend to accept more readily that brand can be an influencing factor in our choices as consumers.

Brand is an intangible asset, so it is difficult for organizations to measure and place a value against, which can make it easy to ignore. However, there is increasing awareness of the value of brand and for many organizations it can be their most powerful financial asset. A study⁴ by Interbrand in association with J P Morgan concluded that, on average, brands account for one-third of shareholder value but this can be even higher – the McDonald's brand has been calculated to represent 71% of shareholder value. Those organizations that continue to ignore the role and contribution of brand to their success are missing out on the opportunity to manage and develop what could be one of their greatest assets.

Brand is much more than a logo or a strap-line. When developed to its full potential, your brand should help define and communicate what it is

that you can do better than anyone else, what distinguishes you from other services, and what is most relevant to the needs of your customers. This is based on much more than functional strengths; it also encompasses your unique values and personality. Put more simply, brand is the spirit of the organization – sometimes aspirational, but always relevant to customers and staff alike. Really good brands have been able to capture and effectively express this 'spirit'. They do this with relentless consistency. The expression of this spirit or 'brand idea' can be made up of many elements, including the logo, colours, images and 'tone of voice' used to communicate them. But mostly, organizations with great brands achieve their reputation by acting to a clear vision. They use their brand idea to drive everything that they do – it informs the kind of audiences they seek out, strategic direction for the development of new products and services, the type of working environment that they create and how they relate to customers and staff.

Some of the strongest brands spring from great and charismatic leaders – they have real personality. Virgin is an example of just such a brand. Every advertisement has Richard Branson's sense of challenging humour, and the organization seems at its most successful when it sticks to its core idea of 'taking on the big guys for the benefit of the small'. Other brands are very successful at acknowledging that people make decisions for emotional reasons as well as rational ones. Ben and Jerry's ice cream is a good example of a brand with a social conscience, its 'lick global warming' campaign being just one example of an approach to promoting ice cream based on strong ethical beliefs. This latter example highlights the importance of being true to your brand idea. It is no good saying it if you do not deliver on it. You may get some short-term benefit, but a brand idea that is delegated only to the marketing department rather than being embraced and delivered by the whole organization is likely to fail in the long term, possibly doing more damage than good.

Brand can be used to give great collective strength to a multitude of products and services. An example of this is Wiley Interscience – an online collection of books, journals and databases built around the promoted idea of 'discover something great'. This is the beginning of something that is much more engaging and meaningful to users of the service. It is also a great

strategic tool: consider how this idea might be used to drive business decisions and new product and service developments. The kinds of questions that come to mind are: How do we facilitate people making great discoveries when they access our content? What sort of new services do we need? How does this idea change the kinds of messages we want to communicate about why we exist and what makes us different? What would this mean for our authors, our commercial partnerships, our journal editors and society relationships? A simple idea like this can be made very powerful and unique to the organization, giving great competitive advantage by building longer-lasting relationships with customers and giving staff more meaningful and focused roles.

One of the strongest brands to have emerged within the academic information environment is Public Library of Science (PLoS). They are clearly a mission-led organization. When thinking of the three C's of a great brand (conviction, credibility, consistency), PLoS delivers on all fronts. Take a look at their marketing materials, their website, their press releases, and what they actually do. They have a clear and relevant value proposition to communicate and they are very single-minded about delivering on it. They also have real personality. From their TV advertisement on launch that showed a businessman flying up into the sky, through to cartoons and their posters featuring relaxed and informal photographs of the researchers who have been published by PLoS, they have a sense of fun and humanity. Similarly, Google is another example of a brand with great personality.

What can we learn from these approaches that might benefit the way in which the library brand is perceived? One lesson, I believe, is not to be overly reverential in marketing academic information and services. Libraries should feel comfortable using emotive language, abstract imagery and generally having fun when marketing their services. Brand can help create a focus for a more imaginative and engaging approach, build critical mass across a range of services, and provide a linking framework for different messages sent out to a variety of audiences.

