

Best Practices in Access Services

Edited by
**Lori L. Driscoll and
W. Bede Mitchell**

Best Practices in Access Services

Access Services departments in libraries have become highly complex organizations responsible for a broad range of functions, often including circulation, reserves, interlibrary lending and borrowing, document delivery, stacks maintenance, building security, photocopying, and providing general patron assistance. This book offers effective solutions to familiar problems, fresh ideas for responding to patron needs, and informed speculation on new trends and issues facing access services departments.

This book was originally published as a special issue of the *Journal of Access Services*.

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First published 2009 by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
933 Vj kf Cxgpg. P gy [qtm'P ["32239. WUC

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an Informa business

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Typeset in Times by Value Chain, India

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN10: 0-7890-3852-8

ISBN13: 978-0-7890-3852-4

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EVOLVING LIBRARIES

Reflections on Academic Libraries
in the 21st Century

W. Bede Mitchell

As The ALA Glossary of Library and Information Science states, a library is “a collection of materials organized to provide physical,

bibliographic, and intellectual access to a target group, with a staff that is trained to provide services and programs related to the information needs of the target group” (p. 130). A library is not worthy of the name if it is not organized and administered according to sound principles of library and information science. Without such organizing principles, collections of information resources of any substantial size cannot be used effectively or efficiently. Without such organizing principles, you don’t have an effective library—you have the Internet. Information retrieval becomes an arduous process of hit and miss, of trial and error, with no assurance that the search-engine-of-the-day has really turned up all relevant sites. But organizing and administering information resources is becoming increasingly challenging due to the explosion in recent years of new publications, both in paper and electronic formats. In reality, no academic library is capable of meeting all the needs of its users, if that was ever possible. Even the great research libraries log thousands of interlibrary loan and document delivery requests every year. In short, truly effective academic libraries are more reliant than ever on highly skilled and well trained professionals who are sensitive to the needs of library constituents. The primary mission of the library faculty and staff as we enter the 21st Century should be to support educational goals and priorities through whatever media, means, and services are most appropriate, and to accomplish this mission the library faculty and staff must be an integral part of institutional planning and decision making.

I believe that while the surface veneer of our work will continue to change in dramatic and often stressful ways, we will also continue to be guided most wisely by the values and principles that have been the library’s bedrock for decades. Consider S. R. Ranganathan’s five laws of library science, which he published in 1931:

1. *Books Are For Use.*
2. *Every Reader His/Her Book.*
3. *Every Book Its Reader.*
4. *Save The Time Of The Reader.*
5. *The Library Is A Growing Organism.*

Maurice Line underscored the validity of these laws by turning them on their heads to describe what he believed to be the reality of too many libraries:

1. *Books Are For Collecting.*
2. *Some Readers Their Books.*
3. *Some Books Their Readers.*
4. *Waste The Time of the Reader.*
5. *The Library Is A Growing Mausoleum.*

The laws of Ranganathan and Line assert in their own ways that academic libraries should be measured by the extent to which they select resources on the basis of user needs, organize the resources so they may be identified and accessed efficiently, promote and expose resources to potential users, engage users in an ongoing dialogue regarding evolving user needs, and respond to social and technological trends affecting higher education. Not only does that describe the ideal academic library of today, but I believe Ranganathan's laws will continue to provide the best guide to achieving the ideal library in the 21st Century. The balance of this paper will expand on that assertion.

Consider the first law, *Books Are For Use*. This means there should be no unnecessary barriers or constraints on the use of information resources. The ideal academic library seeks the best balance between preservation and the need for patrons to use materials efficiently and effectively. Rare or irreplaceable materials require greater emphasis on preservation than on user convenience, but so far as our general collections are concerned the ideal academic library tailors its loan and related service policies to maximize the opportunities for students and faculty to use materials. A new but very important aspect of eliminating barriers and constraints on access is the negotiation of favorable license terms for electronic databases. Many of the standard contracts which vendors present us contain restrictions that go beyond a copyright owner's statutory rights and infringe upon fair use. In response, we should insist upon license terms that protect fair use without affecting the vendor's right to a fair profit or its competitiveness in the marketplace. I am encouraged that a number of experts have published sample license terms that are intended to accomplish just that task. I hope that as academic libraries in the 21st Century assert their rights and reject such dangerous requirements as indemnification of vendors against lawsuits, we will find standardized language in license agreements that is more realistic and less one-sided.

Another constraint on access involves the authentication of eligible users of electronic resources. As we rely more and more on electronic databases, both for users on campus and for remote students enrolled in

distance learning programs, we must perfect authentication techniques such as web access management programs.

The academic library will continue to be a vanguard in the protection of free access to knowledge. First, consider that the people in the future will only know about us that which we preserve. Allowing the records of the past to disappear is a form of censorship. We must beware of being too selective about what we collect and preserve. The universe of academic libraries must preserve all records of all societies and communities and make those records available to all. This will be a major challenge in the future since we can expect the trend toward managing and controlling information as a commodity will continue. Libraries must be responsible for ensuring information is archived and doesn't simply disappear because a commercial vendor goes out of business. And libraries must strive to make information as accessible as possible, so that in the Information Economy about which we hear so much, there is not an unnecessary chasm between haves and have-nots.

