Do You Know What Your Mission Is?

by JANET
L. BALAS

Libraries are suffering from an identity crisis. It used to be so simple—they were about books. Librarians acquired books, cataloged them, arranged them in proper order on shelves, and helped patrons find the ones they wanted to read or use for research. But it's not so simple anymore. Libraries still have books, but they also have audio and video materials. And then there is the Internet with its vast resources that some feel will soon render libraries obsolete when everything in print becomes available online.

In response, libraries have diversified. We now promote our organizations as destinations for entertainment and social activities. We are opening cafes, installing game machines in teen areas, promoting the use of our computers (not only for research but also for social networking activities such as blogging and picture sharing), and developing programming to appeal to people who are looking for entertainment. Bernard Vavrek identified this trend in an article that appeared in American Libraries in 2001. “Wanted! Entertainment Director” proposed that we should promote the entertainment value of the library instead of the more traditional role of information source, since the Internet can and is handling that function in a manner that is quite satisfactory to most information seekers. Vavrek suggested that the role of the library director is to be an entertainment director because the mission of libraries has changed; their role now is to entertain rather than to inform.

It’s a Topsy-Turvy World

It’s a topsy-turvy world now, with cafes and the Internet in libraries and books in cafes and on the Internet.

Perhaps librarians are abandoning books too quickly. While we are seeking to expand beyond being repositories for books, other establishments appear to be rediscovering them. Starbucks has recently introduced several initiatives that are concerned with books and reading. One is the Starbucks Book Break, which was held on Oct. 26, 2006. This nationwide event took place at more than 27 Starbucks locations as readers of Mitch Albom’s For One More Day met to discuss the novel. Starbucks intended for the discussion to continue via a blog to allow interaction between readers and the author.

According to several news reports, Starbucks also has plans to distribute books in a limited way as it has begun to do with music and movies. The Motley Fool has noted these efforts, as has USA TODAY and The Book Standard. According to the article on The Book Standard Web site, Starbucks has signed an agreement with the William Morris Agency to “suggest film, music and book projects to promote and market in Starbucks locations.” Titles would be carefully selected to appeal to Starbucks customers.
The initiatives at Starbucks involve new books, but there is a new online service that promotes the circulation of older books. Entitled BookMooch, the Web site identifies itself as "a community for exchanging used books." Members of BookMooch earn points by listing their used book titles on the site and then sending them to other users who request them. Members redeem points by requesting titles from among those offered by others. Membership is free, but users must pay the postage to send their books to requesters. In order to continue to be eligible to receive books, participants must give away one book for every five they receive. Members can create book wish lists and be notified when titles become available.

I particularly appreciated the explanation of why "mooch" was chosen for the name. According to the site's founder, one of the meanings of mooch is "to borrow something without intending to return it." Certainly many library patrons would prefer to "mooch" a book rather than borrow and return it. Actually, sometimes I think that is the intention of many patrons. It is ironic that, as librarians seek to modernize their services and collections, BookMooch has stepped in to serve readers interested in older titles.

Examining the mission statements of other libraries, such as the Library of Congress, can be helpful, but when decision-makers sit down to write their own, that blank whiteboard can be just a bit daunting. Fortunately, there is help available for those charged with this task. A document that might help at the beginning of the process is How to Write a Mission Statement by Janel M. Radke, available as a PDF on the Grantmanship Center Web site. It details why a mission statement is necessary and lists the three questions it must answer. Several examples of mission statements are examined to see how they answer these questions.

Mission statements are not unique to libraries, so resources on writing them for businesses or nonprofit organizations can often contain ideas and information that is applicable to libraries. I found several useful articles on the About.com Web site. One article, entitled How to Write a Mission Statement, is available in the Management section that F. John Reh, an About.com guide, maintains. This article breaks the process into 12 steps. At the end of the article are links to related materials.

One of the links led to another article in the Nonprofit Charitable Orgs area of About.com. This article by the section's guide, Joanne Fritz, was called Mission Impossible? How to Write Your Mission Statement. It explains the importance of a well-written mission statement, offers tips on writing one, and provides examples from real organizations. Again, there are links to additional resources.

While the general principles of writing a mission statement apply to libraries, it is helpful to learn from other librarians who have worked through the process and are willing to share their hard-earned knowledge. The Private Law Libraries Special Interest Section of the American Association of Law Libraries has developed a Marketing Toolkit that includes an article on writing a mission statement and a bibliography of materials on the topic.
The Ohio Library Council has developed orientation materials for new staff and has included a section on mission statements. This section discusses basic questions that a mission statement should answer, and directs users to learn about their specific organizations' mission statements and explore those of other libraries through the links provided.

The Ohio Library Council also understands that a clear mission statement is essential for effective marketing. The marketing training materials developed for public library staff include a section titled Mission & Goals for Internet Marketing. The section begins with the statement, “Marketing starts with the mission.” In addition to the discussion of how to write a mission statement, it presents examples of Ohio libraries that are effectively marketing services that reflect their missions.

Writing a mission statement is difficult, especially today when the need for libraries is being openly questioned. Now more than ever, librarians, trustees, and patrons must determine how libraries can best serve their communities and express their conclusions in their mission statements. A clear sense of purpose provides an essential foundation for successful strategic planning for the future. Proposed and existing services, including space utilization, collection development, programming, outreach, and technology applications, should all reflect the library’s mission, and we should evaluate their effectiveness on this basis, not on the basis of how new and trendy they are. Successful marketing also requires understanding the organization’s mission, since it would be almost impossible to “sell” a service if you could not explain its value. It is no longer enough to say that libraries matter; we must be able to express why they matter and demonstrate their value to users and potential users.

Janet L. Balas is library information systems specialist at Monroeville (Pa.) Public Library. Her email addresses are jbalas@telerama.lm.com and balasj@einetwork.net.

Resources Discussed


Starbucks Book Break Group Home Page
http://starbucks.gather.com

The Starbucks Book Club—Fool.com: Motley Fool Take, Aug. 8, 2006

USATODAY.com—Starbucks aims beyond lattes to extend brand

Starbucks Looks to Books After Taking on Music and Movies

BookMooc
www.bookmooc.com

Mission and Strategic Plan of the Library (Library of Congress)
www.loc.gov/about/mission

How to Write a Mission Statement
www.tgci.com/magazine/98fall/mission.asp

Write a Mission Statement
http://management.about.com/cs/generaimanagement/ht/MissionStatement.htm

Writing a Mission Statement—How to Write Your Mission Statement—Learn about Mission Statement Writing
http://nonprofit.about.com/od/nonprofitbasics/a/mission.htm

PLL-SIS Independents
www.aailnet.org/sis/pllsToolkit/toolkit.asp

Mission, Orientation for New Employees, Ohio Library Council
www.olc.org/orientation/lib.htm

Internet Mission and Goals, public library marketing training
www.olc.org/marketing/5mission.htm
Copyright of Computers in Libraries is the property of Information Today Inc. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.