Why brand is a critical issue for libraries

On the whole, it has only been in very recent years that academic organizations have really begun to

invest in the management and development of their brands. This has been driven primarily by increasing competition and entry into the market by new kinds of competitors who bring with them more overtly commercial tools and tactics (a trend I predict continuing). Consumers, in general, are also becoming more sophisticated. For libraries, particularly relevant trends centre on the challenge of visibility in the digital environment, the increasing competition for academic institutions to attract the best students and staff, the changing demographics of student populations (more part-time, distance and continuing professional development), the rise in importance of institutional assets (such as institutional repositories) and, perhaps most of all, the overwhelmingly complex choices that information consumers are increasingly faced with.

Libraries have a huge range of issues to deal with – from the micro to the macro – in considering how to develop and manage their brand. At the micro level, how can you brand content as being provided by the library when it may be accessed by multiple routes? At the macro level, how can the library community collectively update user perceptions of the library brand? And somewhere in between – what can you do as an individual library to increase customer awareness, trust and usage of your service?

There has been some development in supporting library branding of content and services. It is essential that users understand when they are using content that has been selected and provided for them by the library. Some publishers have made efforts to provide libraries with basic tools to help brand content in this way – Elsevier's ScienceDirect has an administrative tool that enables librarians to upload a link, logo and institutional name to the ScienceDirect online journal platform. Link resolvers also give libraries greater flexibility to brand and manage access to library content and services. No doubt there will continue to be development in these areas that will support better library branding at this micro level.

Individual libraries can also work to develop and update user and other stakeholder perceptions of the library brand – to inspire them to see you as an active partner in their personal growth, career development and in your organization's success. The first principle is to think of the experience that you offer, and to make this as complete as possible, on- and offline. Be ambitious in considering what

this experience should be. Create it and then market it. Be consistent and encourage everyone within the organization to take responsibility for delivering it – build the promotion of a positive and forward-thinking experience of using the library service into all library staff job descriptions.

The second principle is the active management of your identity. Develop a visual identity system that can help you express the experience you wish to create for library users. Align this closely to your organization's brand and strategic goals, and look for opportunities to extend your brand into new areas (such as institutional repositories).

The third principle is to be creative. Think about the bigger picture and promote your values, as well as features and benefits of the service that you offer. Shape your messages for different audiences but base them all on a clear central mission. Be experimental in how you promote your service – have fun, use abstract and evocative images that inspire (not just pictures of books and journals on library shelves!).

At the macro level, how can libraries work together to maximize individual efforts like those outlined above and so collectively begin to really shift user perceptions? Returning once again to the OCLC report, responses indicated a strong universal view of the library brand across all regions and age groups surveyed. It stands to reason, therefore, that the greater opportunity for changing perceptions lies with the community collaborating to achieve this aim. There have already been some initiatives designed with this goal in mind, particularly in the United States. The American Library Association (ALA) launched its campaign for American libraries with the trademarked logo '@your library' in 2001. Their goal was to: 'increase awareness and support for libraries in a positive context and by communicating clearly and strongly why libraries are both unique and valuable'. Their programme aims to provide individual library members with access to a centralized brand strategy, marketing support and materials – helping deliver prescribed messages in a consistent way. Their campaigns have included celebrity endorsement (George Lopez promoting America's public libraries) and have been built on some stretching and emotive ideas ('change your world @ your library' campaign). The Special Libraries Association (SLA) has also developed a branding programme and uses the slogan: 'connecting people and information', which is beginning to

promote a more ambitious idea of the role of the library for the twenty-first century.

For me, the opportunity for defining a universal brand for libraries lies in addressing the apparent lack of understanding about what *librarians* do, and hence the value that this human expertise brings.

What do librarians do?

Librarians fulfil a unique and valuable role in society. In an article⁵ on library branding, Cynthia L Shamel expressed this well: 'A library without a librarian is nothing more than a document storage facility. With or without walls, librarians are masters of information retrieval, management and delivery. Nobody does it better, and that's the message that current customers, prospective customers, and all humanity should hear.' Shamel goes on to highlight one view of the problem: 'Customers see library staff shelving books, checking books in and out, reading the paper, and occasionally chatting with a library customer. Customers hear library staff enforcing the rules: "You must sign up to use the Internet," "Please keep your voices down!" or "This is due back in 2 weeks or you will have to pay a fine". This tells people what librarians do. These impressions go back to the earliest experience in a library.'