A related issue of information preservation is that of data permanence. Stephen Sottong's article in the May 1999 issue of *American Libraries* records some facts that should give pause to anyone who thinks the paperless society will be within reach in the first decade of the 21st Century:

- Magnetic media such as floppy disks have a data life span of five years or less. According to data-preservation scientist J. W. C. Van Bogart, even in extreme circumstances high quality paper lasts 10 times longer than the best magnetic media used for commercial and scientific data storage.
- Optical media, such as CD-ROM and DVD-ROM, are proving to be far less durable than originally expected. The longest warranty in the industry for CD-ROM products only guarantees for 25 years, in spite of the claims that CD disks are good for more than a century. DVDs can be expected to have a shorter life span since increased data density has been proven to be associated with shorter life spans. In contrast, the life span of acid paper, which libraries have tried to avoid collecting for decades, is 50 to 100 years.
- As of the end of 1999, Kodak still advised libraries seeking to use digital media for long-term data and information storage could be faced every 10-20 years with either:

- a. copying such data to the latest formats, or
- b. purchasing the latest program for uploading data on obsolete formats to the latest medium.

Even given the obvious advantages of electronic media for remote access and searching for specific information, will we be able to justify this new kind of “planned obsolescence” to our funding authorities? The academic library in the first five years of the 21st Century will need to make tough decisions about what resources will need to be archived for the long term, and in what format. I suggest to you that paper will continue to be one of our most important long term data storage formats.

Let us now reflect on the second law, *Every Reader His/Her Book*. Here Ranganathan is telling us we are obliged to help find the resources that meet a user’s need, and that may include going beyond the resources that are easily at hand. As I asserted above, no academic library is able to collect comprehensively. We must engage our constituents in the development of our collection development policy and ensure that when class assignments are made there will be adequate information resources to support them. We should try to stay abreast of the research needs of the faculty and support those needs as much as possible through materials purchases and subscriptions, and also through fast, accurate, and (to the user at least) free document delivery systems. The ideal academic library, particularly one that is a member of a state-supported university system, will help build an infrastructure of policies and procedures that facilitate resource sharing among the system’s libraries.

The library should take full advantage of the dialogues that are possible with library advisory committees, through focus groups and surveys, suggestion boxes and e-mail addresses, informal communication of all kinds, and by the library faculty and staff being fully engaged in the academic community. The dominant ethic of librarianship is service to the individual, community, and society as a whole. This is especially true for publicly supported academic institutions. This requires attention to quality and living up to—and even surpassing—the expectations of library users. I would add that it also requires a commitment to human diversity and multiculturalism, which should be reflected in collection development policies and respected in our patron services.

The third law is *Every Book Its Reader*. In the ideal academic library, the librarians seek to match information materials with their potential users. New acquisitions which could be helpful to someone’s ongoing research should be brought to that individual’s attention. We should be

as concerned with the exposure and promotion of our resources as we are with their accessibility. This goal is not only difficult but urgent due to the remarkable proliferation of paper and electronic publications. How many of us feel awash in information, and overwhelmed at the prospect of sifting through dozens if not thousands of search results to find the information that best serves our needs?

Through such means as electronic and printed bibliographies, current awareness services, and liaison programs with academic departments, librarians should be the matchmakers that bring materials to the people who could use them.

Law number four is *Save The Time Of The Reader*. Information services must satisfy needs as efficiently as possible. Clearly this relates back to my earlier comment about the difference between a library and an unorganized collection of materials.

An important way in which an academic library will save the time of the reader is by bringing greater bibliographic order to the Internet and World Wide Web. As marvelous as these are, they leave much to be desired as efficient and orderly means of archiving and retrieving information. I enjoyed Will Manley's humorous take on the Internet, to wit: "If we were to go about acquiring the Internet like any other resource we would probably try to read a review of it. What would the objective reviewer say? 'The Internet is a vast informational network with millions of entries on a myriad of diverse subjects. It is loosely and unreliably indexed and is awkward to use because of the increasingly slow response time. While some of the entries are well researched by reliable authors, many others are poorly written by people with no literary or academic credentials who have a pronounced proclivity to punctuate their points with the repeated use of the words cool and suck.'" In summary, says Manley, "the Internet is the global village's vanity press. It has no editorial board and no editorial principles."

Given the vastness of the Internet and its resources, we cannot rely on existing Internet search engines to help us find all of the best information available to meet our needs. The most effective search engines index only a portion of the World Wide Web. I think over the course of the next several years we will need to re-double our efforts to save the time of our users by identifying those reliable Internet sites that are likely to be of the greatest utility and facilitating access to those sites. This can be done through subject bibliographies that are printed as well as mounted on the library's web page with links to the sites. It can be done through creative proposals like Dan Hazen's selective scanning. In this scheme, digitizing front matter like tables of contents could result in quicker and

cheaper cataloging, and in the enhancement of the information that catalogers can provide users trying to make informed choices of which materials to examine in depth. It can also be done by helping users learn advanced searching skills and evaluate critically the results of their searches. And it certainly should be done through working as partners with commercial vendors and campus computer centers to design, test, and implement improved search capabilities, user interfaces, and ergonomic hardware.

Naturally we must continue using technology intelligently to enhance our services, but must reject the false dichotomy of either/or choices. In reality, we do not have to be either a Luddite or a technocrat. Each medium has its place. Electronic media are excellent for accessing data and short, discrete textual, numeric, and visual information, while traditional paper-based documents are still the best vehicles for sustained reading.

