LIBRARIES IN THE RECESSION

Developing a survival toolkit

In what was the largest ever turnout for the Society of Chief Librarians annual conference in June, key decision makers and policy makers debated the role of libraries in the economic downturn. Do libraries need to change or refocus their priorities in the light of the recession? It was heartening to discover that most people believed the challenge was not to change but to get the value they already provide recognised – and more widely.

There are two intertwined strands to this strategy. One is to bring that value to the communities that libraries serve. The other is to ensure that value is clearly quantified and understood – because in uncertain times the only certainty is that libraries are going to be asked to bear the cuts that are bound to come, perhaps disproportionately. There is no doubt that in a recession libraries come into their own – we need only look at some of the reports coming out of the US, where the downturn hit first, to be aware that the upsurge in library membership and library use can be headline material. One of the latest reports, worth viewing, aired on the Today Show.

Advocacy or self-promotion?
There is no better time for libraries to prove their value to the organisations and agencies who benefit most from their services, and to the local authority's priorities for the community.

But is 'advocacy' – 'pleading for support' – just too polite a term and too generalised an activity for what needs to be achieved, and quickly? If ever there was a time for library services to take centre stage and abandon all modesty – this is it. It's at local level that tough decisions are going to be taken. **We** know what we do – but do **they**? The PCT, the Police Authority, the Job Centre, the Chamber of Commerce, other directorates…?

But **do** we know what we do? Do we ourselves go sufficiently out of our way to document and promote our daily achievements? Things 'we' take for granted and pass over in our everyday roles are often quite surprising to others working in other sectors. Being analytical, standing back from the day job, is hard to do. It requires a discipline, a process, to turn the ordinary into the extraordinary and create an effective communications strategy out of it. It can help to have a third party facilitate the process. Here is an outline of the questions we need to ask ourselves to turn those

fragmented contributions into a consolidated communications strategy – in just one day.

Developing a value communications strategy in a day
Here are the basics of getting started on a strategy for communicating the value of library services.

We ask the questions: What are our services and **products**? What is their **value**? What is **unique** about them? What can we say about our **performance**?

Breaking these down further:

Products. Every business produces something – widgets, gizmos, advisory services. In their marketing literature companies tend to focus on describing what their products are and how they work, and usually fail to give enough attention to how the user benefits and why anyone should choose to use them. Libraries are not very different. We do need to start with an inventory of all the library service outputs. It's a long list – and goes a long way in itself to describe the wide remit of a modern library service and to counter common assumptions. But we also have to focus on value.

Value. If no one gets any benefit, no one will use the service. So we ought to be able to exhaustively quantify the value of all the outputs identified above. And when doing this we need also to focus not just on the benefits to the service user, but the value delivered to other agencies where library customers are also their client groups.

Uniqueness. If anyone could do what we do, they would be doing it. So why aren't all our services distributed among other service delivery arms? What would be missing if we weren't here? If we don't know with some certainty (and we haven't convinced everyone else) then maybe we won't be here.

Performance. We do lots of things really well. But numbers aren't all that interesting in relation to services that affect people so subjectively. What we need are more stories, more quotations, and some good case studies related to every agenda we serve.

Getting the story out
How we get that story heard and, in fact, how we decide to tell it, will depend on the audiences we want to reach and what we want those audiences to make of the information we give them. So the next phase of this process is to define the audiences – not just 'stakeholders' but the press, our allies, our critics. By aligning **content** with the target **audience** we can identify the most effective **channels** – and find ways in which we can develop personalised and targeted campaigns and create opportunities for face-to-face encounters, not just 'publicity'.

Costs v. value
Every business needs to understand what it costs to create and deliver its products or services, and to relate those costs to the value achieved from its end users. The need is similar in public library services. We need to know how much is being invested in serving the library community, and proportionally how much it is costing us to serve particular groups or maintain discrete services for the value achieved.

One critical aspect of this right now is being able to analyse how much time and money and resource is spent on helping other people – other organisations, other departments and agencies who are our 'partners' – achieve **their** agenda, **their** objectives. Even where the chances of recharging those costs are, for political reasons, slim, we still need to know what they are. We need to know what they are in order to quantify the value we deliver, to defend the costs, to recognise the wider implications of cutting overall service costs – and, in fact, to help us decide where our 'core' business costs lie so we have choices about who, besides ourselves, will ultimately bear the impact of reductions in funding and reductions in services.

