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## An Historical Overview of Marketing in U.S. Libraries: From Dana to Digital

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the past and present of library marketing in the United States. While library marketing's foundations were established by John Cotton Dana more than a century ago, not every library is up-to-speed in its knowledge or practice. Today, there are "Haves" with plenty of space, staff, and money, and "Have Nots" that lack some of those necessities. In the midst of this uneven landscape, this article discusses the organizations and publications that support marketing, details library marketing trends in four categories (Using data; Successful strategies; Technology; Relationship marketing), and lists national campaigns and awards for effective library marketing campaigns and collateral. In this broad overview, attention is also given to the continuing challenges facing libraries as they undertake new or expanded marketing programs, including likely future scenarios.

**Keywords:** History, library marketing, awards, trends, John Cotton Dana

### How Far We Have—or Have Not—Come

The foundations of marketing in libraries were established by John Cotton Dana (1856–1929), a man who began his library career in Denver, Colorado, in 1889 and ended it on the other side of the United States in Newark, New Jersey, in 1929. Dana was already a well-educated man when he accepted his first library job at age 33. The board of School District Number One in Denver established a public library associated with the school. Dana became its first librarian in 1889, as well as secretary to the board of education. As Dana began to organize this public library, he undertook the mission to acquaint the community with the library's resources (Kingdon, 1940).

To many, Dana's methods were unique and unsettling:

He advertised the library extensively. When word of this reached the ears of other librarians, he at once became a storm center within the profession. Such an unorthodox and undignified procedure outraged all the traditions of a profession that had gone its quiet and dusty way providing collections of books for book lovers and letting them come when they chose to get them. It was an unheard-of thing for a librarian to cry his wares in the ears of the passers-by in an attempt to make books a part of the lives of common men. The more conservative of his fellows called him a radical and saw him laying vulgar hands upon ancient practices in their field. Dana went his own aggressive way. A library was to be used. The more people who used it the better public library it was. His work was to get the people to read the books and to get the books the people would read. (Kingdon, p. 45)

Sixty-two years later, M.J. Haueser explained Dana's views on the leading role libraries could and should play, "in realizing the democratic culture and egalitarian society. Dana recognized that public libraries had to identify themselves with common citizens and become a cultural center in the community, a beacon of light to attract citizens interested in educating themselves to become decision-makers in a democratic society. His views were, in many respects, revolutionary in the world of librarianship" (Haeuser, 2002).

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, some librarians still view marketing as "revolutionary," or as some sort of unsavory sales trick that should not be practiced at venerable, nonprofit, public institutions (LaGuardia, 2014). There are, however, many present-day librarians who do understand and endeavor to do what has been dubbed "True Marketing" (Dempsey, 2009), a deliberate process of finding out what people want, making it available, and then strategically promoting it. By doing so, these librarians create wonderful promotional materials and campaigns that explain the deep value that libraries offer. Dana would have been proud.

Such is the state of library marketing in America today. It runs the gamut from organizations that make just a few formal efforts to others that hire in-house professionals and allot them money to spend on major marketing and promotion strategies. This is true across all library types: public, K-12, academic, corporate, and special. The best words to describe library marketing in the U.S. today, and indeed over the past decade, are probably "uneven" or "widely varied." This paper—a brief, broad overview of the topic, spanning the past three centuries—will explore how libraries got to this point and where we might go from here. This author has been steeped in this field for more than two decades and will use that depth of knowledge to explain how effective marketing is essential for ensuring that libraries exist in the future.

## Brief Background of American Library Marketing

In the 1700s, members of the upper class were just starting to gather their books into private libraries. Benjamin Franklin's "first project of a public nature" was to establish the Library Company of Philadelphia (1731), funded by 50 founding members. "Membership increased to one hundred subscribers, who paid an initial fee and annual dues. The idea caught on across the colonies, and by the 1750s a dozen new subscription libraries had appeared ... By contrast, the first British subscription library was not established until 1756" (Murray, 2009).

By the time John Cotton Dana was born in 1856, there were some university and public libraries, but they were still not accessible to everyone. After working in the field, Dana viewed public libraries' purpose much differently than many of his peers who questioned why ordinary citizens would want to use libraries. Dana felt strongly that common people should have access. "Dana believed that the main challenge for libraries was to educate the public about citizenship and their participation in it" (Haeuser, 2002). This was a revolutionary notion at a time when books were scarce and precious.

Dana was determined to change the libraries for which he worked:

He set out to make the library into a democratic institution and is responsible for many innovations that are now standard library services. He ended the closed stack system whereby librarians could monitor (and suggest) which books the patron requested. ... To increase readership he made it easier to get a library card and lengthened the hours the library was open to meet the needs of working-class citizens. ... Most librarians saw children as not a ready fit for libraries. ... Dana saw children as full members of the community surrounding the library and welcomed them with open arms. He created the first children's room in a public library in the country, complete with appropriate furniture and children's art. (Haeuser, 2002)

The changes that John Cotton Dana brought to librarianship were physical, intellectual, or practical in nature:

Dana's intellectual efforts, in practice, meant democratizing the library by getting rid of barriers. Obstacles like metal railings, gates, fences, came down. So did unnecessary rules and unfriendly staff. He advocated a management style that fostered experimentation and a constant testing of assumptions to see if they held up. *But he also was a pioneer in what we now call public relations, marketing, and other promotional activities. He was an early practitioner of needs assessment, target audiences, goal setting, planning, and*

*evaluation that could be quantified.* He saw performance in numbers, in customer satisfaction. If readers liked a service he made sure others knew about it. If he added a new service ... he made sure everyone had an opportunity to learn of it. He used newsletters, pamphlets, posters, flyers, exhibits, newspaper announcements and speeches to groups, and special events to publicize library events and encourage library use. He urged librarians to better understand their institutions from the patron's perspective—to put themselves in the worlds of actual and potential users. ... In short, John Cotton Dana revolutionized the American Public Library. (Haeuser, 2002)

(The italics in the quote above were added by this author to emphasize the fact that Dana set the stage for many of the strategies that are now used in library marketing.)

