

Marketing practices to youth in a public library:

Literature Review

Janice Steinhoff

University of South Florida

Introduction to Library Administration – LIS 6409

Dr. Barbara J. Stites

April 23, 2023

Abstract

In this ever-changing world with access to information readily available, libraries are trying to stay relevant within the community. Marketing is essential to a library's survival. The goal of library marketing is to inform the public about what services and opportunities are available within a specific library setting. For public libraries, it is to inform current users and attract non-users the offerings of resources and information literacy, attend programs, and discover all the library has to offer. Public libraries must tailor marketing strategies to capture the attention of various generations of patrons. Youth, particularly pre-teens and teens, require different marketing strategies than adult patrons. Additionally, the public library must identify their teen population and market to their specific needs, trends, and preferred method of notification of programs and events. This paper provides a review of literature discussing marketing strategies for public libraries focusing on youth services.

Literature Review

Marketing is not new to public libraries, however in this ever changing, technology driven world, they must adapt to this unique environment, not only with relevant services and programs, but how they market to their patrons. Adolescents, pre-teen, and teens are difficult age groups to develop programs to draw them to the library. Marketing strategies specifically for this group must be different than marketing to adults. This literature review will discuss marketing strategies for public libraries emphasizing youth services.

Garoufallou, et.al (2013) compiled a paper which outlined literature published on marketing concepts relating to library services. Within this paper, they put forward Kotler's definition of marketing to non-profit organizations, "is the skill of knowing how to plan and manage the organization's exchange relations with its various publics" and "not only the development and maintenance of services to meet their customer needs, but also the opportunity presented to differentiate themselves from their peers and to gain a prominent role in their arena of activities." Public libraries, as non-profit organizations, must attract and maintain patrons to their services while remaining a community staple to continue receiving funding. With budget restrictions, libraries are under pressure to "defend their existence and reconsider their role" (Garoufallou, et.al, 2013). Garoufallou, et.al, (2013) discuss a concept by Bushing which states "the basic reason that inhibits libraries from an efficient and effective marketing implementation, is the librarians' failure to understand marketing and theory applications." They additionally discuss the importance of emerging Web 2.0 technologies and the importance of adopting social media tools for "educational reasons, sharing news, marketing their services, and providing literacy instruction" (Garoufallo, et.al, 2013).

Examining the difficulties libraries have with marketing, Shontz, Parker, & Parker (2004) studied "attitudes of public librarians toward marketing and the marketing of library services...". They surveyed

members of the New Jersey Library Association which included administrators and staff librarians. Variables studied included attitudes toward marketing, knowledge about marketing, and their amount of involvement in marketing activities. Their study showed a more positive view of marketing from administrators and public service librarians. Reference and technical librarians' views were not as strong (Shontz, et al., 2004). Their conclusion is that library managers are aware of the importance of marketing services and programs for their libraries. This study has shown that marketing is an important part of a library and is positively viewed by administrators and librarians. They also note that training in marketing is not taught in programs frequently or is only offered as an elective course. These barriers to effective marketing can inhibit effective strategies for public libraries to advertise their services to the community.

A goal of a public library is to “provide robust and compelling library experiences to the communities we serve,” (Singh, 2016). Singh (2016) discusses content driven marketing in the form of providing “total experience” and “content-driven experiences” to “inform, entertain, engage and evolve the customer.” Libraries are changing to adapt to their communities' needs. They are transitioning into a “total experience by...redefining their ambiance, learning spaces, roles, responsibilities, functions, and embracing creative strategies to engage communities” (Singh, 2016). He stresses providing content across different “distribution channels” to tell your library’s story.

