

## **Beyond the Newsletter: Concrete Guidelines and Innovative Ideas for Effective Promotion**

Even the most fabulous collections, programs, and services can all languish underutilized and ill-attended without effective promotion. At times, even the most creative among us can become stymied and fall into a rut, relying on the same promotional techniques for all library offerings. Considering other public libraries' successful promotions, along with their underlying marketing principles, can help infuse new life in stale routines. This article presents ten guidelines for effective promotion, illustrated by real library practices.

### **1. Prepare the Way**

Before promoting something to the public, the library staff should first lay the necessary groundwork. At the most obvious level, this requires making sure that the collection, service, or program to be promoted is ready for use or sign up. For example, collection resources need to be ready to circulate, of appeal to the intended audience, and available in sufficient quantity that the promotion will not create demand that cannot be met in a reasonable period. Additional customer service supports must also be in place. Internal promotion can help ensure that all frontline staff know at least the basics about the collection, service, or program slated for external promotion so that patrons will receive ready, accurate answers when they begin inquiring about the campaign. Moreover, internal promotion can build a sense of excitement about the offering that

staff will be able to communicate to patrons.

Ideally, internal promotion will complement a broader customer service program, well integrated into the fabric of library operations, as poor service can undermine even the best planned promotion. Bookstore owner Palmer Cook nicely encapsulates this point: “Marketing money might as well be shredded if customer service isn’t up to snuff.”{1} The same holds true in libraries. The positive correlation between customer satisfaction and employee satisfaction also merits at least brief mention. Happy, empowered employees are much better equipped to provide outstanding service than disgruntled workers.

The following examples demonstrate how two libraries have prepared the way for library staff:

- At a spring all-staff meeting, the Public Library of Des Moines (Iowa) hosted a speaker who shared inspirational strategies and information about early childhood literacy. The staff then received information about the library’s upcoming summer reading club to help them serve as knowledgeable “ambassadors” for the program.{2}
- The Columbus (Ohio) Metropolitan Library’s mission statement professes a commitment “to providing exceptional service to all.” To ensure consistent, uniform customer service delivery, both internally and externally, the library

created CLASS (Customers Leaving Appreciative, Satisfied, and Sold), a one-day training program that all staff attend. Employees' performance evaluations include an assessment of how well they demonstrate the skills and behaviors learned at this program, reinforcing its importance. {3}

## **2. Match the Method to the Market**

One of the most fundamental promotional principles, this guideline presupposes that librarians have a particular target market, or specific subset of the service population, in mind for the message they are trying to communicate. Rather than using a standard laundry list of promotional methods, librarians consider the characteristics and needs of this intended audience when designing techniques to reach them. This applies to both the selection of promotional channels (e.g, Web site articles, newspaper advertisements, personal testimonial) and the way the message is crafted (i.e., wording, graphic design, etc.) For example:

- “Standard” promotional methods, like flyers, newspapers, and radio, didn’t reach or register with the teen mothers and fathers the Woodson Regional Library of the Chicago Public Library sought to recruit for a parenting course. Ultimately, the Library connected with its target audience by working with institutions that already had contact with teen parents, like hospitals and the Department of Public Aid. {4}
- The Charlotte (North Carolina) Public Library’s liaison to the Hispanic community

realized that to promote the library's "Early Intervention Reading Program" adequately, she also needed to emphasize the importance of storytelling and reading to children. She laid this groundwork by taking flyers to health fairs, festivals, schools, churches, and other organizations that serve Hispanics; speaking on radio programs; and writing articles that appeared in a local Hispanic newspaper. {5}

### **3. Customize the Message**

Relationship marketing encourages libraries to build long-term, mutually beneficial relationships with their customers and find ways to see and treat each customer as an individual. By staying in touch with changing customer needs and fulfilling them, libraries increase user satisfaction and repeat business. Befitting a library's mission, this practice can also maximize resources, as evidenced by research indicating that attracting a new customer costs three to nine times more than retaining a current customer {6}

A customized promotion communicates information likely to be of interest to a particular individual. It may also include a personalized salutation. However, note that using the latter without the former can backfire, generating hostility. (Consider personalized spam or telemarketers who ask for you by first name.) These techniques have traditionally been the realm of libraries with relatively small customer bases or with very frequent

patrons who staff get to know personally. Information technology makes it feasible to customize promotions in larger settings as well. For example:

- When two branches of the West Lothian (Scotland) Public Library Service were ready to re-open after being closed for renovation, the library sent a welcome pack, with a letter, schedule of events, bookmarks, booklists, balloons, and more, to registered borrowers who had not used the library during the six months before it closed. As a control, librarians also tracked use among another group of similarly lapsed borrowers at another library. The personal invitation to return to the library succeeded. Of the two groups of borrowers who received packs, 32.5 percent and 25.1 percent returned to the library; of the control group, only 4.2 percent came back. {7}
- Since mid-1997, the MatchBook service of the Morton Grove (Illinois) Public Library has allowed patrons who complete an interest profile to receive a monthly, automatically-generated list of new materials suited to their tastes. {8}

#### **4. Look for Opportunities to Add-On, or “Do You Want Fries with That?”**

When possible, tack promotion onto service provision. At the most basic level, this occurs when the circulation clerk checking out feng shui books to a patron mentions that the library has an upcoming program on that topic or slips a program flyer in one of the books. The library can also display a selection of feng shui materials in the room where

the program is held or en route to it. Remember, too, that great customer service can help build relationships, foster patron loyalty, and lead to outstanding word-of-mouth promotion. For example:

- The Monterey County (California) Free Libraries both provided a valuable service and obtained favorable exposure for the library when it brought its bookmobile to an emergency shelter for hundreds forced from their homes by heavy flooding. {9}
- The Westport (Connecticut) Public Library places books in doctors' office waiting rooms, each containing a letter inviting the reader to the library for "more good books just like this one." {10}

## **5. Collaborate**

Working with other agencies and organizations can increase effectiveness in both service provision and promotion, as shown in the Woodson Regional Library example above. Collaborations can range from very informal cooperation to highly structured partnerships. Whatever form it takes, a collaborative effort will be most successful when communication between parties is open and relationships develop between individuals as well as institutions. {11} For example:

- In a twist on the waiting room reading collection, the Fullerton (California) Public Library's bookmobile has attracted customers waiting for medical services by

following a local hospital's healthmobile route through the Latino community. {12}

- The Minnesota Library Association hit a promotional grand slam working with the Minnesota Twins to depict professional baseball players with books and the caption, "READ every chance you get." The images have appeared on posters hung in libraries, health clinics, child-care centers, correctional facilities, and on 20 billboards in the Twin Cities. {13}
- In Decatur, Illinois the library, hospitals, and schools cooperatively formed Baby TALK (Teaching Activities for Learning and Knowledge), a nonprofit organization committed to early childhood development and parenting education. Baby TALK's many services include a hospital visit after delivery that introduces the program; library lapsit programs for children aged one to three; and family story times. The program has been replicated in 28 states and Canada. {14}
- The Chicago Public Library, Chicago Police Department, The Chicago Transit Authority, and the Chicago Public Art Group joined forces to recruit talented high school students to paint a city bus with a route between two branches. The "Knowledge Express," a unique and highly visible advertisement on wheels, features the students' original artwork and the caption, "Two Libraries Under Blue Skies. Albany Park and Douglass Branch Libraries." {15}

## **6. Cultivate Confederates**

Similar to collaborating, this approach focuses on building relationships with influential members of a particular community to better serve and reach other group members.

The input the confederate provides helps the library better understand the needs of that segment of the population and overcome barriers to service, such as those presented by culture, language, or age. The library earns the confederate's trust by responding to his or her feedback and shaping desirable collections, services, and programs. The confederate becomes a library advocate whose approval increases other community members' knowledge of and confidence in the library. For example:

- The Charlotte (North Carolina) Public Library's liaison to the Hispanic community, whose efforts are introduced above, also developed relationships with Hispanic mothers living in areas with concentrated Hispanic populations. These "Mom Leaders" invited the liaison into their homes to present programs. They also told neighbors, friends and family about the service. {16}
- Dwindling attendance at the Tuckahoe (New York) Public Library's monthly "Stories in Japanese" program prompted librarians to talk with a group of Japanese residents. Their input helped the library design programs of greater interest to the Japanese community and also opened up the extremely effective avenue of word-of-mouth promotion. Consequently, more Japanese residents began attending these programs and using the library in other ways more frequently, too. {17}