In the early 1890s, as Dana established his library and career, the number of registered users in Denver, as well as circulation statistics, grew year-over-year. Fifty years later, biographer Kingdon declared Dana's place in library history: "He awakened Denver to the fact that it had a library. His success awakened the whole library profession to the fact that it had a wide constituency to serve of which it had been largely unaware. His experiments in his first years as a librarian began a revolution throughout the entire field of library practices" (Kingdon, 1940, p. 46).

## Overview of the Evolution: Technology, Books, and Periodicals

Much has changed since Dana's day, but a good deal remains the same. The greatest changes in library marketing are not related to strategy, but rather the tools and platforms used to market libraries and the services they provide. Consider this fast-forward overview of the evolution: In the 1800s, librarians' most basic platforms were word of mouth and newspapers. As printing became easier and cheaper to mass produce, librarians shifted their preferred mode of communication to creating flyers and posters. The small but useful bookmark became a staple of library promotion, as it was easy for staffers to tuck them into books that patrons were taking home. By the mid-20th century, we had "mass media" (radio and television) to help spread the word. In the 1980s, computers were becoming widely used. By the 1990s, computers were cheap enough for individuals to own and that changed everything. Flyers and bookmarks began giving way to sharing news and photos online and the development of library websites.

At the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, librarians began using the new "social media." Websites became de rigueur. Libraries' sites began as did most: clunky and slow. As the technology advanced, our colleagues found ways to make them more exciting and more useful. By 2009, the progressive

Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library in Kansas had begun referring to its website as its "digital branch" since people could access it any time, even when the building was closed (King, 2009).

As video technology became more simple to use, as well as affordable, librarians could do more on their own, without incurring expenses associated with hiring professionals possessing "serious" equipment. Personal video cameras eventually grew smaller and easier to use. Likewise, software that allowed laypeople to edit their videos became popular. In 2018, with good-quality video cameras built into the cell phones that most people carry, many libraries film their own videos for entertainment, teaching, and promotional purposes. Libraries with big budgets, however, still hire companies to produce professional-quality audio and video. In this age of images and movies, the video format offers a powerful way to reach audiences.

On the less technical side are books and other publications. In the 1990s, very few books about library marketing were published. Early in the 21st century, books about library marketing became more prevalent. A handful of these early books make seminal contributions to the literature, defining marketing for libraries and detailing how to market libraries effectively, including the following:

- *Library Public Relations, Promotions, and Communications: A How-To-Do-It Manual* by Lisa A. Wolfe. (Neal-Schuman, 1997). Wolfe starts by discussing how to position libraries in the changing environment, and covered segmentation, PR, branding, advocacy, and more. This excellent overview had a second edition in 2005.
- *Marketing/Planning Library and Information Services*, second ed., by Darlene E. Weingand (Libraries Unlimited, 1999) begins by asking "What is marketing?" and builds on definitions from the widely respected Philip Kotler, explaining the foundations of marketing.
- *Library Marketing That Works!* by Suzanne Walters (Neal-Schuman, 2004) is a useful instruction manual addressing strategic planning steps and the marketing planning process in depth. The volume includes exercises and worksheets.
- *Blueprint for Your Library Marketing Plan: A Guide to Help You Survive and Thrive* by Patricia H. Fisher and Marseille M. Pride (ALA, 2006.) is a thin paperback that focuses on gathering the information necessary to write a marketing plan (via multiple worksheets), including templates for writing those plans.
- *The Accidental Library Marketer* by Kathy Dempsey (Information Today, Inc., 2009) was written for people who have not studied, but have been thrust into doing marketing work for their libraries. In logical order, it discusses definitions, data gathering, communication strategies, and winning buy-in. By tweaking the concepts of business marketing to fit libraries, Dempsey created the Cycle of True Marketing (<https://www.librariesareessential.com/library-marketing-resources/cycle-of-true->

[marketing/](#)), a visual and textual guide to the steps necessary for effective marketing. This concept and book are now used in some MLIS courses.

- ***Marketing Your Library's Electronic Resources: A How-To-Do-It Manual for Librarians*** by Marie R. Kennedy and Cheryl LaGuardia (Neal-Schuman, 2013) was one of the first full-length books to cover how to promote "invisible" resources such as databases and services. Its complete coverage starts with determining the purpose of a marketing plan and continues through creating and assessing plans.
- ***Marketing and Social Media: A Guide for Libraries, Archives, and Museums*** by Christie Koontz and Lorri Mon. Rowman & Littlefield, 2014. Written by two PhDs, this title was the first to cover social media marketing in full academic fashion. It follows the True Marketing model, diving into environmental scans, goals, market research, and the marketing mix before sharing some brief case studies compiled by students in the co-authors' MLIS classes.