Finally, law number five states that *The Library Is A Growing Organism*. While all of Ranganathan's laws, as I interpret them, imply the need to be prepared for change, this fifth law reinforces that need explicitly. We need to continue adapting to new social conditions, technological developments, and changing needs of the clientele. The number of challenges we face can seem daunting at times, but change is the norm in the library world and we must not delude ourselves into hoping that we are ever going to reach a steady-state plateau. A clear implication of this law is that the ideal academic library will make a major ongoing investment in the continuing development of faculty and staff knowledge and skills. We must take advantage of workshops and seminars offered on and off campus—some of which are now offered electronically. We must attend professional conferences, engage in informal networking with peers, and learn from the literatures of our own and other appropriate disciplines.

As noted above, we will need to judiciously select from among many new and evolving media which are best for a given storage need. The academic library of the future will use all kinds of carriers of knowledge and information, with each new means of communication enhancing and supplementing the strengths of all previous means.

The academic library in a publicly supported university will find itself increasingly called upon to serve the citizens of the region and to engage in cooperative ventures with other post-secondary institutions in the state. For example, statewide consortia are the paradigmatic example of the benefits of libraries working cooperatively and with the state to establish an electronic network that brings enormous information resources to all citizens of the

state, at a fraction of the full cost that the individual libraries would have paid for those resources. In the future, such collaborative efforts will become ever more important means of maximizing access to information and controlling costs. Within such initiatives, an individual academic library must be prepared to demonstrate leadership, contribute whatever strengths of personnel and collections it may have, and continue to keep its primary users' unique set of priorities in mind as it works with other libraries for the good of the entire state.

Another intriguing challenge to academic libraries is the growing tendency of superstores like Barnes & Noble (B & N) or Borders to usurp the academic library as the favored location for students to study. Renee Feinberg, a reference librarian at Brooklyn College, has reported on her interviews with college students she encounters at B & N superstores, and not surprisingly to those of us who have enjoyed patronizing these stores, the students indicate a preference for B & N over their campus libraries because of the more comfortable and congenial settings, good coffee, the buzz of conversation, and in some cases even the more convenient hours of operation. Perhaps most disturbing, however, is the recurring statement that B & N has better and more accessible monograph holdings, especially of recently published materials. This is worth bearing in mind when we hear the stories of how students are plugged into technology to the point of ignoring printed resources. The truth may fall somewhere in between these two extremes. As Feinberg states: "Students want their books. If libraries choose to weaken their book collections in favor of increased electronic information, they will lose patrons who would support them as they argue for protection of collections." Fortunately, we are seeing new libraries being built with the niceties found in contemporary bookstores: tasteful signs, cozy spots, comfort, elegance, and the human touch. We in academic libraries should concede nothing to Barnes & Noble in terms of comfort, convenience, and service, and we certainly should not bow to B & N's holdings of scholarly books.

CONCLUSION

As academic libraries evolve to meet new challenges, they must retain the best of the past and a sense of the history of libraries and of scholarly communication. With a sense of history, and knowledge of enduring values and the continuity of our mission, there must also be the acceptance of the challenge of innovation. If the library ever ceases to be a growing organism, then it really will become Maurice Line's growing mausoleum.

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People First: A New Zealand Approach to Staff, Structure and Service

Jane Hill

INTRODUCTION

To set the scene, Wellington is in the Pacific, the capital of New Zealand and the seat of power for central government. Wellington City has a population of 182,000 and is within a region of 350,000. Wellington City Libraries is a network with a Central Library and eleven Branch Libraries. Wellingtonians “love their libraries” and see them as “the jewel in the City’s crown.”¹ Sample annual measures of our business show

that 2.8 million people visit the libraries and currently 1.3 million visit our website. To complete the snapshot, we have an annual budget of \$20 million New Zealand dollars, a collection of 800,000 items, seventy-seven percent of Wellington residents are active members and an annual circulation of 3.5 million items.

CHANGE

With Martin Luther King's words—"I have a dream"²—in 2000 I launched our extensive change process within Wellington City Libraries. Why? In 1993 the Library had celebrated 100 years as a Wellington City Council (local government) owned and operated service. We had added staff, Branch Libraries, new services and a new Central Library. We had been through 5 reviews in 7 years between 1993 and 2000. The budget cycle did not take account of major investment funding for entirely new projects.

Within the national and international libraries market and the information environment generally, Wellington City Libraries had lost its standing. There was an urgent need for the Libraries to become more "businesslike," that is demonstrating value using standard business or customer tools, principles and practices, and businesslike in attitude to treat every customer and every customer transaction as the key to our "business."

THE APPROACH WE TOOK

Eleanor Roosevelt said that "you must do the thing you think you cannot do."³ All City Council units were facing a new change process. I volunteered the Libraries to go second. It began initially as a Business Process Re-engineering Review and developed as a library process led by me and a change team. The governing body, the Wellington City Council, approved the implementation of the Libraries change with the project to be undertaken over two years.

ANALYSIS

Our work gave us a chance to look at the business as a whole, which was important for redesigning processes and ensuring all the elements worked together. We entered a period of extensive analysis—consultation, interviews, dissecting the business and future planning. The analy-

sis took eight months. We started with a blank sheet of paper. It was imperative that we found out what residents, customers, city councilors (that is elected representatives) and staff wanted.