## **7. Pitch Your Message to the Media**

Cultivating media contacts can increase the likelihood of library press releases being

published and public service announcements aired. Some media outlets may even be willing to donate regular space to library messages. In addition to seeking “free” publicity (which always requires some expenditure of resources, most notably staff time), budgeting for advertising can be a powerful promotional tool. Paid advertising gives the library much more control over whether, where, and when its messages are disseminated. It may also make media more disposed to provide free publicity at other times. For example:

- The Manatee County (Florida) Public Library System staff members write a weekly column for the local newspaper that highlights library resources in a featured subject area. {18}
- The Morris County (New Jersey) Library reaches approximately 110,000 listeners each week with the two-minute radio spot it has been airing for over a decade during morning drive time. {19}
- The \$100,000 that the St. Louis (Missouri) Public Library has allotted annually for advertising in recent years has also helped the library receive in-kind media contributions, totaling over \$260,000 per year. {20}

## **8. Hit ‘Em Where They Live (and Work and Shop...)**

Disseminate the library’s message where people spend time each day. Make it as easy as possible for people seeking information about the library to find it. (The library newsletter itself may exemplify this principle, especially when distributed in multiple

forms—hardcopy, electronically via the Web site, and electronically via e-mail to registered subscribers.) Communicating throughout the community also increases the probability that those not actively seeking information about the library will encounter it anyway in the course of their daily pursuits. For example:

- The Schaumburg Township (Illinois) District Library distributed information about the library, including photographs and statistics, on tray placemats handed to between 500 and 2,500 customers a day at two area McDonald's restaurants during National Library Week. {21}
- Five public library districts near Stockholm, Sweden created a newspaper touting the benefits of library use and distributed 80,000 copies at railway and bus stations. Data collected several weeks later showed that over 30 percent of commuters received the paper; of these, over 80 percent took it home or to work, and 20 percent learned about new library services through it. {22}
- When the Sno-Isle (Washington) Regional Library System initiated kindergarten class visits at the start of the school year, the number of cards given out to kindergarteners increased by 19 percent over the previous year. {23}
- Over a six-month period, staff at the Lucy Robbins Welles (Newington, Connecticut) Library visited 50 area businesses to talk to employees about library services. The corporate community's enthusiasm for the program led city administrators, the Chamber of Commerce, and the Economic Development Commission to contribute \$5,000 for it to continue. {24}

## 9. Visibility, Visibility, Visibility

Ensuring that the library has a presence at local events reminds the community of the library's existence and services. It also helps position the library in people's minds as an active, integral part of the community. In addition to participating in special occasions or community celebrations, staff, Board members, or volunteers may represent the library at meetings on a regular (e.g., for the city council, the school board, etc.) or periodic (e.g., for special interest clubs, service organizations, etc.) basis. Representation at other routine community happenings (e.g., a farmers' market or Friday night concert series) also helps raise the library's profile. Additionally, the library can create its own events, both to provide service and to promote itself. For example:

- The Indianapolis-Marion County (Indiana) Public Library entered a float in the 125<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Indianapolis 500 Festival parade, promoting itself to the 250,000 people in attendance and winning an award to boot. {25}
- To celebrate the 350th birthday of the city, librarians from the Springfield (Massachusetts) City Library, community leaders, and city schools sponsored a four-month "Seussamania" festival honoring hometown author Theodor (Dr. Seuss) Geisel. Dressed as the Cat in the Hat or Sneetches, librarians visited each classroom in nine elementary schools to introduce less-familiar Seuss books. The library displayed hundreds of pieces of children's artwork portraying Seuss characters and hosted a performance of *The Lorax*. Circulation of

children's books increased 50 percent systemwide during the festival, which the media covered extensively. {26}

- The Evanston (Illinois) Public Library's Speaker's Bureau offers local organizations a variety of free 20- to 45-minute programs, such as "Raising Readers," "Business Information Resources at the Evanston Public Library," and "Online at Home: The Cheapest, Easiest Solutions." {27}