Today, books on various aspects of marketing appear almost monthly. Having read and reviewed countless marketing books since the mid-1990s, this author has witnessed several factors that helped turn the former trickle into a steady stream of books: First, the internet emerged as a competing source of information in the late 1990s. As libraries were threatened with budget cuts or even closure, more librarians realized the importance of marketing (Schuyler, 2002). Second, authors now explore topics (e.g., branding, social media) that once filled mere chapters in enough depth to create full-length tomes. Thirdly, greater demand for knowledge concerning the various components of marketing has driven publishers to produce more material. Most recently, another trend has emerged: Library marketing and promotion books are not saying much that is new. Many are of a "best practices" nature, with individual case studies as contributed chapters, so they share ideas but lack deep insight and instruction.

One other book deserves mention for its coincidental relationship to John Cotton Dana and for the attention it garnered. In *Start a Revolution: Stop Acting Like a Library*, Ben Bizzle (2014) told the tale of how he and his colleagues in a small public library in Arkansas started using unconventional promotional materials. Their bold billboards, edgy slogans, and funny social media posts really surprised the public, and therefore got people's attention. The team's campaigns won national acclaim, and in conference sessions around the country, Bizzle urged others to be more authentic, humorous, and open-minded about what library advertising and promotion could look like. The tactics in this book sound like things that a modern-day John Cotton Dana might have done.

When it comes to publications other than books, there have not been many from which to choose. Chris Olson & Associates produced a newsletter called *Marketing Treasures* from late 1987 until mid-2006, with varying frequency. Its tagline was "the electronic newsletter with marketing ideas for information professionals." Originally, each issue came with a sheet of library-related clip art; even

after those free images got their own website, the newsletter continued to promote them. The only serial that's focused exclusively on this topic for longer has been the *Marketing Library Services (MLS)* newsletter, launched in 1987 by Riverside Data Inc. and acquired by Information Today. MLS publishes case studies and how-to pieces written by librarians. It covers many aspects of marketing, such as advocacy, public relations, and social media. The newsletter also includes conference reports, news, book reviews, and interviews. While MLS is a professional publication, it is short (eight–12 pages per issue) and highly specialized. Published in English, MLS has subscribers around the world. In 2014, the publisher added an electronic subscription option, making it easier and cheaper for those outside the U.S. to receive the newsletter.

*Marketing Libraries Journal* became only the third publication dedicated to this topic when it launched in 2017. It's the first to be open access, peer-reviewed, and born digital, though no regular publication schedule has been established as of this writing. Occasional marketing-related articles are carried in various periodicals, such as *Library Management* (Emerald Insight), *Library Journal* ([www.libraryjournal.com](http://www.libraryjournal.com)), the *Journal of Web Librarianship* (Taylor & Francis), *Information Outlook* (SLA – Special Libraries Association), and others, but no others concentrate on this family of topics.

In terms of irregular or single publications, survey results and reports have become excellent tools for keeping up with the field. The most useful typically come from Pew Research Center, OCLC, Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL), and the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS). All are well-publicized upon release.

In this century, blogs have become common, and numerous people have blogged about marketing and related topics. Blogs are convenient for sharing information freely, and nearly anyone can manage it. Due to this fluid nature of blogs, which regularly appear and disappear, the author will not list or cite them in this paper.

## Organizations that Support Marketing

One area where marketing has evolved especially slowly is in forming organizations and associations of its own. This is another indication of how long it's taking for the concept of library marketing to reach critical mass.

Each of the major library associations has its own divisions or sections for the marketing-minded: American Library Association (ALA), American Association of School Librarians (AASL), ACRL, Public Library Association (PLA), SLA, and the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA). As noted in the 63<sup>rd</sup> edition of *Library and Book Trade Almanac* (2018), having small groups within larger sections of even bigger organization is evidence that this topic has not gotten top billing. In every case, individuals must be paid members of a parent organization before they can

join a marketing-related section, often for an additional fee. This additional cost prevents interested people from becoming part of these sub-groups. If marketing and PR is a person's main job, he/she may not be interested in the primary business of the parent organization, and their own libraries may not be willing to pay for a general membership when their employee will only be active in one small group. This is a financial barrier to marketing education and action. Some may find their kindred spirits within their state or regional associations, many of which have marketing-related committees or interest groups for them to join. With lower membership fees and reduced registration costs, state conferences are more reasonable events to attend. In addition, local meetings require less time away from work and significantly lower travel expenses associated with them. Regional groups often offer continuing education opportunities (via books, articles, webinars, and conference sessions), and sometimes oversee local marketing and PR contests for members.

Some library systems pay for their employees to join non-library associations for their educational needs. Of course, it's always good to expand one's worldview and network, but much of what those groups offer doesn't apply to nonprofits or libraries (Dempsey, 2018). Their membership and conference fees can be expensive too. As these groups often cater to the business world, membership and conference fees can be expensive. (It is impossible to directly compare membership prices since there are so many options.) For instance, some library workers belong to the PRSA - Public Relations Society of America; others belong to the American Marketing Association (AMA).