Further marketing, noting the concept of storytelling, to increase funding to a library, is discussed in an article by Eicher-Catt & Edmonson (2016). This marketing technique focuses on “reimagining the very culture of the library” through storytelling. This relates to funding of organizations by “corporate executives find narratives appealing because they are beginning to understand the value, they hold for exposing and organization’s operating culture and collective identity, as well as a means by which organizations can envision and shape change” (Eicher-Catt & Edmonson, 2016). This can be an important method of marketing by allowing “libraries to reimagine cultural values, attitudes, and

beliefs.” Based on these premises, the authors conducted research in the York County Library System by surveying library personnel on the role of storytelling to shape the culture of the library. Personnel were interviewed to discuss their experiences about how they connect with the library. A key finding from the study was the emphasis placed on the value libraries have a place of “connection for people of all ages, races, gender, and socioeconomic status...a community place...that offers the community a safe place to gather...” (Eicher-Catt & Edmonson, 2016). Based on these findings, marketing, in the shape of storytelling, is shifting from “primarily and information sources to viewing it as more of a social gathering space that supports creative endeavors” (Eicher-Catt & Edmonson, 2016).

Expanding on the idea of the library as a social gathering space, Cathy Shay (2011) discusses her research with teens to assist in developing a youth program, to determine what they want, which will attract teens to the library. To engage the teens in their survey they partnered with their local high school, inviting them to a program at the library to discuss how the library can help them with their schooling. At that time, they surveyed the students by asking three questions addressing what event would interest them at the library, when would they like the event to take place, and their preferred method of contact about events. Based on these questions, the “most popular request was simply having a space to hang out with friends’ (Shay, 2011). From this a “Teen Zone” was developed, attracting more youth to the library. The key to the success of the program according to Shay was marketing the event. Based on their survey results email and myspace were preferred methods of receiving information. Developing an online presence was essential and creating social media sites, of the youth preference, friends helped to market services available. Additionally, information in high school newsletters, placed on notice boards, and local youth shops were also methods to advertise programs. Shay (2011) notes “youth demand constant change and new ideas, they bore easily and are always looking out for the new thing...we have to keep asking them what they want...promote each event enthusiastically and be continually persistent.”

Carolyn Bourke (2010) discussed a youth survey from the Fairfield City Library System which noted “just under 50% of the 460 respondents said they used the library as a place to study one or more times a week and just under 40% said they meet friends at the library at least once every couple of weeks.” This statistic emphasizes Shay’s work in that not only is the library a place to study and gather information, but youth also use it as a place to socialize. Bourke herself surveyed youth (ages 12-24) regarding how they receive their information about the library. Twenty-five percent said they found out information while in the library on electronic screens within the library. Word of mouth, however, was the most popular tool for promoting services – 45% stating they receive their information from friends.

Wu & Yang (2021) from their study also found that “word of mouth” marketing was the most popular. Their study looked at Taiwan youth ages 10-13 to determine social media marketing strategies. Their study specifically “focuses on user engagement with social media content posted by libraries, with the specific target of preadolescents” (Wu & Yang, 2021). The specific social media outlet for study was Facebook. Results showed that 41% of participants spent less than 1 hour a week on Facebook and 40% spent 1-4 hours per week. Additionally, they noted the number of Facebook friends each participant had with 32% having ten friends or less and 21% having between 10-30 friends. Results of the study showed that word of mouth was the most effective marketing method based on “it impacts user acceptance and judgement of information via trust and familiarity” (Wu & Yang, 2021). They concluded that media platforms need to be perceived by the preadolescents as a “trusted environment.”

Hannan (2011) offers multiple ways to market youth, particularly 13- to 18-year-olds within Wellington City Library in New Zealand, noting the difficulty engaging this age group to participate in the library. Methods Hannan outlines are based on the concept of “staying up to date with trends, technology, and jargon” (2011). She describes a web presence as a strong marketing strategy through the development of a “Teen Blog.” This blog is associated with a logo that is used within other portions of the library to link other marketing materials. Other methods of marketing are social media sites, text

messaging, and print material on community notice boards, youth centers, community centers and schools. Hannan (2011) makes note however that through feedback and their experience “peer to peer recommendations among teens carries more weight than any other form of promotion.”