## **10. Blitz 'Em**

Repeated exposure to the same message can increase the chances that the information will be noted and remembered. Although resources will likely not permit this approach for everything, trying to get the word out through as many avenues as possible can be particularly effective, especially for a concentrated period. For example:

- Over twenty-five years ago, public, school, university, and special librarians from Fairbanks, Alaska organized a one-year campaign to increase community awareness of the cramped, underused, and understaffed public library. The librarians produced photographic spreads of library facilities for area newspapers; enlisted local movie theaters, television stations, and radio stations to play film and sound clips advertising library services and collections; reviewed works in the collection in area newspapers and on the radio on a weekly basis; exhibited twentieth century bestsellers in the library and at the Fairbanks International Airport; and disseminated lists of works about Alaska and its history.

As a result, the community's knowledge and use of the library increased and the city of Fairbanks funded a new library building. {28}

- Throughout National Library Week in 1997, the Carson City (Nevada) Public Library sponsored hourly programs, promoted through flyers, posters, articles in the local newspaper and the city's parks and recreation newsletter, mailings to other city departments and area libraries, word-of-mouth, and radio and television public service announcements, including a rap aired on a local cable station. Library attendance for the week increased to 133 percent of average attendance. {29}
- During Britain's National Libraries Week, the Birmingham (England) Libraries offered 210 events, including quizzes, parties, tours, and giveaways. The library cosponsored the festivities with a local bookstore, promoting them via 300 street signs, 28 radio ads, and television, radio, and newspaper coverage. Both bookstore and library staffers also wore sweatshirts publicizing the week. The number of patrons registering that week increased by as much as 100 percent at some library locations, and over 50 percent of those surveyed at non-library locations knew it was National Libraries Week. {30}

## **Conclusion**

Others' experiences can be an excellent source of inspiration, particularly when reflecting not only on how an idea was implemented but also why it worked as well as it did. I hope that the guidelines and examples described here spark a successful

promotional venture at your library. If so, I encourage you to share your story, optimally in print, to continue the chain of ideas. Swapping tales of accomplishment at meetings can prime attendees' creative pumps. However, by publishing your experience it becomes accessible to a much wider audience, transcending the bounds of location and time. Submitting items to *Public Libraries'* "Tales from the Front" and similar news columns in other (preferably indexed) journals provides a real service to the profession. Chronicling achievements on PubLib and other (preferably archived) electronic discussion lists also has value. {31}{32}

Yet even with resources like this, it can be difficult to locate thought-provoking illustrations of marketing practices. The creation of a local or national idea database on the Web could greatly increase the availability of inspiring anecdotes. Such a resource would categorize, briefly describe, and give contact information for worthy promotional efforts that librarians could self-submit via a simple Web form. Natural candidates to embark upon such a venture include state libraries or marketing/promotion sections of library associations. Easy access to good ideas can help build vibrant, heavily used, and well-supported libraries, ideals worth pursuing.

## **References**

1. Steve Sherman, "Service, the Bookseller's Prelude to Promotion," *Publishers Weekly* 241, no. 19 (1994): 24-25.

2. Jan Danielson Kaiser, conversation with the author, May 21, 2003.
  
3. Wendy Ramsey, Diane Spradlin, and Larry Allen. "A Touch of CLASS: The Columbus Metropolitan Library's Customer Service Training is a Plus for Patrons and Staff." *Ohio Libraries* 10, no. 1 (1997): 22-23.
  
4. Mary K. Chelton, ed., *Excellence in Library Services to Young Adults: The Nation's Top Programs*. 2d ed., (Chicago: American Library Association, 1997).
  
5. Irania Macías Patterson, "Charlotte Public Library Speaks Español: Approaching the Hispanic Community Through Storytelling," *North Carolina Libraries* 56, no. 4 (1998): 145-47.
  
6. Tom Duncan and Sandra E. Moriarty, "A Communication-based Marketing Model for Managing Relationships," *Journal of Marketing* 62, no. 2 (1998): 1-13;  
Lois Geller, "Customer Retention Begins with the Basics," *Direct Marketing* 60, no. 5 (1997): 58-62.
  
