Test Your Library's Marketing IQ
by Christine A. Olson

This article is not about your library's intelligence quotient. It's about its image quotient—the image that your library projects to its clients. Like the stereotypical "nerd" from our high school years (strong on knowledge, weak on packaging), many information service providers ignore their library's image. But just as the nerds, despite all their intelligence and personality, often went lonely on prom night, libraries with poor images fail to attract the attention their skills and resources deserve. And there's no lonely hearts club for libraries—just empty desks, idle staff, shrinking budgets, and thinning clientele.

In this flash-and-brag world of style over substance, information service providers cannot afford to hold out against self-promotion, hoping to let the work speak for itself, or worse yet, thinking that the mere importance of the information that the library offers will bring in the clients and support the budget. Librarians who persist along this thought path, or who see themselves as modest or shy individuals, or who feel that their first-rate work entitles them to focus solely on providing information services, may be in for a rude awakening. Keeping a bushel basket over your light can have devastating results: lost clients, lost funding, lost jobs.

Developing your library's image can be one of the most subtle yet effective means of promoting the library. You don't necessarily need an overbearing advertising blitz. Creating an image appropriate to the culture of the organization in which you exist should be one the goals of your library's marketing image program. I have seen a wide range of corporate cultures, from those in which librarians dress in extremely conservative suits to those where information providers pad around in loafers and blue jeans. Matching your library's image to that of the larger organization will help the library be perceived as part of the team. And as your library's image matures, the relationship between that image and the library's services and products will grow closer, until as components of a

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finely tuned marketing program, image and services will come to constantly reinforce each other in the eyes of your clients, heightening the perceived value of the information services your library offers.

Image: More Than You Imagine

There is no "foolproof formula" for marketing programs. Not surprisingly, a finely tuned marketing image doesn't happen overnight. It doesn't happen without work and planning. And it involves more areas of your library than you may think. A library's image is composed of everything in and about the library that a client encounters. This includes all the paper and products your library generates: fax cover sheets, routing slips, and overdue notices, as well as research findings, current awareness lists, and database reports. Everything from the library newsletter to the notepaper you use to communicate to clients—all of it projects an image and represents your library, and its services and staff to the client.

Image considerations include the physical aspects of the library too: its layout, lighting, organization, and comfort level. Take a look around. Are the posters old and torn? Can people sit in comfortable chairs to peruse a magazine? Are the latest acquisitions on display? Do you have helpful hints for using reference books scattered throughout the shelves? Even if the library is in the basement, it can project a positive image that reinforces the professional services your library provides.

Image is also, and sometimes most loudly, projected by the staff. Even if each member of your staff is a top-flight professional, if they don't project the right image, they will be perceived as inexpert. A helpful, professional-looking, and friendly staff with exactly the same qualifications and abilities will do so much more for their clients—and so, also, for your library's reputation—simply because they are at every moment inviting use of their services and expertise. (1)

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Library Marketing IQ Test

The toughest part of managing your library's image is "seeing it" through the eyes of your clients. Here are a few questions aimed at helping you evaluate your library's IQ. Circle the letter that best represents your response.

1. When you think of your library's current image, you
>   a. Shake your head, and say, "I don't have any time for that."
>   b. Feel that it not only lives up to but also supports the work of the library.

2. Your library staff prides themselves on
>   a. Coming up with every answer to any question at all times.
>   b. Understanding the organization's goals and developing products and services to help achieve them.

3. When asked what your library's goals are, you answer
>   a. "To keep on keepin' on."
>   b. With a summary of where you are, where you want to be, and how you plan to get there.

4. What products and services have you given a brand name to?
>   a. Brand names are for potato chips. I'm in a serious business here.
>   b. Everything from our new computer system to our current awareness bulletins to our routing system has a unique name.

5. What opportunities do you foresee capitalizing on to reflect your visual image?
>   a. What visual image?
>   b. Even our invoices reflect our image.

How Did You Rate?

Tally up your responses. How many A's versus how many B's?
Mostly A's: Just like in high school, all A's don't guarantee happiness. Great work alone isn't enough. You'll serve your customers better with an image that matches the quality of your services.

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Mostly B's: Congratulations! With such a high library marketing IQ, your clients make the most of your services, and you make the most of your library! But if you had one or two A's on your list, it couldn't hurt to read the following discussion and have every aspect of your library rate as well as your best.

Room For Improvement

Understand and Evaluate the Current Image

Before you can change the library's image, you must understand how you are currently perceived. A good look at the library—its staff, products, services, and physical appearance—will give you the foundation on which to build an image. Gather samples of each piece of the library's paper trail. And I do mean each piece. You might be in for a surprise. Do all the pieces together project a single, unified image through the use of a standard logo, paper and ink color, typeface, and layout presentation? How would you describe that image? Hi-tech? Friendly? Old-fashioned? Does that image parallel the goals and visual image of your organization? Or is your image a jumbled mess? Nothing matches. Each piece could have originated from anywhere, not specifically from your library. Is it any wonder that your library doesn't get credit for its high level of services and products when no one can instantly recognize that your library produced them.

Take the time to talk to clients informally about the library. Notice I didn't say "conduct a survey." Image is an intangible aspect of your marketing program, existing in the "eyes of the beholders"—your clients. Getting a handle on your library's real image will take gentle, impromptu conversations with clients who use the library on a regular basis and with prospective clients. This may be a tough assignment. You could be shocked to learn that the library and its staff are perceived as "glorified file clerks" (I was actually confronted with this phrase in my previous life as a library manager.) Regardless of what the perception is, acknowledge it. Then plan a strategy that either reinforces the current image or changes it to the one you feel best supports the library, its staff, and services in light of the organization's culture and goals.