A substantial portion of effective marketing to any consumer, particularly youth, is to know what to market. Elaine Meyers (1999) describes the results of the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund project designed to “launch Public Libraries as Partners in Youth Development Initiative”. In this study, teens were surveyed in library meeting rooms, community centers, or street corners to give their opinions regarding public libraries. Although this study is older, results showed one main reason for coming to the library was to access technology. Additionally, teens “confirmed the importance of word of mouth and their knowledge of appropriate media to spread the library story” (Meyers, 1999). This study reiterated others in 1.) word of mouth as a strong marketing strategy for youth and 2.) It is important to know the needs of your community. In this community, at that time, access to technology was important.

Branding is strategy public libraries are using to market themselves to the community. “Libraries can use branding to create more focused marketing programs – going beyond logos or claims about services – that, in turn, will have a greater impact on potential users.” (Thompson, 2018). Thompson’s article provides a definition of brand and exercises a library can use to develop their unique brand. He stresses the importance of marketing one's specific library “rather than marketing libraries in general.” (Thompson, 2018). He notes that a unified brand can be effective and aimed at both funders and users and that messaging about the brand is “vital.” Holt (2003) takes branding a bit further to discuss branding to young adolescents. He states, “branding is the marketing process by which a for-profit or non-profit firm marks its products and services behaviorally and attitudinally.” (Holt, 2003). He compares companies like Disney and Barbie brands as something recognizable and memorable. Other marketing tips on developing a brand are from Olenski (2015) written in Forbes Magazine. He states to

“work with them, not away from them” and “out with the Old/In with the new” are concepts to consider. He stresses the importance of following social media platforms used by teens. Although these tips are not specific to libraries, they provide good insight into marketing strategies for youth.

Sanchez & Stralendorff (2018) outline marketing strategies developed by the Anaheim Public Library in their article *Developing Marketing Strategies for Public Libraries*. In this article, they focused on branding to inform the community of their resources and services. The Anaheim library used “patron focused marketing” to develop brand identity for the library (Sanchez & Stralendorff, 2018). They noted that the success of the campaign was dependent on a team approach, reviewing the statistics of the population to help identify what the community’s needs are, and follow up by “continuing the story and representing the library brand” (Sanchez & Stralendorff, 2018). Digital marketing for the Anaheim library was an important aspect of the marketing strategy as was storytelling. They note “increasing online engagement increases awareness of programs, resources, and reasons for patrons to visit your library,” (Sanchez & Stralendorff, 2018).

Despite word of mouth as a strong marketing strategy for public libraries among the youth population, social media and a web presence is essential to develop and maintain to reach not only youth but all patrons. Pashootanizadeh & Rafie (2020) conducted a survey, using questionnaires, of administrators and users of public libraries to determine views on social media marketing of library services. Their results showed that users noted that “interaction capabilities” is the most principal factor a library can have using social media. Directors stated, “creating a true picture of the role of the library” and “informing users about library services” were the most important. (Pashootanizadeh & Rafie, 2020). Additional results showed that 79.1% of users “expressed interest in receiving library information through social media” (Pashootanizadeh & Rafie, 2020). Although this study was not specifically directed toward youth, most of the respondents were school students (50.9%) and students at university (29.1%).

Choi & Joo (2021) address the need for social media within a library marketing strategy, identifying challenges, motivators, and perceptions of its use. They performed a nationwide survey of public libraries to identify perceptions of the use of social media in a marketing strategy. Their survey found Facebook and Twitter were the most popular sites used in libraries for marketing. They also identified challenges to maintaining a strong social media presence. These challenges include lack of staff resources, lack of staff time particularly with the need for near constant upkeep of the sites, and lack of skills and expertise (Choi & Joo, 2021). Motivators included “demand and acceptance” from patrons about innovative nature of using social media. This study addresses the library’s perceptions of social media use but does not differentiate between adult users and youth users. As a limitation they note the issue of the “digital divide” can impact social media marketing practices, particularly in small rural communities.