One additional drawback is the fact that many will be sharing ideas without providing sufficient context: "Library employees flock to informal groups, such as listservs and social media groups, to get and share marketing ideas and information. While this is simple and accessible, caveat emptor: You get what you pay for." It is useful to be able to ask others for their ideas when you need a name for a new book group or program, when you want to find out what activities they planned for a building's Grand Opening, how they're promoting their Summer Reading Programs, etc. Of course, these types of queries do not necessarily support deep learning or build understanding, "and what was a winning tactic for one library system may not work at all for another in different circumstances" (Dempsey, 2018, p. 28).

The lack of formal organizations for library marketers did not go entirely unnoticed. By 2011, a librarian named Bob Kieserman, a professor at Arcadia University in Pennsylvania, surveyed people to determine interest in a small conference, and the response led him to create one. Kieserman put together what he called "the Inaugural Conference" of the Association of Library Communications and Outreach Professionals (ALCOP). The meeting took place in a suburb of Philadelphia on October 9–10, 2011, drawing a small but enthusiastic crowd that led Kieserman to try to build a membership-based association around it (Dempsey, 2018).



Kieserman's group put together three more annual conferences after that, but they continued to draw only 50 to 100 people, and the association itself never really got off the ground. (Highlights of the 2011 conference are presented in the January/February 2012 issue of *Marketing Library Services*, pp. 1-3; the 2013 conference was covered in the an October 6, 2013 *The 'M' Word – Marketing Libraries* blog post <http://themwordblog.blogspot.com/2013/10/alcops-2013-conferenece-day-1-highlights.html>.) In January 2015, people inquired if there would be another conference later that year; Kieserman replied that he'd decided not to continue them. A small group of former attendees felt the event could be expanded and improved. Given the many challenges of securing funding and the closure of some libraries, this group knew that their peers desperately needed to learn to do more and better marketing.

After a flurry of online discussions with Kieserman and others, Dempsey accepted the challenge of rebranding and rebuilding this fledgling event. Throughout 2015, she led a team of 13 volunteers from across North America. They were joined by the cooperative Amigos Library Services, "which provided the start-up money and conference-building expertise" the organizers needed (Dempsey, 2018). The team put out a Call for Proposals and dealt with all of the content and publicity work while Amigos handled hotel contracts and online registration.

The first Library Marketing and Communications Conference (LMCC) was held in a suburb of Dallas, Texas, in November 2015. It proved that people really did want and need such an event as all of the 200 available seats were sold (Dempsey, 2016). People came to Dallas from all over the U.S. and Canada, from public, special, and academic libraries, for two full days that included two keynote addresses and 28 breakout sessions (Burke, 2015). Attendees' on-site excitement and subsequent survey responses told the planners that they valued this conference leading the group to plan the second Library Marketing and Communications Conference for November of 2016 in the same Texas hotel. Armed with their first-year experiences, measurements, and survey results, the LMCC Planning Committee and Amigos Library Services were able to attract 330 attendees to the event that featured two keynotes and 32 sessions, as well as several extra activities for which people had asked. Countless attendees said things such as, "Thank you for creating this conference!" and "I never had anywhere to go before to learn all this and to meet people like me" (Dempsey, 2017).

The conference organizers held the third LMCC in 2017 jointly with Amigos Library Services. They also formed a 501(c)3 nonprofit called the Library Marketing Conference Group that year and worked to create a brand via a professionally designed logo. The fourth annual conference, in St. Louis in November 2018, was another sell-out. This organization and event now appear well-established.

The only other organization that operates in a similar space to LMCC is also fairly new. In December 2012, a small group formed an official political action committee (PAC) called EveryLibrary.

As this nonprofit's mission statement explains: "EveryLibrary helps public, school, and college libraries win bonding, tax, and advisory referendum, ensuring stable funding and access to libraries for generations to come" (EveryLibrary, 2012). While political advocacy is related to marketing, it really is its own field, with various guidelines on how it raises and spends its funds as it tries to influence policies and funding votes.

Led by Executive Director John Chrastka, EveryLibrary has been growing steadily and has started its own publication, *The Political Librarian* (EveryLibrary, 2012). The organization's board members already have an impressive history of training librarians to organize citizens in order to win support for the various taxes that fund libraries. According to its 2016 Annual Report, EveryLibrary had supported 60 library campaigns, 45 of which won at the ballot box. Consequently: "... we can proudly say we have helped secure over \$200 million in stable tax funding for those libraries. We grew our social media reach by 10 times in 2016 and are now able to communicate directly and effectively with over 100,000 Americans through our Facebook and Twitter feeds. Our key strategic initiative was launching our Action platform at [action.everylibrary.org](http://action.everylibrary.org)." (EveryLibrary, 2016). One of EveryLibrary's main strategies is to partner with others to strengthen its position as it continues to fight for libraries. Look for it to become more influential in the next few years.

## Trends from the Past Decade

This paper has covered some history of library marketing, presented a brief overview of how library marketing has evolved over the past 100 or so years and outlined the beginnings of two organizations focusing on different aspects. Four topics that have been trending through the past decade or so deserve attention too: Using Data, Successful Strategies, Technology, and Relationship Marketing.

### Using Data

One might think that using data to make marketing decisions would be "marketing 101," as it is in the for-profit business world, yet American librarians have shied away from using patron and usage data due to their concerns about protecting privacy, as evidenced by countless comments at the LMCC. As the technology world made "big data" a common phrase, and as email marketers began designing more-customized messages to get attention, libraries recognized that they too could use their considerable data to make library marketing more effective. Panels at industry conferences that discuss whether (and how) to harvest and use digital data are drawing crowds (LMCC, 2018b).