The consultation and stakeholder interviews resulted in process, communications and culture changes, establishing new processes and devising a new organizational structure. While wanting a “business-like approach” we wanted to establish a team culture that encouraged innovation and ideas. We wanted people to be empowered. We wanted to see if we could achieve a flat organizational structure.

Three key performance areas were agreed—service levels as measured by resident and customer satisfaction, staff satisfaction as measured by staff surveys and staff feedback and reduction in the cost to council as measured by financial results detailing cost savings and additional revenue.

VISION

This was an essential first element. Our work in this area gave us focus, an opportunity to look at the business strategically as a whole and to examine present and future perspectives. Our choice of vision was to be “the first choice of Wellingtonians seeking to enjoy and benefit from fact and fiction.”

To achieve the vision we needed to ensure all the elements worked together—the delivery of quality services, the use of quality information systems, the employment of highly skilled, versatile staff to work in high performance teams, the use of streamlined customer focused processes and support, cooperation, innovation and continual learning.

LEADERSHIP

I made a decision to lead the change. I believed and believe passionately in public libraries. I wanted to have the advantage of leading/steering the change. I was given the delegated authority from the Chief Executive and involved in all high level, weekly change planning meetings. This was vital. I undertook to make the difficult decisions (usually people centered.) I made a commitment to the staff that communication and honesty would be how the process was handled. I arranged for extensive support networks, counselors and change management courses for staff to attend. I spoke to every staff member who was made redun-

dant at the end of the full appointments process (This process combined the use of recruitment protocols with interviewing all the staff for the new positions. Fifty-one staff were made redundant.)

A Libraries Change Team, with a Change Manager from another City Council area, worked actively on promoting and coordinating the change implementation and processes with me. A year before the main staff appointments were made we advertised for three Coordinators to manage aspects of the Libraries operation and change processes for two years.

We underwent change in a fishbowl—media, customers, councilors, lobby groups, other national and international library managers watched very closely. My first experience of handling the television media was when the public announcement was made by the Mayor and the Chief Executive that the change process was to begin. The media turned to me at the back of the room and only wanted to know about the Libraries' changes. The other Council areas were of no apparent interest. I was on camera! It was a steep learning curve. There were public meetings where the integrity of me and my staff was questioned often by former library staff concerned that things were changing. Time and time again our change messages were repeated. We held on to the vision we believed in.

RESPONSIBILITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

I believe that responsibility and accountability are key in any change that involves staff. I was accountable to the Chief Executive, my peers and to the staff and responsible for steering the change. Risk taking was part of the process and brought benefits.

UNION INVOLVEMENT

Ninety percent of the Library staff were members of the New Zealand Public Service Association Union. The Libraries had already been through several reorganizations and management was only too aware of the burden and cost to staff. The prospect of job losses, retraining for different jobs, redundancy and other “fall-outs” painted a scenario for potential disaster.

I had inherited a climate of “union versus management” where each took a stance and approached problem solving with a confrontational attitude. Staff had been on strike after a round of unsuccessful employment contract negotiations. Given this scenario, we opted for a new

approach—one that would achieve the stated objectives. We made a commitment to look at the benefits for the individual staff member so they complemented those of the business. The Libraries Leadership Team viewed this exercise as an opportunity to develop a new relationship and partnership with the Union and the delegates.

To initiate the process we did our homework first. Using De Bono's colored hat methodology, my team and I set out the issues. Such a method identified the possible situations, emotions, consequences, trigger points and uncertainties of the prospective appointment process. Secondly, we involved the Union delegates and representatives in the change process. The Union became a sounding board for possible options.

Communication used with integrity was key. The ground rules were that confidentiality was respected, open communication of problems, active listening for problem solving and no hidden agendas. We developed and maintained a transparent process. The Union adopted the change process and "work together" attitude and developed with us a platform for future business development and growth. They assisted the process by continual discussion and active problem solving with staff. Any unexpected problems that arose were efficiently resolved.

The real two-way meeting point was that the Union was party to the Library management's organizational structure proposal. We met weekly and discussions resulted in frequent joint newsletters. A jointly agreed *Libraries and Union Protocol* was developed that led to the Library winning the *Local Government Award for Management Excellence*. It provided the Union with a model for other union/management working patterns around New Zealand. The result of working together was a smooth change from one structure to another and an enhanced customer-focused culture. Today we have a living, working, ongoing relationship with a genuine willingness to work together.

COMMUNICATION

The key words were and remain honesty, integrity and communication. Open and continuous communication led to transparent discussions between the staff and management.

During the change, we had a weekly *Change* newsletter, a *Change* telephone hotline whereby calls came into my office and I replied within twenty-four hours, and regularly scheduled team meetings. There were meetings with individual staff who had questions or concerns. The Change Team members became a vital contact point for questions and discussion with colleagues and our customers and a link with the rest of

the Council staff. Today we have an internal newsletter, intranet, email lists and I visit each team regularly for team briefs and exchanges of views to keep communication going.

KEYS TO OUR SUCCESS

A clear vision was crucial. The business direction “eye on the present, view to the future” underpinned the Libraries’ five year strategy. We have placed people first—customers and staff. We have made a shift from a collection focus to a customer focus. Customer interaction has become a key driver for the business. Surveys, focus groups and on-going dialogue allow us to find out what is needed. Our customers maintain that staff, books, services, technology and community buildings are important.

Staff were actively encouraged to be involved in the change process and in process designs. Their continued initiative, attitude and skill resulted and results in new ways of acting and accomplishing goals. For example, a team designed a process whereby new items would be available on the shelf five days after delivery rather than the previous three month timeline. New services, technology, collection layouts and stock set a new base line for better customer service.

