

## **Overworked? Understaffed? Don't Stop Marketing!**

By Christine A. Olson and Suzanne Stewart Moseman

The phone is ringing off the hook. Your in-basket is overflowing with work. Your staff is losing weight because no one has time for lunch. Your computer terminals are melting down from overuse. You've just ruptured another stress ball. And from behind a mountain of reference books comes your heartfelt cry: "I've got more customers than I can handle. I don't have time to market my services -- I have too much business already!"

Rethink that lament for a moment. Marketing offers holistic management tools to resolve many of the dilemmas brought on by too many customers and not enough hands. Marketing helps you to understand your customers, evaluate your products and services, and better manage your library operations. Savvy marketing can streamline your operations, decreasing your workload while increasing visibility and customer support.

### **Back to Basics**

But first, when you say "marketing," do you really mean "promotion"? Most people use the all-encompassing term "marketing" when they really mean to say "promoting." If you're overwhelmed with business, you may well want to put a freeze on promotion, but it is the prime time to concentrate on your marketing activities.

Marketing is not just promotion. It embraces an entire suite of management activities: determining market niches, defining products and services, setting prices, promoting services, and building good public relations. There's a reason why these activities are grouped together under the marketing management umbrella. They are interrelated. You can't separate a product from its price—if you have a horrible product you won't be able to give it away at any price. You can't separate service from location—if you have a wonderful product but people have to climb a mountain to get it, you won't have many takers. Marketing brings all the elements together so that you can provide a good product at a fair price, efficiently and consistently. As a comprehensive management toolkit, marketing can help you operate the library in coordination with other tools like financial management, resource allocation, and strategic planning. Marketing is a powerful management asset that encourages you to look at both the big picture of your library business and its details. And it gives you the

tools to shift and mold all aspects of your business to fit your market, your products, and your resources.

### **Who are You and What Do You Do?**

The first critical prerequisite for any marketing activity is an understanding of your customers and what they consider to be valuable and important. Even though you may be busy filling information requests, take a breather for a moment and review the most frequent information requests. What are the top ten subject areas? Who asked for the information? If you have a recent customer survey, great! That can be the source for this information. If not, common sense can often help you identify your markets and your customers. We're not talking about a complex study here. Just take a look at your customer base. Who is using your services the most? Are your services in line with your parent organization's mission? Are you spending a lot of time on requests that are tangential to that central mission? Be sure you understand clearly your mission and its scope, for it justifies your library's existence and defines the parameters of your marketing decisions.

Marketing encourages a focused approach to meeting customer demands. The non-marketing, shotgun approach has been the downfall of more than one library. Make sure you target specific library products and services to defined, manageable groups of customers. If your library or resource center is swamped with work from dozens of unrelated customer groups, ask yourself, "Are we trying to be all things to all people?" Maybe it's time to be selective about who you serve and what you provide. Take your cue from the decline in department stores. They try to offer everything, but now their customers are gravitating towards smaller specialty shops with targeted products. Gourmet cooks frequent cooking stores, where it's easier to find a lemon zester than in a department store.

If you specialize in technical information but your most influential customers need business information, don't try to do it all by yourself. Get some help. Outsource. Hire a business research specialist. That's what your managers do. Be selective about your markets. Targeting markets that are rising stars in the organization, have political clout, or influence financial and personnel resources is a good strategy. But you also need a plan for handling the requests from customers outside your target markets. Here's where your public relations program will come in.

## **Prepackage Your Products**

If you spend a lot of time turning out custom reports and research projects, take a little time to identify for yourself the products you provide. Products and services don't grow on trees. They should be carefully developed and monitored. They are the essence of your business. They are the goods for which your customers are willing to exchange their time and money. Product and service definition is a critical area in which marketing can help you both simplify your operations and still meet your customers' needs.

If you can't list by brand name all your products and services, neither can your customers. Every time someone wants something, you have to spend time explaining what they can get. When you define your products and services, you automatically assist your customers in asking for information from your library, and you permit other staffers to help deliver the product, according to the standards that you have established.

