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## A Disciplined Brand Approach to Marketing Libraries

Spenser Thompson

Golden Gate University

**Abstract:** The purpose of this paper is to propose a narrow definition of brand, explain why it is important, and present practical exercises to discover a library's brand. Based on the author's experience in corporate and library settings, a brand is defined as an idea that can be discovered by two formal processes outlined in the paper. 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. The processes described in this article provide an alternative to costly and time-consuming consultants or agencies. Furthermore, these two templates for brand discovery enable librarians to move beyond marketing libraries generically to marketing a specific library. This article discusses organizational culture and related obstacles to brand discovery and implementation.

**Keywords:** branding, practical exercises, academic libraries, public libraries, promotional videos

### A Brand Is an Idea

The word *brand* is widely applied inside and outside the library world and it often becomes conflated with products, services, benefits, colors, and logos, which can result in muddled and undisciplined planning and missed opportunities. At its core, however, a brand is a simple idea that can be expressed in one word. Nike is for *winners*. Apple is *different*. Disney owns *magic*. Furthermore, as Nichols Jr. and Schley (2010) argue, a brand is an idea that elicits an emotional response in consumers and is consistent with an organization's identity and aims. Once a library discovers their brand idea, it can leverage that idea to create effective marketing materials—from bookmarks to promotional videos—and to motivate audiences to use or donate to the library.

Effective branding moves beyond marketing fundamentals, such as selecting an audience and creating messages that communicate features and benefits. While these marketing fundamentals are important, their impact and effectiveness is lessened when they are not supported by an overarching brand. Furthermore, discovering a brand is helpful for all levels of marketing, from creating a bookmark to a undertaking a multiyear marketing campaign. Successful exploration of a brand can also inspire creative, marketing-related ideas. For example, it can lead staff to create new services or repackage existing ones to make them more attractive. This paper suggests that brand discovery processes should precede other marketing practices.

Brands are built and discovered over time—ideally—by staff who are invested in it. Therefore, libraries should treat this essential marketing activity as a process of brand discovery rather than simply brand declaration. This paper includes practical exercises that show libraries how to undertake the process of brand discovery. These exercises will help library staff discover their library's brand thereby also learn how to make it stand out among other library brand ideas, both online and in physical space.

In the brand discovery process, it is important for staff to market their specific library or consortium, rather than marketing libraries in general. For instance, for a given library, *family* may be a powerful brand idea if that value is prominent in the library's community, however, this brand idea is certainly not universal to all libraries. Even finding a brand for all U.S. libraries, such as the American Library Association did in its brilliant "Libraries Transform" campaign (American Library Association, 2015), still had to be unique to the mission and vision of that particular organization.

### **Is the Library Brand Really *Books*?**

In OCLC's library marketing study, *Perceptions of Libraries, 2010: Context and Community*, the organization reported that the library brand is "STILL" books (Gauder, 2011). The report's emphatic, all-capitalized "STILL" referred to findings in a previous OCLC report where, in response to the question, "What is the first thing you think of when you think of the library?" participants largely associated the library with books (De Rosa et al., 2005).

OCLC's question is what marketers call a top-of-mind or product-association question, not a brand question. Although such questions may incidentally elicit a brand response such as *freedom* or *knowledge*, they most likely will prompt responses that relate to a company's products and their features. This is certainly true in OCLC's case. Indeed, if one accepts the premise that a brand is an idea, then an object such as a book (or e-book) cannot be a brand. A book can, however, be a manifestation of an idea, such as fun, education, or truth. Even so, finding the brand of a book is not the same as discovering the brand of the library. Knowing top-of-mind is important, but it can be misleading for libraries that are undertaking brand discovery.

OCLC report's conflation of brand with free association underscores an important semantic point about the distinction between brand and top-of-mind. Understanding the difference between the two will help libraries arrive at brand ideas that go beyond their products or services to create compelling marketing programs. OCLC is not alone in the over-application of the word *brand*. Companies, ad agencies, and survey-question templates provided by Survey Monkey (Survey Monkey, 2017) often conflate the concepts of brand and product. Marketing managers are often called brand managers, even though the former is more descriptive of what they do. Ultimately, applying *brand* in this unfocused way is unwise for a survey or marketing planning environment because it confuses the principal message that the company would like to convey and dilutes the actual brand.

In order to discover their brand, libraries should consider administering a survey to users. They can include questions, such as:

- What *idea* does a library brand represent to you? This question generates the kind of information necessary for an idea-focused brand discovery process.
- What is the first thing you think about when you hear [product]?

These questions may elicit answers that are actual ideas, such as antiquated, modern, educational, and so on, rather than library products or services. Once the responses for these preliminary questions are tabulated, the library can test them against a brand idea they discover through internal research (see the exercises below).