Staff involvement can be seen more easily in terms of the organizational structure changes. We made a conscious decision to leave behind the old hierarchical structure. It was building based, and each building had its own hierarchical structure with little overlap between buildings. There were eleven layers in the organization in 2000. There were power brokers, “gate keepers,” and no personal responsibility was taken. Decisions were made by a few people and new ideas were “filtered out.” Length of service mattered, not competencies. The service model had stagnated, morale was low and staff were not growing and developing. The restructuring of the Libraries’ organizational structure has resulted in a future-focused flat structure. We have a smaller management structure and staff work in customer focused teams. We work as one network across the Central and Branch Libraries. Following the initial change, we made fifty-one staff positions redundant as we had developed smarter processes. Staff often devised the new processes themselves.

There are new staff positions and line responsibilities. The structure has a Libraries Leadership Team comprised of seven library managers, a marketing manager and a strategic business advisor who report to the Director. This team has negotiated and assigned service areas, financial responsibilities and strategic portfolios for the Leadership Team mem-

bers. For example, one person has overall responsibility for children's and youth services and portfolios such as building management and occupational health and safety. The individuals have also staff team responsibilities (a human resources legislation requirement). As a team, the library managers can negotiate to change roles with each other. This keeps them fresh and new services can be created easily.

Below the Libraries Leadership Team is the rest of the organization. There are specific roles with different pay rates, but organizationally the structure is flat. For example, a specific Technology Coach works with teams across the network, not only on one site. The coach role was new and has resulted in a positive attitudinal change by the staff members. The coach position was a response to the challenge of developing and empowering staff. The coaches are critical for tactical, day-to-day operational leadership. Their roles encompass facilitation and training, matching business and staff development needs. They mentor, coach, motivate and identify opportunities for improving internal and external customer service.

There is a culture of participation. The managers lead by example. Staff report that they feel part of the whole network. Each person does ten percent of their time serving at public desks. Their ideas and initiatives are valued. The most junior staff member can make a suggestion, investigate it through an Ideas Process and present it through to the leadership team or to their service team, as appropriate. Staff are empowered to make decisions and take personal responsibility for those decisions. A staff member on a front line desk is able to implement policy without referral to a senior staff member. The culture did not change overnight. It has taken five years. There are project teams that work across the network and involve a variety of staff. They become part of the decision making process and learn and develop. Staff are encouraged to develop and grow through an extensive training program. A new Library training program was developed to meet business needs and staff development. In-house teams have presented their approaches to training at national, library conferences. Each staff member has training and development tasks set as part of their six monthly tactical objectives. An individual's training needs flows through to the larger plan.

Recruitment is based on competencies. A "can do" attitude is crucial. We recruit for this attitude and provide the library training if necessary. Sixty percent of the newly hired staff have library qualifications. The Library is seen as a great place to work and we are attracting graduates from other disciplines. Our staff mirrors the diversity of the community. There is constant challenge and planning to achieve results with people. Staff will continue to be developed to support the Libraries' strategic di-

rection and services by being able to fully exploit and adapt to the challenging digital environment.

WHAT HAVE WE ACHIEVED?

1. A state-of-the-art library service for Wellingtonians with a platform for future development and growth.
2. We have shifted from involvement to people investment.
3. We have an entrepreneurial environment.
4. Wellington City Libraries has become a leader in the provision of public library service in New Zealand. We have won several awards for new initiatives and products.
5. We have a high level of customer satisfaction.
6. Staff are positive and the morale is good. Those that went through the change say they would never want to return to the old ways.

To quote from Nelson Mandela—“(we) have tried not to falter. (We) have made missteps along the way. But (we) have discovered the secret is that after climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb.”⁴

I believe that Wellington City Libraries network is customer focused, business-like and with empowered staff. I lead a vibrant libraries network and share a passion and commitment for public library services with my library colleagues—all two hundred and five of them.

NOTES

1. BRC Marketing and Social Research. *Wellington City Libraries Users Survey*, Appendix B: Verbatim reports. May 2003, p. 86.
2. King, Martin Luther Jr. *I Have a Dream* speech, Washington Civil Rights Rally, 15 June 1963.
3. Roosevelt, Anna Eleanor. *You Learn by Living*. New York, Harper, 1960.
4. Mandela, Nelson. *Long Walk to Freedom*. United Kingdom, Little Brown and Company, 1994, p.617

Mildly Delirious Libraries: Transforming your Library from Top to Bottom

Pam Sandlian Smith

Imagine this scenario: you walk past a public library and you see a drab, unkempt building. From the outside, it looks dirty, there is a faded handwritten sign taped to a window. You wander in out of curiosity and get an overwhelming sense of disrepair, old furnishings, and confused organization. The carpet is dirty, the beige paint is chipping. There are

piles of clutter everywhere. A few people are reading newspapers, but the library is essentially empty. You wander into the children's department which is drab and devoid of joyful noise of children's chatter. There are signs taped throughout the library: no children allowed without parents or guardians, no running, no talking, you are limited to 10 items per card, \$20 fee for nonresidents. The overwhelming sense you get is that this library is a place that has become irrelevant.