Take a cue from the fast food restaurants. Define your products. Standardize product characteristics so customers know what to ask for and what to expect. Limit choices to the number of packaged formats that will save time. Develop templates so you can quickly plug in the specific facts and figures your clients need. Make it easy for your customers to order standard statistical reports, current awareness services, competitor intelligence updates, or company financial profiles. You should be able to meet most requests with standard products. Have product samples available so customers can preview them. Remember, if photos of hamburgers and fries can instantly convey what food is included in a prepackaged meal, so can photos or samples of reports convey the information coverage of your library's packaged products.

Information services are intangible until you apply tangible characteristics to them. Packaging is one way to make information tangible and to increase visibility and recognition of your library services. Wrapping all products in recognizable library packaging, be it cover sheets, binders, folders, ribbon, or electronic transfer notices, takes no more time than dumping a database search printout into a manila envelope—but the rewards are much greater! With your logo and colors prominently displayed on your packaging, everyone who sees your product will know where it originated. That's one reason children can recognize the McDonald's arches before they can read. Making your products distinctive and recognizable doesn't require an enormous effort or much time, and yet the marketing benefits are huge.

## **Pricing Customer Services**

Are you considered an inexpensive resource that is responsive and courteous? Being responsive and courteous may be fine, but the inexpensive positioning may be getting you into trouble. Marketing tools can help you set prices and establish pricing strategies that minimize work and build profit margins based on what your customer market can bear. Make sure your prices reflect the actual value of what you provide. Customers should see the price or cost of your work and the product, in time and expense terms, at the time of delivery. Letting customers know the cost will help them learn the value of your work by the price you indicate.

If you aren't directly charging your customers for work, let them know how many hours of expert research and analysis were required for each product they receive. Make sure they know the value of your services. With everyone embracing the information highway concept and being bombarded on the nightly news with Internet stories, the cost of information isn't quite as transparent as it once was. Your customers go home at night and sign on to commercial vendors and databases that charge for their services. Take advantage of this environment and let your customers know the true cost of providing online searches, document delivery, or journal routing. Borrow a page from the American Automobile Association (AAA) marketing strategy. They provide free tour books as a member benefit. The books prominently display their "retail value" on the front cover. By conveying the non-member price of the tour books, AAA is reinforcing the "value" of its membership fees. With your membership you get as many "free" tour books as you need. So, too, in your library, no matter who pays for your work, or how your bottom line is accounted for, make sure customers know how much your products and services are worth!

## **Stand by your Promotion Efforts**

In a marketing program, promotion is the activity that aims to generate sales. Since you and your staff are overwhelmed with information requests, this is the one marketing activity you don't want to expand. Instead, stick with your current promotion methods—newsletter, web site, business cards, flyers, and so on. Just be sure that every item that goes out of your library carries your logo and establishes your identity. Consistency is the key here. Don't increase your promotion efforts; just stay the course for now. Later, when your workload changes or your staff and resources expand, you can implement new promotion strategies.

## **Messages Support the Marketing Strategy**

The marketing strategy outlined thus far in this article targets a manageable group of customers, offers prepackaged products and services, and educates customers on information service costs. For an overworked library staff, adopting this strategy could result in not all customers being given equal service, fewer customized products and on-demand services, and the loss of some customers because of the cost of information. For many librarians this is a hard strategy to assume. But let's face it. Do you want to continue working over your lunch hour or do you want to keep your sanity? We vote for sanity.

Public relations is where you should put your aggressive marketing efforts to support your prior marketing decisions. First of all, develop a set of messages that convey your market positions. Our marketing strategy requires messages that tell your targeted customers about your services. The messages educate customers on what to expect and how to ask for products by name. You also need a communications strategy for those times when people outside your target markets request services and products that you are not prepared to supply. Consider offering the names of other research services and making referrals to other resources who can complete the information request. If the person represents a market that you would like to target someday when resources are more plentiful, decide what messages should convey that thought when you offer the referral. And how do you convey the prices of your services and products? Do you use a formal line item price sheet that breaks down all the costs? Or do you use red price tags from the office supply store, informally adhering them to customer packages. Both techniques deliver the pricing message, but in a different way. What's best for you and your library? What image do you want your customers to have of your library and its services?