## Why Brand Matters

**A brand idea is worth money.** Aside from the low price of its materials and programs, part of the cost of using a library is the time users must spend traveling to the library or accessing its information (for example, learning to use its databases). A good brand lets a company charge a higher cost for its products (Grossi, 2012 ; Stanford GSB Staff, 2006). For example, Apple believed that it could charge \$1,000 more for its iPhone X than Samsung’s Galaxy 8S by leveraging its brand, even though “that could be a hard pill to swallow considering that two phones largely share the same set of features” (Kumar, 2017). Libraries can learn to apply the same logic, even though most of their services are free of cost.

**A library that has established its brand idea has a higher likelihood of successfully executing a marketing tactic.** A definite brand idea can keep marketing efforts from drifting backward, away from the brand and into a laundry list of the library’s service and information offerings. Furthermore, it is important that the library has one unified brand aimed both at users at funders. Creating tactics for two ideas can be expensive and time-consuming. A campaign will be more focused if it emphasizes different manifestations of a single brand idea. Take the idea *success* as an example. A library user may care about success in work and life, but funders will likely value the success of the whole library enterprise.

Messaging surrounding the branding is also vital. It involves finding answers to questions that are more grounded: “Who are we (the library) talking to? What do we want users or funders to believe? Why should they care about our service?” These questions are best asked in the context of a well-developed brand that has been discovered through a disciplined process.

## Practical Exercise #1: Brand Discovery Process

The idea of refining the delivery of a brand to a single concept has roots in advertising legend David Ogilvy’s oft-quoted statement: “Unless your advertising contains a big idea, it will pass like a ship in the night” (2011, p. 20). This exercise is designed to prompt libraries to consider the big ideas that underlie their services in order to initiate the brand discovery process.

1. Start with the unshakable belief that a brand is an idea—not a logo, mission statement, object, or a list. *High tech* can describe an object, but is it an idea? Or enough of one?

High tech is in a gray area between idea and service. Upon further reflection, a library may decide that *relevant* is the true underlying idea behind high tech.

2. Consider the question, "What is this library all about?" In a group setting, make a list of ideas that could be used to respond to this question, such as *freedom*. If staff members cannot immediately think of ideas, it can be helpful to rephrase this question metaphorically. For example, "If our library were a car, what kind would it be?" Responses to this question can be quite revealing. For example, if someone selects a Volvo, they may be expressing their opinion of the library is durable, practical, liberal, or trusted. If a formal meeting on the topic is impossible, a good alternative is conducting interviews with individuals or small groups of staff members. Eventually, motifs will arise from the discussions that can be used as a brand. Outsiders, such as student volunteers, are often more effective as interviewers because they will encounter fewer political roadblocks and rehearsed answers from existing marketing or mission statements.
3. Scrutinize the proposed brand idea by asking if it is helpful to business goals. For example, does it improve relationships with funding bodies and spur community interaction? If an idea fails at this stage, the team should select a different idea. In some cases, the team may be best served by going back to step 1 and starting over.
4. Conduct the umbrella test. Can this single idea persuade the various targets, such as funders, first-year students, or a library board? *Success* as an example brand idea makes for a sturdy umbrella—it can mean something positive to multiple target groups even though each group may define success differently.
5. How easily does the idea translate into marketing tactics, e.g., event marketing and signage? Imagine a billboard with one word on it. Would that word work as a logo? If you had a balloon with the brand word on it in front of the library, would it be intriguing?

## **Practice Exercise #2: Positioning and the Brand Idea**

It is essential to compare a brand idea with those of competitors, such as Barnes and Noble, Google, student commons, or the children's park. Knowing the brand's position in relation to these competitors helps libraries avoid an "us too" idea. For example, if a library chooses *technology* as its brand, can it claim that idea more strongly than Google? Here is a checklist of questions to help libraries position themselves among competitors.

1. What brand ideas do the library's competitors already use?
2. Among these choices, to which idea can the library stake a claim and back up with its programs and services?
3. Will library staff be comfortable enough with the idea to introduce it to the users?

Here is an example list of ideas that might result from a brainstorming session:

Caring ; Community ; Fun ; Success (career, school, life) ; Different ; Tradition ; Truth ; Family ; Prestigious ; Dynamic ; Cutting-edge

Which ideas in this list might be valued most by the library's audiences, and which could the library claim? The library should aim for highly valued ideas that it can honestly claim and that are claimed by few competitors. Libraries should discuss these ideas in brand-discovery meetings. Additionally, rather than sharing a pre-made list of ideas like the one above, which risks stunting the flow of ideas, librarians should share the definition of a brand idea at the beginning of the meeting.

## **Making a Promotional Video: A Brand-Discovery Litmus Test**

Creating an effective promotional video is one of the most difficult marketing projects an organization can tackle in terms of discovering and communicating a brand. If a library intends to produce a video that is broadly promotional, it should make the brand-discovery process its first step. Brand discovery will help the library distill disparate ideas from a tangle of services and messages and ultimately remove all but one. Effective library videos will state this main idea in the first 10 seconds and use all the images and words that follow to support that idea.