This is a description of the West Palm Beach Library in the mid-nineties. The library was stuck in a sixties time warp. Old rules, old furniture, old building. Unfortunately, this situation is an all too familiar scene in public libraries throughout the country. As library funding is cut, the physical environment is allowed to deteriorate. This sends a negative message that unfortunately can become self-perpetuating.

From the moment that I saw the West Palm Beach Public Library when I took over as Library Director in 1997, I knew we had our work cut out for us. The 1960's building had not been maintained, the collection was dismal and overcrowded. It had been twenty years since weeding had occurred and the marginal book budget simply didn't keep pace with the need for current books and media. There was no technology support and a computer system that had been down for six months. Everywhere one looked there were piles and files of irrelevant aging paper and machinery. The original furniture was vintage sixties. The walls were beige and dirty. The Children's department was attempting to hold things together, but there was one missing ingredient: children. You get the picture, a librarian's nightmare. This place was a mess.

THE LIBRARY THAT LOST ITS CUSTOMER BASE

While the West Palm Beach Public Library had a tradition since 1884 of being a lively, festive library at the edge of a park on the Intracoastal Waterway, it clearly had fallen upon years of bad times. It had become a forgotten institution which was almost closed due to a city funding crisis in the early nineties. The library building sitting in the center of Centennial Square was so non-descript, it was almost invisible, a stealth building. The children and families played joyfully in the new computerized fountain just outside the library's front door, but that joyful noise was not occurring inside the library. A security guard who resembled a WWF wrestler sat at the doorway inspecting visitors and making sure that children with bathing suits and flip-flops didn't sneak into the li-

brary. People had stopped coming to the library because it was no longer a safe, welcoming, friendly place.

I knew we could infuse new energy into the library and bring it back to life, but this job was going to be a challenge. Turning a library like this around was going to take more than a spark of creativity; it was going to take a structural, cultural, facilities and technological overhaul. We had to do something fast to save this patient from hemorrhaging. We started with a strategic plan developed with Aaron Cohen and Associates in 1998 which recommended shifting from basic services approach to an innovative, proactive library. City residents and businesses wanted a vibrant library. Systematically, we set out to bring the library back to life and the community back to the library.

HOUSECLEANING

First on the agenda: we rolled up our shirt sleeves and cleaned house, weeding over 50,000 books and documents. We reorganized our staffing, encouraging collaboration, speedy service delivery and customer service. The library had a tradition of excellent reference service and most of the staff were delighted to shift directions. It became apparent that some staff were not aligned with the new plan. Some elected to opt out of the team; some were encouraged to find more appropriate employment. A culture that seemed negative and somewhat stagnant needed to be redirected to focus on the looming task of reengineering and revitalizing this library. We jump started the process by focusing on staff who displayed sparks of creativity, and it soon became apparent that energy and positive problem solving attitudes were expected at the West Palm Beach Public Library.

Cataloging backlogs went from six months to a sprightly three week turn-around from the order date to receipt by a customer. The Library Advisory Board recommended a bold move: instituting a global library card. Anyone with a current picture ID qualifies for a library card at the West Palm Beach Public Library whether you live in Boston, Rome, Miami or Puerto Rico. This was the perfect solution to a snowbird community with an international seasonal population. It reminded us to welcome our guests into our library home.

We began partnering with local agencies to provide expanded services and programs. We connected with local museums, schools, businesses and media. Programs like Clematis for Kids brought children into the library while their parents were enjoying Clematis by Night, a

weekly music event held in front of the library. We were willing to experiment with programs and services, from hosting authors, creating a business reference (which didn't fly), and visiting neighborhood groups to promote the library and receive feedback. Slowly but surely things began to change. More people began using the library; they even began complaining that it was too noisy, and in our case, noisy was a very good sign.

BADLY NEEDED: IMAGE REPAIR

All of our efforts to jumpstart the library were beginning to pay off, but we weren't getting any real traction in creating a significant change in attitude by the community. The mechanical side of the library was humming, but the building was still in a state of despair. Our sense of pride in our work was diminished by a grey gloom of institutional sameness, a lack luster environment. The image of the library still conveyed a sense of hopelessness. The physical appearance of the library was sending the wrong message.

We needed a makeover in the worst way, but we were on a very limited budget. Half a million dollars was allocated for the library from the city capital projects budget. The library strategically allocated \$300,000 for a complete technology upgrade and \$200,000 for a makeover.

The executive director of our local greenmarket was recommended. Peter Robinson, President of Mildly Delirious Design, has a background in the hospitality industry where he developed the GASP process (Graphics, Ambience, Style, and Presentation.) We contracted with Peter to assist us in creating a new environment that matched our enthusiasm. As badly as we needed to refresh our interiors, we also needed to refresh or more accurately, reinvent our image. We needed the entire package from furnishings to logo to website; we needed to establish a look, a brand. Our goal was to involve a team of staff and management to develop and then deploy a common vision and image for the library.

CREATING A VISION

We used the GASP process as a tool or vehicle to achieve this cohesive vision. The process on the surface is quite simple, Peter previews the GASP program and then gives the participants homework: list ten adjectives that represent your concept of how graphics, ambience, style

and presentation should feel. The kicker is adjectives. It is so easy to insert verbs, nouns, adverbs, but he asked that we stick to adjectives and he gave us about a week to accomplish our assignment.