It's not an easy analysis to do, but even an approximate breakdown is better than blindly continuing to try to respond to everyone else's needs while feeling powerless to defend our own. It is also an essential step towards more formally recognised and reciprocated partnerships – a step beyond the continuing exploitation of a 'free' service that drives up the costs of a service that is by no means free – and an essential component of the value communication strategy outlined earlier. We could start by gathering data about the questions people actually ask in libraries – and what proportion of these are in effect answered 'on behalf of' other council services.

Libraries are a community asset. What is the value of that asset, and what will be the consequential social cost to the community of a reduction in services? What will be the replacement costs to the authority of picking up the pieces of a dismantled service?

Our core business
No matter how well we get the story right, there will always be that residual belief, in the minds of those who don't think about libraries for more than a few minutes a week, that libraries lend books. And, by the way, seem to be lending fewer these days. We have two answers to that problem. One is the current trend to focus on other achievements. That's not wrong, it just doesn't make the problem go away. The other is to make stock work better and reverse the perception. In a recession everything is working in the right direction already. There's a success story in the making here. A bit more focus on getting stock to really work – and without spending more money – can make all the difference. Demonstrating that we can be successful in our perceived core business would be the best foundation on which to argue for the wider social value of library services.

Making stock work
The Libraries Agency works with library services to develop promotional strategies to increase the effectiveness of stock. It has recently worked with one authority to review its stock policy – and achieved a 3% increase across the board, in nearly all branches, in just three months.

Seven ways to increase stock effectiveness. OK, there are probably more.

1. Seriously reallocate the stock fund away from a balanced and representative range and focus on front list titles, even in small branches.

2. Make more use of the back stock to refresh and rebalance the stock range across library locations.

3. Invest in stock management tools to create a more evidence based and less subjective approach to stock purchase and stock circulation. You can find out more here about how **smartsm** can help you clean up the catalogue, get stock back into circulation, allocate existing stock more effectively and avoid wasteful purchasing.

4. Track what is selling in retail, and what is moving in other library services. Nielsen offers both **BookScan** and **LibScan** services that are indispensable to any library service.

5. Cost out the return on investment by spending resources on management tools to increase usage and value from a limited budget.

6. Review stock organisation and presentation in every library.

7. Develop service-wide branded promotions to highlight targeted areas of stock.

Investing in technology
In many library services there is still some way to go to realise the full benefits of technology and outsourcing to maximise supply chain efficiencies – not only to make cost savings but to enhance services and speed of supply to users. There are significant savings to be secured (as a return on investment) by making the most of supplier managed services and by fully integrating workflows and data in the supply chain through a full commitment to EDI.

The Libraries Agency offers help and advice on all aspects of supply chain management and stock promotion. Contact info@librariesagency.com for more information.

Income replacement
Revenues continue to decline, both from fines income and hire charges for DVD and CD products. Many low-level income generation initiatives – workbooks, stationery, posters – hardly cover their admin costs. But there are opportunities in the market that hold out better prospects.

Encourage & Praise Reward Charts
Victoria Ballard has designed and produced a great range of Encourage & Praise ™ Reward Charts that retail from a library display stand and make a 30%-50% margin for the library service. More than that, they are right on the button to support the children and families agenda. Because Victoria can produce customised sets of progress charts to meet the priorities of the local authority or its strategic partners, libraries should be looking to develop an authority-wide bespoke product range where they can act as the distribution channel. You can find out more here or email vb@vchart.co.uk.

Commercialisation
That's the handy industry term to cover initiatives to find commercial revenue for libraries based on footfall, space inside and outside libraries, and revenue opportunities through such things as sponsored search engines and coffee vending. The Libraries Agency works in partnership with Unique Space Solutions to identify a portfolio of suitable opportunities over the longer term.

Working with the Libraries Agency
The suggestions in this paper are representative of the way libraries can be supported by a third party perspective on service marketing. Free discussion and debate is always available. Email info@librariesagency.com or call 01788 822975.