Savvy marketers know that they can no longer email the same general message to everyone and still achieve a respectable open rate. Harvesting, segmenting, and harnessing the power of data is difficult without knowledgeable staffers and serious software. Some vendors have emerged to help with this, and a few fearless library leaders have been experimenting. Those leaders have shared their impressive results in conference sessions, articles, and webinars. One early example was when the Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library in Kansas began working with vendor CIVIC Technologies in 2009 integrate data from the library's ILS with geocoded market segmentation data for mapping. (Millsap, 2011) A Product Spotlight article in *Library Journal* names vendors with similar mapping products, including Analytics on Demand from Gale Cengage Learning, Simply Map (Geographic Research Inc.), and OrangeBoy (Savannah Company). (Hazlett, 2016)

**Turning Data into Stories** – One way that many libraries, groups, and individuals have been able to use data without expert support is by telling stories in order to reach and hopefully influence people. Libraries gather tales of library experiences from fans and curate them into websites, as exemplified in the following:

1. *Libraries Changed My Life* (<http://librarieschangedmylife.tumblr.com>), a Tumblr site created by Ingrid Conley-Abrams and Natalie V. Binder, active 2013–2015.
2. *Library Stories* (<http://www.lib.ncsu.edu/stories>), a blog from North Carolina State University Libraries with stories contributed by NCSU librarians, active 2014–present.
3. *My Library Story* (<http://blog.gale.com/tag/my-library-story>), a blog from Gale, a Cengage company, active 2014–2017.

It can be difficult to digest lots of numbers and charts, but the emergence of many tools and templates for showing information via colorful images have made it easier and pleasant to share, and to understand, library data. In his post, "Libraries matter," Piotr Kowalczyk presents 18 infographics developed by libraries to illustrate their data. (Kowalczyk, 2018)

**Assessment** – Measurement and assessment have long been a staple of for-profit marketing, but again, librarians have been slow to adopt. Most libraries have used simple counts, such as book circulation statistics and the number of reference questions posed, never doing much to assess those numbers or to use them strategically. College and university librarians have been tasked with "assessment" for years, but they've not always used that data in market planning. Recent conference presentations (LMCC, 2018) and books (Britto, 2018) indicate that the tide is turning.

Data analysis requires the use of spreadsheets—which some librarians want to avoid—but they do so at their own peril. Libraries of all types are competing with other departments for precious dollars, and with the ubiquitous internet. Now, libraries are required by their administrators to demonstrate their value with hard data. Anecdotal evidence is no longer sufficient to convince people that financial support is warranted; librarians must be able to calculate returns on investment (ROI)

and more. Many libraries are illustrating their value to users and organizations by connecting collections, reference assistance provided, and research conducted to the ultimate outcomes of projects (and the impact of those projects on institutions/communities).

## Successful Strategies

There are a handful of broad strategies that are common in marketing, and a century after John Cotton Dana recommended them, most librarians have adopted them. As people become more familiar with library marketing and the Cycle of True Marketing, they are carrying out strategic research at the beginning of marketing initiatives to ensure that they choose narrow, target audiences and communicate with those groups in ways that they know will be effective. In addition to those most basic strategies, there are more-specific activities that deserve coverage in this article: Advocacy, branding, merchandising, and vendor assistance.

**Advocacy** – The term, advocacy, means to plead on behalf of something or to publicly support a cause. Advocacy is usually more convincing if people who are not directly related to the cause are the ones speaking up for it. However, librarians have jumped on the advocacy bandwagon, learning to speak up for themselves.

When Camila Alire made it her presidential initiative when she headed the ALA in 2009–2010, librarians truly got serious. Alire’s concentration on the topic was a call to arms. ALA created a Frontline Advocacy Toolkit (Alire, 2010) to help people understand and act. As resources were added to the toolkit, it grew into the free online Advocacy University ([www.ala.org/advocacy/advocacy-university](http://www.ala.org/advocacy/advocacy-university)).

The call for all librarians to advocate for their field has continued, sparked by writings like an Executive Director’s Message in *American Libraries* magazine (Fiels, 2014). As mentioned earlier, the PAC EveryLibrary operates in the advocacy space, teaching librarians and their champions how to effectively lobby for support.

**Branding** – Most people think of branding as the work of for-profit businesses trying to sell their products. However, librarians have realized the importance of branding to increase the recognition (and eventually, usage) of their own products and services. Today, most U.S. libraries have logos. Library systems with bigger budgets hire professional firms to help them determine key attributes and then design a logo and visual identity around that brand (Priddy, 2014). We now see branding as a basic component of any worthwhile library marketing strategy.

**Merchandising** – Once the exclusive domain for businesses and retail stores, in the past five years or so, librarians have come to embrace the concept of merchandising. They now understand that merchandising is more than just making attractive displays.

Merchandising is a strategy to coax visitors deeper into a building, a way to affect what library visitors think and feel, and a tool to increase circulation. Good merchandising is based on retail philosophies and studies, and it involves not only book displays, but outdoor and indoor signage, font and color choices, psychology, and more. The progressive Anythink Libraries in Colorado has gone so far as to create a merchandising guidebook.

**Vendor Help** – It's not uncommon today for library vendors to create marketing aids for their library customers. For instance, if your library subscribes to a database, its vendor may offer posters, bookmarks, and downloadable images or videos that you can use to make patrons aware of the database. This is self-serving in a way: If you buy a database and hardly anyone uses it, you will probably not renew it. Since libraries don't always have anyone on staff who can create great-looking promotional materials, this help is welcome.