When the staff reconvened, (we had a team of about ten members including management and librarians) we reviewed our descriptive words, patiently listening to each other's concepts. To our amazement, our words were surprisingly similar in tone. The library that we were describing was vibrant, colorful, tropical, invigorating, refreshing, and innovative. I would never have guessed that an eclectic mix of fairly traditional librarians would simultaneously and independently imagine such an intriguing space. From that moment, a huge sigh of relief occurred. We discovered that we had a common vision, one that we could work toward together. By taking the time to create that vision, we have formed a common language, a common bond of decision making criteria that has served us now for over seven years. This vision has helped us create a cohesive personality for the library that helps us define not just how we look, but how we deliver services and our inspiring programs.

The next step was to get a design contract approved with our Board and City Commission, and then we worked on design concepts by developing a bubble diagram of traffic flow, anchors and collections. Within a limited amount of space, we needed to create more of retail, hospitality environment for the main floor which hosts the adult and teen services and collections. Once we had agreed upon a new workflow layout, Peter went to work developing concepts and color palettes. He researched carpet, furniture, mill work, and retail display fixtures. We went through two or three complete schemes of colors and carpets which needed approval by staff, Library Board, City Administration and finally City Commission.

DRESS THE LIBRARY FOR SUCCESS

As we went through the process of deciding on colors and carpets, human nature took its course and people reverted back to personal preferences when asked to decide on samples. At one point we had a huge carpet dilemma, so many choices and everyone had their favorite. Peter brought a group of twenty carpet swatches to a staff meeting, asking everyone to stand on their favorite. Choices were eclectic: pink, navy, beige, and turquoise. Then Peter began reading our adjectives and asked us to move toward the samples that met our criteria. One by one, we

eliminated the carpets that didn't fit and we narrowed our choices to the ones that met our tropical identity. The guidance of our adjectives: tropical, crisp, and fluid kept us on task when it came time to make hundreds of critical decisions.

Because we were on a very tight budget (\$200,000) for the main floor, (including ceiling tiles) and then \$100,000 (from our annual Florida Library State Aid funding) for the children's department, we had to maximize every purchase. On the main floor, the decision to open the library up to our beautiful waterfront view guided our color scheme of ochre, sea blue and green, which ultimately guided the carpet decision. We found a carpet company that allows you to customize your carpet through a computerized process. The client selects the pattern, the yarn colors and the weave. This carpet was more expensive than typical state contract government carpet, the quality of the product eventually won over our procurement director.

Fortunately for this project, there were no structural changes, and minimal electric work. Other key items in establishing our look were paint, millwork for a new circulation and reference desk, display furnishings for media, signage and computer furniture. We reused existing tables and chairs out of budget necessity. The floor was finished off by purchasing outdoor furniture and tropical fans to create the casual, tropical, welcoming atmosphere. Peter Robinson very generously helped us stay on budget by shopping at thrift stores for used furniture and brought fabric swatches at bargain stores to upholster cushions and chairs.

The results: magnificent. The makeover was so cost effective and it produced inspiring results overnight. Our grey boring space was as luxurious as a hotel lobby, cozy, warm and welcoming. The space was so beautiful it received rave reviews, even from our toughest critics. Palm Beach residents sat in front of our gorgeous water view reading next to our homeless customers and everyone seemed contented. Teens started noting that the library was one of the coolest places in town.

GRAPHICS TO THE RESCUE

In tandem with the interior work, we created a graphics scheme involving logos, signs, and banners. We went through three graphic designers before we found a graphic representation that fit our concept. Since the initial logo design, we have evolved into yet another logo

which provides even more fluidity for our image and all of our communications.

Staff used the GASP concept statement as we developed our website, our publications, business cards, library newsletter, program flyers and ads placed in our local newspaper. The repetition of our image is communicated in a professional, cohesive manner—aiding in our branding as

FIGURE 1. West Palm Beach Public Library Graphic

GASP

- G = Graphics – image projected
- A = Ambience – the feeling in the air
- S = Style – service approach
- P = Presentation – personality and programs



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a unique tropical, innovative library. The discipline of utilizing a style sheet, so to speak, sometimes provoked a concern that we were stifling creativity. However, after years of working through many hits and misses, staff understand the value of a cohesive look to all of our materials. The graphics changes have evolved over a number of years; as funding became available we have added additional elements. Each element that we add builds on the branding of the library and creates recurring value and image recognition. I see people all over town carrying our beautiful library bags. Families walking to the store, people on bicycles, business men walking downtown, all carrying our recognizable bag with the West Palm Beach at the cost of about twenty cents a bag.

DON'T FORGET THE CHILDREN'S LIBRARY

Once the main floor was complete, we gathered the children's staff and completed a complimentary round of GASP. We wanted the children's department to provide a continuum of the adult space, but have its own identity and sense of frivolity. Adjectives from the children's team included: submerged, snorkeling, calming, nourishing, intriguing and approachable, magical, dancing, curiosity generating and adaptable.

The challenge of the children's department may have been even greater than on the main floor. Unlike the adult services area, the children's department had no great view, just a concrete jungle and about 2,500 square feet of fixed book stacks with poles supporting the main floor. This severely limited our options for creating the multiple zones required for a dynamic children's department serving babies, parents, grandparents, toddlers, preschoolers and older kids. Attempting to create both quiet and active spaces challenged our best sense of space planning. Once again, using an out of box thinking style, our designer pushed some of our barriers by removing shelves from the shelving units and converted the remaining "poles" into desks for a homework or quiet game space.

