

BRAND-AID®
Corporate Marketing Methods
in Library and Information Services

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Introduction

One key element of any modern library management policy is public relations. In the last few decades, public relations in libraries—whether in a public, academic or special collections setting—has focused on customer service. Every interaction between librarian and patron, from reference to circulation, centers around providing access to the best and most accurate information available. Yet in recent years, libraries have faced increasing competition from other information providers such as bookstores and online search services like Google. Library administrators are finding that they need to go beyond the customer service focus of public relations and adopt marketing practices from the corporate world in order to differentiate themselves from their commercial competition and continue attracting patrons and their support. One marketing technique libraries and library associations have borrowed is branding. This paper defines branding and the related concepts of corporate image, corporate identity, and relationship marketing. It presents some advantages and disadvantages of this technique and explores how branding has been interpreted and used in the information service industry. The Special Libraries Association's recent process of brand identity creation is documented as a case study.

What Is Branding?

The term “brand” comes from the old cowboy method of identifying livestock by burning a unique mark on the cattle's flesh with a hot iron. Its application in business, however, is not quite as painful. The American Marketing Association defines a brand as “a name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as

distinct from those of other sellers” (American Marketing Association). A simple example of this type of identifying brand is McDonald’s golden arches—the hungry customer knows that he will soon be eating a Big Mac and not a Whopper.

At first glance, the American Marketing Association’s product-based definition of brand seems at odds with the service-oriented mission of libraries. However, broader interpretations of branding demonstrate that branding is not solely a logo or symbol physically appearing on a product, but can also be “an image, an identity system, a value system, a relationship and a personality” (Rowley 2003, 17). An example of this type of brand is Nike’s Just Do It™ campaign, which goes beyond merely identifying a running shoe, but creates associations of fitness, health and competitive drive. This broader interpretation of brand is a value-added definition, where the added value exists only in the mind and memory of the customer (Dempsey, 32). Brands evoke recognition and associations in people, create demand for goods and services, and are ultimately “subject to the consumer’s emotional response, interpretation, and recall” (Hollis, 26).

Brand Elements and Characteristics

There are several elements that typically make up a brand. A **brand name** is the part of a brand that can be spoken, usually words or numbers. A **brand mark** is that part that cannot be spoken, like a symbol or design. A **trademark** is the legal designation of exclusive brand use. A **trade name** is the name of an organization, rather than of an individual product (Rowley 1997, 244-5). While nonprofit and service organizations may brand specific products, it is more likely that they focus on branding the company

through corporate identity and corporate image. It is important to distinguish between these two concepts because they comprise the type of branding in which most libraries engage. **Corporate identity** is focused inward; it is how the company views itself, its values and mission. **Corporate image** is an outside force, and is the way the customer perceives the company. While a company can control its identity, it cannot control its image, which is shaped by customers' previous experiences with that company's products or services. The challenge then, is for companies "to align corporate identity with corporate image" (Rowley 1997, 246).

At its simplest level, a brand serves to identify a product. However, consumers are savvy and sophisticated and require more than a recognizable brand to influence their purchase decisions. Successful brands contain added values that satisfy non-functional emotional needs such as social acceptance and prestige. These added values are pertinent to service providers like libraries, because they promote the practice of relationship building. Also called **relationship marketing**, this process strives to develop and retain long-term loyal customers by "creating mutually beneficial relationships that go beyond simple transactions" (de Chernatony and McDonald, 31). The focus is not on short-term single transactions, but rather on many transactions over several years that continue to "forge relationships with customers" (Rowley 2003, 14).

Why Brand?

The local public library is no longer the only information provider in town. It faces external competition from profit-driven bookstores and from the Internet, both of which

are not only rivals in terms of information provision, but also in leisure pursuit (Hood and Henderson, 17). Bookstores attract many customers who normally do not patronize libraries in large numbers, specifically older teens who are drawn to bookstores because of marketing techniques that make libraries seem boring by comparison. Ironically, many of the customer-friendly features of modern bookstores originated in libraries: comfortable chairs that encourage sitting and reading, children's story hour, book discussion groups, even the décor that recreates a 19th century library's oak paneling and bookcases. All of this has prompted one librarian to wonder, "We have both a heritage and an identity that bookstores envy. If they can market our wares so successfully, shouldn't we be doing the same" (Woodward, xiv-xv)? In fact, many libraries are actively pursuing corporate marketing techniques, especially branding. What was once considered "an alien commercial process, inconsistent with the core values of public service," is now quite common (Rowley 2003, 13).

Advantages of Branding in a Library Context

In a purely corporate context, the main advantage of branding is promoting future income. If a brand is successful, it ensures that loyal customers will make repeated purchases of the branded product. Libraries' missions are not focused on selling a product and making money. Rather, they are service-oriented, providing free access to books and information. Nevertheless, branding still has many advantages for libraries and library associations such as: awareness, loyalty, prestige, clarity, and promotion. Branding can increase library user awareness by highlighting various library services like specialized reference or preservation activities. It can promote user loyalty, especially if

the branding process is focused on relationship building rather than on individual transactions. Effective branding can enhance a library's prestige and can provide clarity through a greater understanding of library services. Finally, brands can serve as powerful promotions and can transform a library's image. An example of this is the American Library Association's "@yourlibrary" campaign, which is a branded program designed to promote libraries' technical services and challenge traditional stereotypes (Hood and Henderson, 21).