## Technology

As most people experience technology almost constantly in their daily lives, they've come to expect it everywhere, including in their libraries. Librarians put a lot of time—not to mention money—into technology in order to support internal operations (e.g., online catalogs, RFID), to serve users by providing access to ebooks and makerspaces, and to promote their offerings via social media and video. One problem is that most people don't equate "library" with "high-tech," but with books, so it's even more challenging to tell them that libraries have technology and invite them to use it. (OCLC, 2010)

Reaching young people is especially difficult. "Digital natives" (i.e., people who have had access to high-tech toys and tools all their lives) tend to think they know everything about technology, so they don't seek help with search or with more complex tools. If they believe that some old library lady with her hair in a bun knows less than they do, they are unlikely to even follow her on social media, to watch her videos, or to read her flyers.

The web and social media may have been around for a long time now, but there are new promotional tech tools that can reach and surprise these young people (and their elders): Bluetooth, mapping, mobile, search engine optimization (SEO), social media, and video.

**Marketing with Bluetooth** – The latest marketing tech works via Bluetooth. Businesses used it first, as usual, but libraries have started to get into the game. Organizations can buy "beacons" the size of hockey pucks that transmit messages of their choice via Bluetooth. End-user devices can get the

messages if they have downloaded an app and turned on Bluetooth. When a person comes within range of a beacon, a message will be pinged to him or her. Librarians are using this "push technology" to share various info: reminders of upcoming events, notices that holds are available, invitations, etc. (Eng, 2015) While still in its infancy in terms of library marketing, beacons from these vendors are being used in libraries today: BluuBeam ([www.bluubeam.com](http://www.bluubeam.com)); Capira Technologies ([www.capiratech.com/ibeacon-library-app-integration](http://www.capiratech.com/ibeacon-library-app-integration)); Estimote (<https://estimote.com>); Kontakt (<http://kontakt.io>); Piper ([www.piper.ly/proximity-notifications](http://www.piper.ly/proximity-notifications)).

**Geographic / Demographic Mapping** – Putting demographic data about citizens on a map of a public library's service area is perhaps the Holy Grail of marketing today. Just as big business does while planning for store locations and product development, public librarians can gain a deep understanding of their local population in order to determine which services and products will be most useful at each branch.

Over 20 years ago, Dr. Christie Koontz of Florida State University spearheaded the GeoLib initiative in which Geographic Information Systems (GIS) software would combine a map with a library's list of cardholders' addresses in order to determine which areas lacked accessible service points. (Koontz, 2005) Adding data from the U.S. Census made the maps even more useful, allowing librarians to learn about the sorts of people living in various areas in order to send customized promotions that fit those people's needs (Dempsey, 2018). Over the last five to 10 years, this has expanded into a real industry, with vendors ready to help with data-crunching software (Hazlett, 2016). A handful of companies are at the forefront of mapping demographics for libraries today:

- CIVICTechnologies (<http://civicttechnologies.com>)
- Gale Cengage Learning (<http://solutions.cengage.com/analytics>)
- Orange Boy (<https://www.orangeboyinc.com/savannah-overview>)
- Policy Map (<https://www.policymap.com/industries/public-library>)
- Simply Map (<http://geographicresearch.com/simplymap>).

Given the tools and expertise to visualize this very detailed customer data, public library systems that can afford it are able to segment citizens by various demographics (e.g., income, job status, number and age of children in the home, languages spoken, ethnicity) and then target their marketing accordingly. Using these systems, marketers can customize newsletters and send them to postal codes where they know certain groups are prevalent. For instance, suburbs where many people commute to work in nearby cities will get mailers about audio books, ebooks, downloadable music, and the like. This demonstrates segmented, targeted marketing at its best. Case studies of libraries using OrangeBoy's Savannah customer intelligence platform are evidence that the technique works (<https://www.orangeboyinc.com/successes>).

**Mobile Marketing** – Apps are all the rage, and while they are not exactly "marketing," some libraries have built their own to help patrons see when a book is due or when a hold is waiting. If libraries launch a new app, they will need to promote it to get people to start using it, as Kevin Unrath explained in "How we promoted our mobile app." (Unrath, 2013)

**Search Engine Optimization (SEO)** – People start seeking information using a search engine more often than going directly to a library website and may only become aware of the library if its website appears at or near the top of search results. While businesses have been spending money on ads that appear as the first search results, and on Search Engine Marketing (SEM) or SEO experts to help their sites appear organically, libraries hadn't made a great deal of effort in that arena until the past few years. A unique vendor called Koios ([www.koios.co](http://www.koios.co)) has emerged to help public librarians understand the importance of high search rankings and to do some of the heavy lifting to achieve those coveted positions. Koios helps public librarians apply for grants for Google Ads, which then covers payments for keyword advertising, enabling libraries to sit at the top of results lists, effectively pointing searchers to their websites and resources.

**Social Media Marketing** – While social platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, SnapChat, and Pinterest have been around for years, they're still very hot in library marketing, in large part because they are free. Even without any startup costs, social media can still have a high "price" since it demands much staff time and attention. The constant changes and updates make some social media platforms, especially Facebook, somewhat difficult to use on an expert level.