Despite challenges identified by Choi & Joo, Ransey and Vecchione (2014) identified strategies libraries can use to engage users on social media. “In establishing social network, libraries can begin to tune in to their users’ voices and begin to build relationships with them through the interactivity of comments, “likes,” and other forms of sharing” (Ramsey & Vecchione, 2014). Although their paper addresses social media marketing in academic libraries, they note the use can help “their potential for engagement with the library’s community,” (Ramsey & Vecchione, 2014) a concept that is echoed by public libraries. By developing a social media marketing strategy, promotions of resources, workshops, and services are posted which for their study allowed help in planning, keeping track of services and an ability to assess their success (Ramsey & Vecchione, 2014). “Linkage between social media postings, the slide shows in the library lobby and on computers, and other outreach efforts is key in reaching as many patrons as possible, establishing brand identity...” (Ramsey & Vecchione, 2014).

Little is studied about youth and marketing, specifically within public libraries. Principles of consumer behavior with youth and social media can help to establish a strategy. Ramnarain & Govender

(2013) conducted research into the youth market looking at the “potential value of social media as a promotional tool for targeting youth.” The rationale for their study was the idea that social media plays a significant role in the lives of young people between the ages of 18 to 24 years. They surveyed 150 students regarding demographic data, social media usage, and perceptions of social media as a promotional tool (based on a Likert Scale). Findings showed that 73% of participants stated their purchasing behavior was influenced by referrals from friends who also use social media (Ramnarain & Govender, 2013). Also, it was found that consumers access social media for information on products and brands since it is “less time consuming” and 80% indicated social media browsing influences their purchasing behavior (Ramnarain & Govender, 2013). Based on all the findings in their study, Ramnarain & Govender (2013) concluded that “there is a significant potential for social media as a promotional tool.”

Word of mouth, branding, and social media are all avenues identified while discussing effective marketing strategies to youth patrons of a public library. Another method noted in the literature is through community service and public outreach. Natalie Mulder (2011) discusses ways the library can help teens identify areas of community service. “By serving as a liaison between school groups and community organizations, the library helps to ensure its future existence by remaining relevant in the community” (Mulder, 2011). She notes partnering with schools to make teens aware of the library and other organizations within the community. Jennifer Velasquez (2019) takes another approach by using public outreach as an effective marketing strategy. She notes “outreach involves connection with organizations outside the library in order to attract new users to the library or to bring library services off site” (Velasquez, 2019). She further describes an outreach program as one that “encourages users to utilize library services.” Velasquez (2019) quotes the 2010 Young Adult Services Association by stating “the text urges libraries to promote young adult library services directly to young adults through school visits, library tours...through engagement with their parents, educators, and other youth-serving

community partners.” With many avenues of outreach available, “local library administration should provide staff with a clear definition of outreach in a way that aligns with the library’s mission and goals” (Velasquez, 2019).

Conclusion

Based on this review of literature, there is not one specific way to market library services to youth. Even within the youth market (pre-adolescent vs adolescent) marketing strategies may be different.

Additionally, it is essential to know your youth population and engage them in what would bring them to the library. Multiple methods of marketing are needed including collaboration with schools, local shops teens frequent, parents and most importantly, other teens and word of mouth. The trend that is taking the biggest hold in the attention of the youth market is a web and social media presence which should be interactive and collaborative across platforms.