If what a librarian actually does is this invisible in the physical space of a library, imagine how invisible this must be in a virtual environment? Why should you trust a library anymore than a search engine if you have no idea about the value that librarians add and what this means for you?

Librarians today play a crucial role in the evaluation and filtering of information resources. They work hard to identify and satisfy complex needs (how, where, what, when) and make good quality information as accessible as possible. They are educators, providing support and instruction to help users navigate an increasingly complex information environment. They are strategists, working with senior teams to align the library service with organizational goals. They have to be capable of demonstrating enormous flexibility in order to keep improving information services as technology and user needs change. They are natural networkers, forging alliances to make the most of their collective knowledge. They understand that libraries are part of the bigger process of

contributing towards personal, organizational and community growth. The challenge for developing the library brand is to find a way to effectively communicate this and demonstrate how it adds value to information.

A new idea for the library brand

This is where brand strategy can help. If current perceptions are that the idea of the library is to provide 'books', it seems that a new idea is needed. It has to be simple and easy to communicate by a diverse range of institutions. It should be an idea that library staff can really get behind, and that engages with and inspires users and other stakeholders. Developing brand ideas is a specialist function, and is usually based on an intensive programme of research that takes in internal views, compares these to external perceptions, and then reviews this feedback in the light of the whole competitive context for that organization. This programme of research can help an organization understand what it really is, what it could be and the gap that it might fill to its competitive advantage.

Without the advantage of undertaking this research, I still found myself developing early thoughts on how the library brand could be refreshed and updated. I propose this as an example of a brand idea and how it might work, rather than a firm solution, as it will help illustrate the opportunity. My first thoughts were based on the concept of a library existing to facilitate 'sharing ideas'. That is, connecting people with today's ideas (and great ideas from the past), so that they can create new ideas for tomorrow; supporting social and personal progress through co-operation and partnership; less 'information' and more 'fuel for thought'.

How would the role of the library be defined now, based on this idea? Perhaps it might be described as a virtual and physical space created by experts who know how to help people use information to develop ideas and share them with others.

Take a moment to envisage the impact of this idea on the form and function of the library. As well as creating spaces for quiet study and learning, the library would manage spaces for the active exchange of ideas (management of 'speakers'

corner', development of blogs and instant messaging services). Other value-added services might include facilitating connecting individuals with others who share their interests (a step on from 'people who looked at this also looked at ...' towards 'people with a similar information-searching profile as you within this institution ...,' etc.). Imagine how you might promote the service – the kinds of images and language you would use and how that might be different from the way you currently promote the library service. The ideas begin to flow, and I hope this begins to give an indication of how a simple idea can be translated through into a radical change of approach for an organization.

Making it happen

Developing and communicating a simple, collective brand idea for libraries would require enormous collaborative effort, but this is something the community is very good at. Like ALA and SLA, it would require management through some central body. After all, how many individual libraries realistically have the budget, staff or time to devote to this? More than that, it would be enormously wasteful for libraries to all try to solve a common problem individually. Centrally funding a brand programme – perhaps initially in the UK or Europe and partnering with other countries where programmes are already under way – would seem a sensible way forward. Through this approach, a robust brand strategy could be developed, documented and made available to individual libraries. Centralized training and workshops could be organized, providing support to libraries and helping them network and share in the application and development of the brand idea. Marketing expertise could be made available, as could a central marketing toolkit containing materials that could be tailored to individual needs, etc. The framework for achieving this already exists. All that is needed now is the will.

Conclusions

Evidence indicates that the library brand has got left behind as libraries have rapidly evolved and embraced a much broader role. Increasing

competition, the changing information landscape and the challenge of digital visibility is a real threat to the perceived value of the library and its staff. However, the complexity of the information environment means that the role of librarian and the 'institution of the library' is needed more now than ever before. There needs to be a step change in the communication of the value and role of the library to users and stakeholders. Individual efforts will help individual institutions, but the greater opportunity lies in wider collaboration.

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