Disadvantages of Branding

Although branding is a proven effective marketing technique, it also has some potential drawbacks, especially in a library setting where money and resources are scarce. Brands are expensive to establish and often require many years of promotion before consumers begin to associate specific attributes with a brand. A successful brand may become so firmly associated with a company name that it becomes difficult for a company to change the attributes of their product or service. Brands need to be maintained and continually brought to the attention of the consumer. Finally, it is difficult to calculate the monetary value of a brand, which is necessary to determine the budget needed for brand development and maintenance (Rowley 1997, 247-8).

Branding in the Information Service Industry: The SLA Example

Libraries may choose to brand an individual service along "product" lines. They may also play host to branded services that are essentially externally originated and delivered locally such as learndirect. Individual libraries themselves may be branded, alternatively the local authority may choose to brand the service as a whole. National strategies tend to be more focused on promotion and advocacy (Hood and Henderson, 21).

As Hood and Henderson indicate above, branding in the information service industry can vary in scope from service-specific branding in an individual branch library, to a nationwide brand identity sponsored by a national organization like the Special Libraries Association (SLA).

In 2001, the SLA created a Branding Task Force to determine how its future as an organization could be more in line with their members' skills and experiences. The organization realized that since its founding in 1909, fundamental changes had occurred in the tools special librarians use, the services they provide and the skills they require. The SLA was at a "strategic inflection point—that is, a critical juncture in [its] evolution" (Romaine, 14). The Task Force decided that re-branding was necessary to reflect these changes. The SLA's processes and considerations in the creation of a brand identity are worthy of review because they highlight many branding recommendations for nonprofits in marketing literature. Also, the SLA's experience in forming their corporate identity can serve as a model for other libraries or library groups considering creating their own brand identity.

One of the most important elements in any nonprofit's brand is their mission statement and core values. Marketing experts recommend that a nonprofit's mission statement be specific and realistic, so as to be credible in the eyes of potential patrons or donors (Chiagouris, 32). The SLA began their branding process by examining the core values that were outlined at the organization's founding to determine if those values were still

applicable. The Branding Task Force decided that while the 1909 core values themselves were still valid, the language describing them was out of date, and so rewrote the core values using modern terms. In this way, the SLA completed the first step in creating a brand identity: it specified its core values, which are that “information professionals in special settings provide services to unique clients, customize resources, formats, and services, and adapt to future needs” (Romaine, 13).

The next step in creating a brand is threefold: deciding whether a brand would be beneficial, determining the objectives of branding and if the objectives of branding can realistically be achieved (Rowley 1997, 248). The Branding Task Force decided that creating a brand would indeed be beneficial. Their objectives in creating a brand—to express the SLA’s core values, to maintain consistency of message and mission, to have dynamic programs—would forge stronger connections with current members as well as provide incentives for new members to join (Romaine, 14). The Task Force also set realistic goals, limiting their branding efforts to a new name and a new logo.

The Special Libraries Association was not creating an entirely new brand identity from scratch. Rather, they were re-branding their existing image. An important consideration when re-branding is to be aware that existing services already have an image with consumers. To minimize consumer confusion and to maintain credibility, a company’s new image must remain consistent with the old (Rowley 1997, 248). The SLA’s main re-branding effort was to effect a name change that would better reflect members’ professional diversity as well as the organization’s core mission. However, members also

wanted to have a name that did not abandon the concept of librarianship, which they thought differentiated them from computer organizations. The Branding Task Force recommended two possible name changes: Information Professionals International and SLA (initials only). The first choice, whose advocates wished for more radical change within the organization, was general enough to include professionals with titles like Media Specialist and Electronic Resources Manager without alienating those members with the more traditional job title of librarian.

SLA members voted on the name change at the 2003 annual conference. They decided to retain the original name of Special Libraries Association, which according to then-President Cynthia Hill, “allows us to build on our heritage over the past century, while keeping our focus on the expanding information economy of the 21st” (Special Libraries Association). Although the vote was an anticlimactic end to the three years of research by the Branding Task Force, the decision to not change the name nonetheless fulfills another expert recommendation that a brand name should be easy to say, spell and recall (Rowley 1997, 249).

Conclusion

Branding within the branch library context promotes services, increases public awareness and creates loyal long-term users. Branding at the national level, such as within an organization like the Special Libraries Association, benefits the library profession as a whole by promoting a consistent message and image. Branding has traditionally been viewed as a commercial marketing tool that creates instant recognition and evokes

positive associations to entice customers to repeatedly purchase a product. This profit-driven motive does not seem to have a place in service-oriented libraries, but this is a mistaken perception. Rather, “public and academic library managers have embraced marketing activities and, even, to some extent a marketing philosophy,” (Rowley 2003, 13) and can continue to do so without compromising their commitment to free information access and community-focused service.

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