As in the adult area, key features in the children's department are the carpet, warm tropical paint colors, millwork that turns the reference desk into the bow of a pirate ship. Accents to complete the package include tropical Adirondack chairs, mesmerizing water bubble fountains, and aquatic murals to give the sense of being underwater, or the calm of snorkeling. Built into the reference desk is a series of snorkeling masks set at toddler height for gazing into an underwater diorama.

PHOTO 1. West Palm Beach Public Library: Before



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PHOTO 2. West Palm Beach Public Library: After



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If it is possible, the response from the redo of the children's department might be even more positive than the adult makeover. The colors are warm and engaging, almost like a bright porcelain bowl. They draw you in as you walk into the space. We wanted to highlight the books in age appropriate zones and bring out the non-fiction that had been buried in the prison-like stacks. The computers are always a draw, but we wanted the entire library to have a sense of discovery. We splurged on some beautiful Italian fish lighting that set the stage for an underwater cove. The space features a craft area with rubberized flooring for easy clean up, a small story hour area, a movie space, a pre-school-toddler-baby space with grownup chairs for parents to spend time reading or chatting with each other.

IT GOES BEYOND PAINT AND CARPETING

Changing our interiors has gone beyond new carpets and furniture; it has changed the way we do business. Staff defined the library that we wanted to become and this language has guided our design process and continues to guide our thinking as we develop and grow into a refreshing library that strives to make its customers happy. A library has to deliver more than a pleasing look; it has to work to continuously to deliver great products, services and programs. Just like a company, a library cannot rest on past laurels; it must stay ahead of the curve.

PROGRAMS INVIGORATE THE LIBRARY; CREATE AN EXPERIENCE

Adjacent to the children's department is a meeting room which has been commandeered by the children's staff as their black box theater like space. They stage impressive theater-like interactive book experiences for special occasions like summer reading or holiday programs. The Polar Express program has become a huge hit with families over the past two years. This summer reading program features the book, *Eragon* by Christopher Paolini and encourages children to become dragon riders. The entire library is participating in the summer reading theme: Ignite your Imagination.

Establishing the library as place is sometimes more difficult with adult programs. One huge success that the library has encountered is a Friday Night Jazz series sponsored by the Palm Beach Post. The event turns the li-

brary into a jazz club for two hours a month, the second Friday night of the month, where we host a local jazz combo arranged by JAMS (Jazz Arts Music Society) and serve wine by the glass through a local wine merchant, Wine Living. This program consistently draws crowds of over 200 people who simply enjoy listening to some fabulous music while sipping a drink. The occasion brings people who never have visited the library and turns them into regular users and adamant supporters of a library that is filled to the brim with a sense of *joire de vivre*.

AT YOUR SERVICE

Focusing our attention on an image makeover provided new interiors, but more significantly, a revision in the way staff interacted with customers. Over the past years, our customer service approach has been developing in an organic fashion. The management team has developed a series of customer service training packages which draws on staff experiences in the hospitality field. We treat our customers as guests, welcoming them into our library as if it were our home. The management team visited the Ritz Carlton for a day of concierge training. We analyzed the Ritz Carlton customer service style and decided it was too formal: ladies and gentlemen serving ladies and gentlemen. That did not fit our casual style that was a bit more informal and whimsical. We developed a customer service card that outlines our service expectations and guidelines that is used in training and mentoring staff.

THE BOTTOM LINE

So what? The result of paying attention to our presentation and service style pays off daily. The most common comment from library customers is “I love this library.” We regularly receive customer comment cards such as the following:

“Awesome.”

“The best library ever!”

“Amazing. I am so pleased to have an amazing library for this region. The staff are problem solvers and courteous. The movies are first class and the book selection is ever improving.”

The library statistics reinforce these comments. An underutilized library that was barely holding its own now displays a robust community support and use. Circulation has tripled, customer visits have doubled, and our budget has more than doubled since 1997. Library card registrations have climbed from 15,000 to our current 80,000.

The take-away from this experiment? Appearances count. When a library looks worn out, it can be more easily dismissed as non-essential. If we want our public to take the library seriously, we have to respect ourselves enough to invest in regular physical maintenance and upgrades, fresh paint, and colors, clean furnishings and tidy surroundings. Looking good is not an option, it is a requirement.

Ambiance is key. When you walk into a space, you immediately generate an impression from the space. Some libraries generate a sense of formality or aloofness, a sense of superiority that intimidates people. In West Palm Beach, we work on creating a sense of welcome. We want to be respected, but approachable. When I walk into the library, which is many times each day, I always feel like I want to smile, I feel a sense of warmth, and an invigorating charge of curiosity, a sense that everything is right in the space.

Cohesive, integrated planning pays off. When everything and everyone work together in a cohesive manner, each element supports the brand, and the result is greater than the sum of the individual parts.

Language is a powerful tool. By using language to paint our vision, we began imagining our future. Instead of beige, bureaucratic institution, we became a surprising oasis of knowledge. The West Palm Beach Public Library will never have the best or largest collection and cannot begin to compete with the large, popular library systems, but by claiming we are the nicest library in the world, we have set our sights high, and it gives us a mission, to try to offer the friendliest service to each and every customer. Words are remarkable. They can create powerful energy and direction. They pointed us in the right direction and they reinforce our every move. We have become that generous, whimsical, innovative, approachable, energetic library. It all started by creating that word picture . . . and then connecting all the pieces into a cohesive, thoughtful package.