7. George D. Kerr, *Gaining and Retaining Customer Loyalty*, Homepage of Bertelsmann Foundation. Accessed May 23, 2003, [www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/documents/customer\\_loyalty\\_englisch.pdf](http://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/documents/customer_loyalty_englisch.pdf).
  
8. "MatchBook: How, When, and Why: A Service of the Morton Grove Public Library,"

Homepage of Morton Grove Public Library. Accessed May 23, 2003,  
[www.webrary.org/rs/matchbookhist.html](http://www.webrary.org/rs/matchbookhist.html) (and linked pages).

9. "Library Responds to Flood," *Public Libraries* 34, no. 4 (1995): 198.

10. Ellen G. Fader, "The Doctors' Office Collection," *School Library Journal* 37, no. 6 (1991): 48.

11. North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, "Guidelines for Effective Collaboration." Accessed May 23, 2003,  
[www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/envrnmnt/go/93-3guid.htm](http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/envrnmnt/go/93-3guid.htm)

12. Camila Aire and Orlando Archibeque, *Serving Latino Communities: A How-to-Do-It Manual for Librarians* (New York: Neal-Schuman, 1998).

13. Christine Watkins, "Yes, Read Every Chance You Get...But Don't Forget to Catch the Ball!" *American Libraries* 28, no. 6 (1997): 90-93.

14. "Baby TALK," Homepage of Baby TALK. Accessed May 23, 2003,  
[www.babytalk.org/](http://www.babytalk.org/) (and linked pages).

15. Sheila Burnette, "Book 'Em! Cops and Librarians Working Together," *American Libraries* 29, no. 2 (1998): 48-50; Chelton, *Excellence in Library Services to Young*

*Adults.*

16. Patterson, "Charlotte Public Library Speaks Español."
17. Elizabeth-Ann Sachs, "A Door to the West," *School Library Journal* 41, no. 9 (1995): 136.
18. Jonathan Sabin, "'Library Card' Newspaper Column," *The Unabashed Librarian* no. 106 (1998): 11-12.
19. Joanne P. Roukens, "On the Radio." *The Unabashed Librarian* no. 112 (1999): 21.
20. Glen E. Holt, *Public Library Partnerships: Mission-Driven Tools for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Homepage of Bertelsmann Foundation. Accessed May 23, 2003, [www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/documents/holt6en.pdf](http://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/documents/holt6en.pdf).
21. "Fast Food for Thought," *Public Libraries* 32, no. 5 (1993): 244.
22. Lars Rydquist, "Travellers' Tales: Reading for Commuters," *Scandinavian Public Library Quarterly* 25, no. 3 (1992): 29-31.
23. Mary Kelly, "Re: What REALLY Has an Impact on Circ. and Other Library Use Stats?" [Online posting to [prtalk@ala.org](mailto:prtalk@ala.org)], July 27, 1999.

24. Evan St. Lifer, "Libraries Make it with Marketing," *Library Journal* 118, no. 15 (1993):

34.

25. "Librarian Floats to Sweepstakes," *Public Libraries* 37, no. 5 (1998): 289.

26. "Youthreach: 'Seussamania' in Geisel's Hometown," *American Libraries* 17, no. 6 (1986): 485.

27. "The Speaker's Bureau," Homepage of Evanston Public Library. Accessed May 27, 2003, [www.evanston.lib.il.us/library/speaker-bureau.html](http://www.evanston.lib.il.us/library/speaker-bureau.html).

28. Steve Sherman, *ABC's of Library Promotion*, 2d. ed. (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1980).

29. Jennifer Fakolt, "Everybody Wins! Carson City Public Library Pulls Out All the Stops for National Library Week," *Public Libraries* 37, no. 3 (1998): 190-94.

30. Felicity Rock, "To Raise Your Profile, Raise the Roof," *The Library Association Record* 100, no. 4 (1998): 188-89.

31. PubLib archives are available at [sunsite.berkeley.edu/PubLib/archive.html#publib](http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/PubLib/archive.html#publib)

32. For an example of routinely using an electronic discussion list to share promotion ideas, see Janelle M. Zauha, "You *Can* Get There From Here! A Marketing and Public Relations Program for Montana Libraries," *Public Libraries* , 42, no. 1 (2003): 117-121.