

2. What?

Marketing myths

Librarians are experts in their own field, like other professionals. On the whole they tend not to be experts at marketing any more than they are at accountancy. This is in no way a criticism; it's a fact of professional life. Because of this lack of awareness there are a number of misconceptions about marketing - what it actually is, how it ticks and how it can be used effectively in the services sector. Before looking at these issues, I would like to de-bunk some myths which might act as barriers to the development of your marketing thinking.

Marketing is advertising and selling

Advertising and selling are only part of the entire marketing picture - they just happen to be the most visible, and the element of marketing to which most of us are regularly exposed. Unfortunately, that exposure is not always recalled with any particular warmth - obscure TV commercials, persistent salespeople who won't take "no" for an answer and enough junk mail to paper the entire house!

But the advertisement was probably based on market research; it was aimed at a particular type of customer and possibly to counter a competitor's campaign. That is all marketing.

The customer is always right

Marketing does not mean giving the customer exactly what they want, when they want it, at whatever cost to the library. However, the customers are:

- the most important people to come into the library
- not dependent on the library; the library depends on them
- not tiresome outsiders but part of the library
- not just statistics; they are human beings, with biases and prejudices like anyone else
- people who bring their wants or needs.

But customers might also want 24 hour, 7 day opening; an obscure text in medieval Russian available on demand; and to borrow the Encyclopedia Britannica. The librarian has to strike the balance between reasonable and unreasonable demands, both between customers, and between customers and the library.

Librarians don't sell things

Well, maybe occasionally; pens, bookmarks or a local history study. But that is to miss the point; the real question is, what is selling? Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary defines 'to sell' as 'to give or give up for money or other equivalent' but also 'to cause someone to accept (eg an idea, plan): to convince of the value of something'. So when, in response to a request for information a librarian 'causes someone to accept' what can be obtained *and sends that person away happy*, then a sale has been made. The request could be for a journal article, the credit rating of a particular company or to provide relevant details for the company's Annual Report. When a librarian matches each request to the resources available, it's a sale. If customers are satisfied, they'll come back - and probably either tell their colleagues or bring one with them on the next visit.

Marketing is the marketing department's business

Anyone in contact with a customer is concerned with marketing. Having said that, not everyone is good at it. Can every librarian lecture on cataloguing or computerise the acquisition system? No, because some professionals lack the experience needed for those jobs. Equally, the formal marketing tasks require certain skills and attributes. Those involved in marketing need :

- a belief in their service and what they are trying to achieve
- a clear understanding of their organisation's overall aims and objectives
- an ability to assemble and interpret information
- good communication skills, both written and oral
- enthusiasm and commitment
- an ability to take criticism, not always constructive,

plus common sense!

Many of these are, of course, the attributes of a good librarian who uses his or her professional skills to their best advantage. This means that librarians will find it easier than other professionals to take marketing on board.

A library service is free; marketing is all about profit

There is no such thing as a 'free' service. Costs have to be met somewhere along the line - maybe indirectly, but somebody pays. It may be spread amongst the council tax payers or shared out amongst cost-centres as an overhead. The problem with a 'free' service is that those who pay often do not see a direct benefit from their expenditure. If a library is 'just an overhead' then constant internal marketing will be required to ensure that the library's

value is recognised and that the service is not whittled away by budget cuts because no-one speaks up for it during the annual business plan discussion.

What is marketing?

There is a multitude of definitions for the term marketing, some slick ('marketing is 90% common sense'), some profound ('marketing is a state of mind which informs corporate priorities'), some based on jargon ('establishing a competitive edge'). However, the Chartered Institute of Marketing's definition 'the management process responsible for identifying, anticipating and satisfying customer requirements profitably' covers the key elements of focusing on the customer's existing and future needs, in a way which is of benefit to the service provider.

There are a number of key activities which must be undertaken :

- researching and analyzing the existing marketplace in which the library can offer its services
- identifying what the needs are and which parts of that marketplace share them
- analyzing the library's strengths and weaknesses in terms of resources, personnel and areas of specialist expertise
- understanding the competition
- designing offerings (i.e. services and products) which translate the library's internal strengths into specific services that meet the identified customer needs
- making existing and potential customers aware of these offerings
- monitoring and/or measuring customer satisfaction with the services provided, feeding back and acting on the resultant information.

These activities cannot be undertaken as a one-off exercise. The market-place, the customers' needs and perceptions, the activities of the competition and the library's own attributes and resources change over time and in response to one another. The whole marketing effort is on-going, although there are peaks and troughs in any one of the component activities. It is a dynamic process.

For example, collecting and analyzing data about clients and competitors in order to prepare your first marketing strategy is a major exercise. But once done, it need only be up-dated, and you need only write a strategy every two to three years. Drawing up your marketing action plan is part of the annual planning cycle, although its effectiveness must be routinely monitored. Media relations require constant attention, as does the day-to-day 'selling' of your service. But you only need a new brochure every 18 months or so.

All of these activities are marketing. It is a mixture of planning and analysis, and on-going action. It is also a management process, not a separate function undertaken (possibly part-time) by the 'marketing person'. It should be a library-wide philosophy, accepted by everyone from top management down, because only in that way can the two tests of any proposed action ('does it benefit the customers?' and 'does it benefit us?') carry any weight.