References

- Bourke, C. (2010). Library youth spaces vs youth friendly libraries: how to make the most of what you have. *Australasian Public Libraries and Information Services*, 23(3), 98-102.
<https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A237532030/AONE?u=tamp44898&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=add346c1>
- Choi, N., & Joo, S. (2021). Understanding public libraries' challenges, motivators, and perceptions toward the use of social media for marketing. *Library Hi Tech*, 39(2), 352-367. <https://doi.org/10.1108/LHT-11-2017-0237>.
- Eicher-Catt, D. & Edmondson, M. (2016). Reimagining Public Libraries as Learning Communities: What Library Stories Can Tell Us. *Public Library Quarterly*, 35(3), 203–221.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01616846.2016.1210448>.
- Garoufallou, E., Siatiri, R., Zafeiriou, G., & Balampanidou, E. (2013). The use of marketing concepts in library services: a literature review. *Library Review*, 62(4/5), 312–334. <https://doi.org/10.1108/LR-06-2012-0061>
- Hannan, A. (2011). Communication 101: we have made contact with teens. *Australasian Public Libraries and Information Services*, 24(1), 32-38.
<https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A252446865/AONE?u=tamp44898&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=935ce98a>.
- Holt, G. (2003). Library branding for young adolescents: Learning from Barbie and Mickey. *The Bottom Line*, 16(2), 76-78. <https://doi.org/10.1108/bl.2003.17016bab.001>.
- Meyers, E. (1999). The Coolness Factor: Ten Libraries Listen to Youth. *American Libraries*, 30(10), 42.
<https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A57815428/AONE?u=tamp44898&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=8e4b28b6>.
- Mulder, N. (2011, Fall). Encouraging community service in the public library. *Young Adult Library Services*, 10(1), 25-27.

<https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A272078177/AONE?u=tamp44898&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=2ec5982d>.

Olenki, S. (2015). Five Things Your Brand Needs To Know About Marketing To Teens. *Forbes Magazine*. March 25, 2015. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/steveolenki/2015/05/26/5-things-your-brand-needs-to-know-about-marketing-to-teens/?sh=29974ada6248>.

Pashootanzadeh, M., & Rafie, Z. (2020). Social Media Marketing: Determining and Comparing View of Public Library Directors and Users. *Public Library Quarterly*, 39(3), 212–228. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01616846.2019.1622395>.

Ramnarain, Y., & Govender, K. K. (2013). Social media browsing and consumer behaviour: Exploring the youth market. *African Journal of Business Management*, 7(18), 1885-1893. https://academicjournals.org/article/article1380458063_Ramnarain%20and%20Govender.pdf.

Ramsey, E., & Vecchione, A. (2014). Engaging library users through a social media strategy. *Journal of Library Innovation*, 5(2), 71+. <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A395848253/AONE?u=tamp44898&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=0af2d9c1>.

Sanchez, M., & Van Stralendorff, C.R. (2018). Developing Marketing Strategies for Public Libraries. *Marketing Libraries Journal*, 2(1), 31-38. Retrieved from <http://journal.marketinglibraries.org/august2018/MLJ-v2i1-31-38.pdf>.

Shay, C. (2011). The twilight zone: bringing youth into libraries. *Australasian Public Libraries and Information Services*, 24(1), 42-46. <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A252446867/AONE?u=tamp44898&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=cf6cb61c>.

Shontz, M., Parker, J., & Parker, R. (2004). What do librarians think about marketing? A survey of public librarians' attitudes toward the marketing of library services. *The Library Quarterly*, 74(1), 63–84. <https://doi.org/10.1086/380854>.

Singh, R. (2016). Creating Engaging Library Experiences through Effective Content Marketing. *OLA Quarterly*, 21(4), 49–54. <https://doi.org/10.7710/1093-7374.1838>.

Thompson, S. (2018). A Disciplined Brand Approach to Marketing Libraries. *Marketing Libraries Journal*, 2(1), 16–23. Retrieved from <http://journal.marketinglibraries.org/august2018/MLJ-v2i1-16-23.pdf>.

Velasquez, J. (2019). Young Adult Outreach: An Examination of Outreach Attempts at Branch Libraries in a Large Urban Public Library System. *Journal of Library Administration*, 59(2), 202–213.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2018.1562801>.

Wu, K. & Yang, T.-Y. (2022). Library collections promotion for preadolescents using social media marketing strategies. *Library Hi Tech*, 40(6), 1671–1688. <https://doi.org/10.1108/LHT-03-2020-0073>.