As with many other marketing tools, the usage and mastery of social media varies widely. Some libraries have just one or two accounts and don't post often; others not only dedicate staff time, but also write annual promotional plans and content calendars. More librarians are trying to measure their results with each platform's built-in tools or with specialized ones (Bower, 2016). Chatter about social promotion is a constant in library-related listservs and online groups, and at live events (e.g., association meetings and annual conferences).

**Video Marketing** – While video is popular with the public, short attention spans and competition for attention mean that promoters need to keep videos short (generally less than 2 minutes) to win viewers. Librarians create and use videos for various purposes, for example:

- **Library That!** from Sno-Isle Libraries (public) near Seattle, Washington, demonstrates the power of a library card (<https://youtu.be/e2EkzHnL1zc>)
- **Song parodies** are popular, such as Bruno Mars Uptown Funk Parody: Unread Book from Pogona Creative and the Orange Public Library in association with Chapman University, near Orange, California (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J6zclFUvdJ0>)
- **Academic articles in a library minute** ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=zApJETdSt\\_A](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zApJETdSt_A)), compliments of Arizona State University, Tempe campus

- *Save Our School Libraries* from the Oregon Library Association explains why K–12 school libraries matter (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eKUeCkY2gKA&index=10&list=PLTjeiGIA0elruiYDol3s2wCP1Wbq8EhUJ>).

**Relationship Marketing** – Librarians are leaving their desks and their buildings, partnering with outside organizations, and in general trying to get more personal with users and potential users. This relationship marketing entails getting librarians' faces in front of people and making services more personal and pleasant. All types of libraries are using these strategies. With so much competition from countless other information sources, librarians could no longer afford to be docile or reactive, so they had to leave their comfort zones. Some started small, by simply sitting on the side of a desk instead of behind it, to remove the "barrier" and to appear more welcoming to patrons. Then, there was "roving reference," where the experts left the desk entirely and wandered through the building with tablet computers to find patrons at their point of need and answer questions on-the-fly.

Librarians also started attending more meetings within their companies, medical centers, campuses, and towns so they would have a seat at the table during decision-making and be more visible to stakeholders. Once that became common practice, they went further afield, even embracing outdoor adventures. Now librarians staff tables at county fairs and other community celebrations, often taking Wi-Fi-enabled tablets in order to issue library cards on the spot. Some are taking small book collections on the road to set up temporary "pop-up libraries" in town squares, campus buildings, parks, and corporate centers. Book Bikes—bicycles that pull boxes of items—are popular (Talaga, 2015). Public librarians are even holding book group meetings in nontraditional places such as restaurants and bars (White, 2013).

Academic and special librarians have been embedding, meaning they work in a building or area occupied by the group with which they liaise (Shumaker, 2012). A 2017 article in *American Libraries* magazine discussed a sort of newfangled public librarian "who is part of the business community instead of separate from it, who strives to be an equal partner and have an equal voice" while serving small businesses and the professional community. The author explains that embedded business librarianship is not about promotion, but the library is promoted when a librarian becomes a part of the business community (Alvarez, 2017).

**College Students Helping to Market the Library** – Some universities are using college students as liaisons with their fellow classmates. As college students act and react differently with their peers than with authority figures, hiring student liaisons who report back to the library is a smart, inexpensive way to find out what the larger student body thinks and wants.

In one case study from the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill, a librarian detailed how she's been hiring students from UNC's School of Journalism and Mass Communication to help with



public relations and graphics. (Panitch, 2014) In another case study, a librarian explained how she was hiring undergraduate students at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln to meet a strategic goal of becoming a more student-centered library. (Barnes, 2016) The author coordinated a Peer Guide program in which they assist in five main areas: recruitment outreach, user surveys, promotional outreach, events, and social media.

**Partnerships** – Librarians have been forming partnerships to achieve benefits for many years. As library budgets have shrunk, their partnering efforts have expanded as they seek to obtain additional money, space, and staff time. Libraries have tried many tactics, for instance, obtaining tickets from sports teams to offer as prizes, contracting with museums to get free passes to loan to patrons, and having large book sales in non-library buildings. Other examples include achieving visibility and brand exposure with local businesses (Weyrick-Cooper, 2014); K–12 school libraries working with public libraries (Cooksey, 2017); helping military veterans (Inouye, 2016); and joining with mass transit (SEPTA, 2013).

## National Campaigns and Initiatives

Each of the 50 states has its own State Library that oversees grant money, offers training, handles political advocacy, and generally serves the rest of the libraries in their state. These State Libraries set up marketing campaigns too, doing most of the background work and providing collateral materials to participating libraries. Some states also have cooperative agencies that serve specific regions.

National organizations also run their own campaigns and projects. Several of the major campaigns are as follows:

- Geek the Library, OCLC with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. 2009–2015
- Libraries Transform, ALA. 2015–present
- Library Card Sign-Up Month, ALA. Annually in September
- National Library Week, ALA. Annually in April
- National Library Legislative Day, ALA. Annually in May
- National Medical Librarians Month, Medical Library Association. Annually in October
- Project Outcome, PLA. 2015–present
- School Library Month, American Association of School Librarians. Annually in April.

These regional and national campaigns help send messages in a unified voice, which is vital for being heard by the masses.