Your public relations messages should support your library's image. This is not something to be taken lightly. If you watch enough TV, you'll notice a trend in advertising. Companies do not so much promote individual products as they promote themselves. We're told to think of Maytag as "the dependability people" — not as the manufacturers of a particular model of dishwasher. The ads of BASF don't tell you precisely what the company does, only that it makes a lot of products that you use better.

The point is that these campaigns are not trying to sell you on a product as much as they are instilling a positive image about the company and its products. This concept is an important one for libraries with overworked staffs. Rather than soliciting more business, your public relations campaign can enhance your image and help you maintain a positive presence within your organization. Remember the saying, "out of

sight, out of mind"? It's true. So don't put your head in the sand because you have too much work. Put on your thinking cap and develop messages that broadcast the fact that your library provides dependable and timely services and access to critical information—without a sales pitch!

### **Library Soundbites**

One public relations message that most librarians embrace is the one that justifies their existence. Statistics tell that story, but by themselves they're dull and meaningless. Your customers need a reference point against which to measure and comprehend your activities. Look at your organization's annual report. It's not just numbers. It tells a story of success and future plans. While you may not have the time to create an annual report, you certainly should make the time to compose short "what-we-have-done-for-you-lately" stories. We call them library soundbites. For example, tell customers how the 15 financial profiles you produced this year saved X dollars, or how the 149 online searches you completed contributed to the success of certain projects. Print the soundbites inside report covers, attach them as postcard notes to search results, write them on the bookmarks you include with article reprints, and post them as weekly announcements on your web site. And don't forget, testimonials from satisfied customers make great soundbites and add to your credibility.

Similar to soundbites are notices about your new resources. Don't just list titles in your newsletter. That simply reports quantity and doesn't support a perception of your expertise in selecting high-quality materials for your organization. Instead, quote the review that convinced you to buy the materials. Put copies of book jackets into your handouts. Briefly explain why this is such a great addition to your collection. And liberate these announcements from your newsletter. Place them in flyers and on your web site; put the soundbites on your products or on posters in the library. No major marketing effort is needed here—just a few quick reminders of your expertise and commitment to obtaining the latest and best information resources for your organization.

### **The "No" Message**

Saying "no" may be the hardest part of the entire marketing effort for an overworked library staff. Everyone likes to be helpful when asked. But, be realistic. You can't be all things to all people. There are some requests you simply shouldn't accept. This flies in the face of the library's traditional role as a service center and may seem like an

admission of failure to you, but it makes sense. If you are in the business of providing technical information to a target market, and some customers have a habit of making off-the-wall requests, burdening your already overworked staff, you have to draw the line somewhere. For unless you are being promised more staff and resources to meet demand, not saying "no" could be the kiss of death. Too much work, performed under high pressure, can actually undermine the quality of all your work—the worst possible marketing message.

So, put together a policy that defines the requests you will accept and the ones you won't, using your target market and product definitions as guidelines. Then have alternatives ready to soften your "no." Maybe for requests outside your target market, you extend the due date. Perhaps you offer a packaged product instead of a custom search. Point to other sources your customer can readily access. If the question is outside the scope of your responsibilities, direct your customer to another information provider. Offering viable alternatives with your "no" can make you look like an astute information expert who may be too busy to attend personally to a question but who does have the professionalism to point a customer in the right direction.

### **Never Suspend Marketing Activities**

Because marketing includes the tools for managing target markets, products, pricing, and public relations, it can be an overworked librarian's best management friend. Almost all of the ideas presented here can be implemented without a lot of extra time and effort, and yet they will yield big results. One caveat though: These ideas are meant for understaffed libraries with no immediate hope of additional resources. If your library is overtaxed but there is an opportunity for extending resources, then your marketing strategies should be different from those suggested here.

But if you are a librarian with a workload that makes you feel like you're running the Boston Marathon, don't carry excess baggage. Streamline your work, focus on the task at hand, and pace yourself. Marathoners dress lightly and don't try to juggle while they run the course. They prepare carefully, choose the right equipment, avoid extra steps, and then go for the goal. Attending to your marketing strategies can lighten your load and keep you winning.

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