



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
September 9, 2005

“Marketing is an organizational function and a set of processes for creating, communicating, and delivering value to customers and for managing customer relationships in ways that benefit the organization and its shareholders.”

-From “Dictionary of Marketing Terms” on American Marketing Association website (marketingpower.com)

I am taking a marketing class this semester and I am beginning to understand the difference between marketing and publicity. So far my favorite definition of publicity - or promotion, as it is also called - is from Seiss’ book *Visible Librarian*. Quoting Darlene Weingand, she says: “[Promotion is] communicating to present and potential clients that the library has identified community needs and developed cost-effective products and methods of distribution that respond to those needs.”

This definition appeals to me because it tells us the library has looked at what people want and figured out ways to give it to them. Of course, the challenge in this is the juxtaposition of what our library patrons want and our mission statement. The mission statement is the ultimate guide to what we do - it is where we go when we wonder about adding or taking away services, programs and materials. It also

reminds us to remember to balance the stated desires of the majority and the needs of the minority. As I’ve mentioned in previous columns, I think the word “public” in “public library” means everyone. And so, unlike a bookstore that may specialize in the latest publications of everything from DVDs to books to CDs, a public library must continue to provide those as well as old favorites, and eclectic and infrequently requested items.

Part of the dilemma is that public libraries already exist, and so they carry with them certain historic expectations. Changing what we provide or how we provide it can make both the public and the staff uneasy - and yet if we don’t, it will be difficult to continue to exist.

Marketing a library is not the same as marketing for a profit business. At the library we can only judge our success by use, gate count (how many people use the library over a

period of time) and circulation – how many and which items are being used. We can also ask our users – either informally or through surveys or focus groups. And in the long run we can judge our success by how the voters vote. If we have done our marketing well, and people understand the vast array of possibilities in a public library – online databases, storytimes, public Internet access, homework centers, author visits, film series, new books, CDs, DVDs, and so on – the voters will continue to support us.

To my mind, libraries are even more important now than ever before. We are like the little store near my family’s cabin - you can find almost anything you want there. I love to walk up and down the aisles and see rubber toilet gaskets hanging next to fuses on one side and candy bars on the other. On spinning racks there are videos, paperbacks and

DVDs. Around the corner, there is beer in the refrigerator, alongside juice and soft drinks. There’s dog food, baby food and ice cream bars. The newspaper rack is above the logs and the cereal is across from the salad ingredients, not far from the sunscreen, lip balm, hammers, diapers and everything else one could need or ask for while vacationing in the mountains.

Public libraries are the general stores of the library world. We try to anticipate new needs, while at the same time we keep providing the library equivalent of eggs, milk and bread. We do this by listening and letting people know we listened – and that is marketing.