## Awards

One positive trend is that organizations are setting up more new awards related to library marketing. Among the most prestigious of these are the John Cotton Dana Library Public Relations Awards since 1946 given by ALA (EBSCO, 2017), and since 2002, the PR Xchange Awards Competition (LLAMA, 2018). The I Love My Librarian Award was first given by The New York Public Library, The New York Times, and the Carnegie Corporation of New York in 2008 (ALA, 2008). While it does not assess marketing specifically, nominations come from the public and serve to they indicate how well-known and well-loved are NYPL staff are by the community. Two new awards have been initiated recently: The LibraryAware Community Award was first given by EBSCO's NovelList division and Library Journal in 2013 and the Marketer of the Year Award was first presented by Library Journal and Library Ideas in 2016 (Berry, 2017).

## Continuing Challenges

Librarians still face plenty of challenges in relation to marketing activities. When this author queries large groups of library employees during conference sessions and webinars, their replies, without fail, indicate that many libraries still don't have marketing plans and some leaders still don't adequately support marketing efforts. In the business world, marketing is deemed essential for driving demand, sales, recognition, and revenue growth; it seems obvious that even nonprofits need marketing to drive usage, recognition, and funding. Based on vast experience, this author believes that marketing and promotion are essential to ensure a future for libraries.

The myriad challenges could easily fill their own feature article. As this paper is an overview of the evolution of marketing, the related challenges will simply be mentioned here. The greatest problem is that library budgets often are subject to the whims of members of library boards, city councils, university administrators, and organizational leaders. Too often, the people oversee funding have little understanding of libraries today. A related issue is broad lack of buy-in not only of those stakeholders, but also from library administrators who don't fully appreciate what marketing really is and can do for the library, and therefore don't give it enough support. The many stories of refusal to better fund libraries or allocate money for marketing cannot be detailed here; identities must be obscured to protect the guilty. The question is, can we use promotional tactics to effectively educate and consequently change the minds of stakeholders who don't understand that funding libraries provides huge returns to the communities they serve?

Library school education may be partly to blame as well, since marketing and promotion is not sufficiently emphasized within the curriculum. A small percentage of graduate programs offer courses, and when they do, they're often electives instead of core classes (Singh, 2017).

Lack of budget for additional staff is also an issue. As a result, libraries tend to make do by having each staffer promote his/her own activities and events, rather than hiring someone to fill a marketing or publicity position on the library staff. This widespread practice was a big reason that the guidebook *The Accidental Library Marketer* was written. An informal online survey conducted to measure whether there was a need for the book produced useful data and anecdotes. One question asked whether respondents had intended to do marketing and promotion work in libraries, and how they ended up doing it. Answers included these:

- "I fell into it."
- "This aspect was lumped into it."
- "Anytime you are providing a service, you end up promoting it." (Dempsey, 2009).

Even in those lucky organizations that do have such a position—or a department!—their employees have privately lamented that they often struggle to find their seats at the administrative tables. In other words, administrators still see marketing as promotion, which means the announcements, posters, and publicity that happens at the end of a process. A more strategic approach when considering new library service offerings would include discussions of how each would be marketed at the beginning of the planning process.

Another major challenge is how best to measure and communicate the value of a library or information center. ROI measurements come easy for product sales and other things that can be counted, but "soft services" that help people are notoriously difficult to measure. Therefore, libraries sometimes lose out (in funding votes, staffing requests, etc.) because they cannot post hard numbers that prove how intensely valuable their services are.

## What Does the Future Hold?

There is no crystal ball that would allow one to predict the short- or long-term future of America's library marketing efforts, but we can use the recent past and the present to make some predictions. While the strategic marketing approach discussed above has been catching on slowly over the past 20 years, a portion of U.S. librarians are still not where they need to be, due in large part to the "Haves and Have Nots" nature of library budgets. While not essential to have lots of money for effective marketing, but it is important to have staff with the know-how and time to properly execute the necessary steps. Of course, promoting libraries to the proper stakeholders can improve a budget situation, but it's difficult for overworked, undertrained librarians to plan for marketing. Given the federal government's recent efforts seeking funding cuts for IMLS, it's likely that federal funding for libraries will continue to be at risk. Expert analysis of recent reports and data shows

great concern that some of libraries' most basic support has waned at the state and local level as well (Chrastka, 2018).

All librarians need to prove their value and convince patrons and fans to speak out for libraries. They need to gather data about how librarians help save money for their corporations, how they help attract students to universities, how they help doctors make correct diagnoses, how they help people with basic and advanced (digital) literacy skills. In this era of budget cuts and anti-tax advocacy, all library staffers need to understand how to communicate the value they provide to their institutions and greater communities.

If librarians are to be successful in promoting their products, services, and expertise, they are going to have to keep up on other fronts as well, staying on top of technology. If library staff is viewed as lacking tech skills, people may dismiss them and bypass the library altogether. Librarians need to keep building community and be present at the table with the leaders of their parent organizations and their physical communities. They need to acquire the requisite skills for using data for strategic decision-making, to measure develop more insightful metrics, and get more comfortable with statistical analysis.

The large and well-funded library systems and the fearless, progressive ones will continue to do effective marketing and to serve as examples for others. Their success has already convinced their stakeholders, funders, and legislators of their value. Are there enough of those to counteract all the arguments by laymen who stubbornly believe they can access all the world's information on their mobile phones and who think that libraries have outlived their usefulness? That remains to be seen—but librarians can definitely affect the outcome by concentrating more on True Marketing.

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