Although it is natural to think of production value as a key to good promotional videos, it is not the only consideration. Indeed, spending money on high production values is not an option for many libraries that do not have large budgets. Furthermore, if library staff members are not market savvy—versed in marketing fundamentals—an undisciplined process can result in a few pitfalls. Intelligent planning discussions about a promotional video can lead library staff to ask, "Who are we and what are we about?" Although this is a valid question that can lead to helpful discussion, without a solid marketing framework in place, it can also result in a lack of focus.

An organization that has used video effectively to communicate its brand is the Shasta Public Libraries (SPL) in California. SPL used *home* as the brand idea for its "At Home at My Library" campaign ("At Home," 2016). Home is an effective idea because it is not owned by library competitors such as Starbucks, which offers community space, and Google, which offers information searching. Also, like all good brand ideas, home carries emotion and inspires action. The campaign's videos expand on the idea of home with brief vignettes of children, senior citizens, and others with light-touch graphics. The video exemplifies the main thrust of this article because it has a single strong idea—not a laundry list—that it effectively communicates despite the fact that it does not glitter with slick production value.

The Lipscomb University Libraries in Nashville, Tennessee, created a video, embedded below entitled "Lipscomb University Campus Tour" (2012). The library used the video, which is peppered with friendly staff, to communicate a down-home, Nashville feel.



*Video: Lipscomb University Campus Tour (2016)  
by Lipscomb University Libraries*

## **Vendors for Library Promotional Videos**

Libraries that choose an outside advertising agency to create promotional videos will face different branding challenges. A good agency will typically ask the kind of brand-discovery questions discussed in this paper to uncover a brand idea that works. However, if the library tells the agency that it is “about the materials,” the likely result would be a video animation with a book in it. Therefore, libraries should bring at least one brand *idea* to initial agency conversations, particularly because agencies may have misconceptions about libraries that lead them to select brands that libraries would not choose for themselves. Working through a formal brand-development process before the agency meeting can counter any preconceptions about libraries that an agency might bring to the table. During the meeting, then, the crucial task of the library is to quickly show the agency what the library is about and what its idea is.

## **Library Brand in Context of Community or University**

Libraries are embedded in larger institutions, organizations, or towns. Some communities have strong identities that draw people them (for example, the New Age identity of Sedona, Arizona). A library that is embedded in a place with a strong identity may have a ready-made brand idea, but it should decide if the idea will actually be beneficial.

In higher education, libraries are one service within a broader set of services, i.e., colleges or universities, that students have selected for a reason: price, convenience, prestige, entertainment value, location, or even a brand idea. Branding an academic library is more challenging because it is less differentiated from its environment than, say, a public library sitting in the middle of a city. There are two strategies for academic libraries. The first is to recruit students as part of an automatic focus group that already carries a brand idea in its collective mind. The second is to look at the parent institution’s branding. If the parent institution does not have a strong idea or identity (other than quality services), the library will have more freedom to create its own.

If an academic library’s college or university has a strong identity or a clear brand campaign, the library can consider aligning with it. For example, the University of San Francisco

(USF) uses the tagline “Change the world from here” (University of San Francisco, 2017). USF’s campaign exemplifies a kind of strong branding that has been built up through the decades. It seeks to attract aspiring San Francisco-style world-changers by leveraging the city’s reputation for political and social protest. USF’s library could build off of this brand idea by asking, “What would a world-changing library look like? What services and experiences would it offer? Can our services—research and getting the facts—be tied to social change?” USF’s campaign also implies that it is looking for people who think of themselves as part of a lineage of San Francisco activism. The library could ask: “How do we show that we are progressive too? How are we helping activists succeed?”

## Brands and Organizations

Most of the time, brand statements can be bold and focused only when they are consonant with the leader’s vision. The less clear the direction, the harder it will be to discover a brand and apply it. Company employment webpages often focus on institutional culture. They know if there is no culture, there is no conviction, and therefore no money. Behind a marketing tactic—a flyer, for example—there may be a strong brand idea (or not), and behind that are the people who make up the organization that created it. An important marketing practice is hiring people with high energy and high conviction rather than people who just know how to market or use Facebook.

Good branding is easier with focused leadership. Leaders who have difficulty understanding their customers, prospects, or suite of services will inhibit employees from exploring and selecting brand ideas. If the leader envisions and communicates a clear identity for the library enterprise (even if that identity is the leader’s personality) and prioritizes the services that are most important, brand discovery will be easier. Ideally, the leader and staff believe in a shared idea and will thus be more motivated to create aligned marketing tactics.

## Next Steps

- Librarians can go through Practical Exercise #1 above and discover a brand idea for their library.
- Libraries can create a survey for their users based on this paper that includes both a top-of-mind brand question (e.g., What do you first think about when you hear library?) and a conceptual question (e.g., What idea does the word *library* suggest to you?). The survey could also query whether the library’s chosen brand makes sense to the respondents and motivates them to engage with the library more deeply. Based on the results, libraries may choose to adjust their services. Libraries may also choose to retest respondents periodically.
- Finally, libraries can create a tactical marketing piece (e.g., event, video, brochure, logo) that is the result of either a survey or Practical Exercise #1.



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