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Put yourself in the shoes of your clients. "Shop" (that is, anonymously use the services of) your library.(2) Call the library while you are away and ask a question. What type of response do you get? I've called libraries during lunchtime and asked for their mailing address only to be given the wrong address or told that the librarian was out and to call back later—they didn't know the address. Good grief, it isn't a tough question! How would your library staff respond?

Establish Library Goals and Direction
No matter how well a library meets the needs of clients, its work should be judged by how well it serves the library's goals. Meeting information needs as they arise, although it attests to your skills, does not necessarily further the library's image or its goals. Instead, it could have you and your staff scrambling in different directions each time a new information need arises. Establish and understand your library's goals and directions. It may not be appropriate for your library to offer a software clearinghouse or an office supplies inventory system ("Hey, if you can maintain an inventory of books then why not pencils" was the reasoning presented to me one time.) Next, work toward providing services that achieve the fulfillment of those goals. A comprehensive marketing image plan can produce a more useful professional image than a carload of library talent, constantly working under the gun, could ever present.

Identify Current Clients and Target Prospective Ones
Without knowing whom you serve, whom you wish to attract, and those with whom you want to make a positive impression of value, it is unlikely that you will gear your image in the right direction. You need to constantly monitor your clients. Who are they? Where are they? Who is the rising star? Whose office has been moved to no-man's land? Who gets all the money? The best advice that I can give you is to get out of the library and talk with people. You'll be amazed at what you learn—about your library, about the organization's goals, and about your clients. If you find it difficult to start impromptu conversations, then make a point to personally hand deliver library products to at least three different clients each week. Take the opportunity of this personal service interaction to learn about what is important to the clients. Get yourself into the "in-house information loop"

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(otherwise known as the grapevine). And remember, while you're gathering information for your marketing image program, you're projecting an image: one of an outgoing, dynamic, personal service–oriented library that cares about its clients.

Name Products and Services
If you think you don't need to name your products and your services, think again. Consider all the brand names you know and how some brand names have become (much to the chagrin of their companies) common names for the product. Identifying the products and services of your library with names lends them credibility and underscores their importance within the library's set of offerings. Brand names make it easier for clients to remember your library's myriad products and services and to ask for them "by name." (3) And making it easy for clients to request a service makes a positive impact on clients' perception of the library—its image. Just as McDonalds has a name for every type of hamburger imaginable, you can name every product and service your library offers, and even bestow families of names for related products. And like McDonalds, you define exactly what the client gets when they ask for "Library Nuggets" or "The Library'n Muffin Service."

Identify Opportunities to Reflect Your Library's Image
As you develop your marketing image program, you should become aware of opportunities every time you glance around the library, building hallways, elevators, stairwells, bulletin boards, lunch rooms, lounge areas, banking stations, snack bars, maybe even the bathrooms. All of these places offer opportunities to project your image and tell people what products and services are available through the library. How the staff answers the telephone, how they respond to inquiries, and how they present themselves also has an impact on the clients' perception of your library's image. From database research report covers to library signs to notepaper, items that you once may have thought to have only one function, can also work to support the big picture of your library's marketing image.

Start today. Go through your library and write down all the places and items that you could use in projecting your library's image. Then go to a

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local bookstore, a grocery store, a drugstore, or a Kmart store if there's one nearby, and take note of what opportunities they have exploited to get their image across to you. Now go back to your library's list and augment it. Did you think of putting a sign on the library bookcart? No bookcart? Well, how about putting posters on your organization's in-house mailcarts? Remember to change the posters every month—you can't afford to have stale messages.

You Can't Lose

Sure, implementing and maintaining a strong marketing image program requires work and planning, but the results work in your favor. As your image becomes more unified, clients will come to recognize that the library's staff, products, and services all hail from a single, cohesive resource: the library. The unified image thus serves to remind clients just how often they use library services and shows them how important the library is to their work. A cohesive image also encourages use of the full range of library services. When users who rely on one library service become aware of another product, they will be more likely to try it. The library's established image on the product will reinforce client recognition that the product comes from the library, and that expectations for a quality product will be high—after all other library products are valuable. A newfound appreciation of the library staff and its resources accompanies each of these benefits. Taken as disparate parts, image elements have limited value. But together, they can be the glue that holds any organization together.

As clients recognize the value of the library through its image, you can look forward to continued or even increased funding for your library, and more as well as more frequent clients. The library staff will be perceived and treated as professionals, more than ever before. And as their expertise is better appreciated by clients, your staff should discover greater opportunity for expanding their own information skills and resources.

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And if, after reading all these arguments in favor of paying attention to your image, you still feel it's too vain or trivial an enterprise for you, think about this: Whether you've carefully chosen your image or chosen to ignore it, your library does have an image. Wouldn't you prefer to dictate exactly what that image is?

It's time to decide that hard work and brains are not enough. You also need a high library marketing IQ (image quotient, of course). Don't plead ignorance any longer. Banish forever the thought that as long as you offer sound information services, you needn't develop your image. Now, when you deliver that first-class work, make sure it is professionally and appropriately delivered. When clients visit the library, let them know they're in competent hands. You'll reap the rewards: challenging projects, client loyalty, increased respect, and greater clout when it's time to submit your budget.

So do the "nerdy" part of your library a favor. Pay attention to its image. Dress it up. Teach it good posture. Buy it a new suit, encourage it to smile. The prom might be a memory from the distant past, but there are still plenty of people out there you'll want to impress. Remember the words of the exasperated parent who tried to explain why the most winning personality won't get you a date if you don't brush your hair: "How will they ever love the present if they don't want to unwrap the package?"

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