
Should Libraries Be Run Like Businesses?

Andrea Berstler and Tracy Nectoux, Guest Columnists

Andrea Berstler is the executive director of the Wicomico Public Library in Salisbury, Maryland, and the current president of the Association for Rural and Small Libraries. She is a contributing author to *"The Entrepreneurial Librarian"* and presents workshops on strategic planning to libraries at the local, state, and national levels. **Tracy Nectoux** is a newspaper cataloger and the quality control and metadata specialist for the Illinois Newspaper Project at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She is the former secretary and reviews editor of the GLBT Roundtable of the American Library Association and the editor of *Out Behind the Desk: Workplace Issues for LGBTQ Librarians*. Nectoux is also the editor-in-chief of her city's independent online culture magazine, *SmilePolitely.com*.

Correspondence concerning this column should be addressed to **Karen Antell**, Head of Reference & Outreach Services, and **Molly Strothmann**, Social & Behavioral Sciences Librarian, University of Oklahoma Libraries, 401 W. Brooks St., Norman, OK 73019; e-mail: kantell@ou.edu and mstrothmann@ou.edu.

Is it appropriate to speak of the "business" of libraries? Should librarians view our relationship with the people who use our services as one of supplier and customer? Can thinking of ourselves in business terms spur us to greater efficiency and responsiveness to our stakeholders, or will such an attitude compromise our core mission? To what extent—if any—should libraries emulate the private sector? In this "Taking Issues," a public librarian and an academic librarian debate these essential questions.—*Editors*

BERSTLER

I run a customer service business. This organization focuses on providing information services, technology access, education support, and work force development to a wide customer base. It also acts as a community and cultural events hub. To run my business successfully, I need a well-developed strategic plan, professionally trained staff, and information about our customers. This enables me to focus my company's marketing and promotion efforts to inform my current and potential customers of the benefit of using our services to meet their needs. As the administrator, I am responsible for keeping my business on budget, providing quality service to my customers, overseeing the business's daily operations and my employees' activities, and making sure that my company's stakeholders receive all possible return on investment. Oh, and by the way, the business I run is a public library. Libraries, like other professional organizations, should be operated by the principles and conducted with the standards we would expect of any other professional organization.

NECTOUX

I agree with you: libraries are organizations that should be run professionally, and librarians are professionals. Certainly, for-profit businesses do not own these terms and descriptions. But it's here that we part ways.

If you substituted "library" for "business" or "company" and "patron" for "customer," everything you wrote would still be true. So why am I getting caught up in semantics? Because words have meaning. And renaming what we do and what we are—relabeling it to make it sound like it's something that it's not—is trying to fix something that isn't broken.

Libraries are neither "companies" nor "businesses." Businesses are profit-driven. Businesses sell things, or they create

things that can be sold. Yes, they provide services like libraries do, but those services are *always* for sale. They cost something. Customers *buy* from businesses, and businesses *sell* to customers.

Likewise, library patrons should not be thought of as “customers” for the simple reason that customers are people who *buy* things. Library patrons do not; rather, they *borrow* things. These words have meanings, and I think that renaming a “library patron” as a “customer” changes the dynamic of our relationship with that patron. We no longer see those who utilize our services as partners or benefactors in our libraries, but rather as clients, buyers, purchasers of services—someone from whom we’re profiting (because that’s what customers are, after all).

So, I disagree strongly that libraries should be “operated by the principles and conducted with the standards we would expect of any other professional organization.” If we did that, we’d be forced into operating like any other organization whose only bottom line is profit. We seem to have lost sight of what our own bottom line is.

It is possible to provide quality, professional services without labeling ourselves as something we are not—something we were never meant to be.

BERSTLER

I agree that words have meaning. It seems prudent to me to choose to use the terms most familiar and comfortable to those who use and may invest in my library. And while you are accurate in saying that people do not buy from us, there is still a transaction. They request, we provide.

While we serve all who enter our doors, and while those who benefit from our services may have no other access to these resources, I do not believe that libraries should operate as a charity (funded according to the public’s philanthropic whim). Nor should they be considered just a government department (with the accompanying over-funded and underworked stereotype). Rather, a library should be seen as a vibrant, contributing, vital component of any healthy, growing community: an organization that brings more to the table than it takes. This image, this model begins with the mentality of how the library is run: Is it a charity? Or a government service? Or is it a business?

NECTOUX

“Vibrant.” “Vital.” Libraries are both of these and more. We already bring more to the table than we take. The taxes that a patron pays for his public library couldn’t possibly cover all the services that library provides to him.

Thus, libraries are not charities. How can they be when their own funding comes from the very public that they serve? Yes, libraries are a government service, and librarians should

be proud to say that they are civil servants (stereotype be damned). Libraries are publicly funded for a reason, and it’s because they are a public good.

I have always felt (and I’ve written before) that implicit in the statement that libraries should operate more like businesses is the negative connotation that businesses *make* money while libraries *cost* money, and that implies that the former is more valuable than the latter. But libraries are not here to make money; that is not their mission, and it never has been. Rather, libraries spend money in order to meet their first, and most important, mission, which is to preserve information and make it accessible to the public.

Anyone can enter the doors of her public library and provide herself with the equivalent of a college education. And she can do this practically for free. While she’s there, she can also use a computer, make copies of important documents, perhaps get free tax advice, play a video game, watch a movie, use the restroom, learn about ways to homeschool her children, and sit in on a public meeting or address. And outside of the local tax that she pays to her district, she can do all of this free of charge. If the library operated as a “business,” if its librarians thought of this patron as a “customer,” I worry that such services would disappear, unless libraries began charging for them.

Libraries support and educate our citizenry, which in turn strengthens democracy. *That* is their mission, their principle, and their standard. Everything else is icing. Libraries are here for the public; the public pays a small tax to keep them here. It’s a mutually beneficial relationship that has been in existence for centuries.

BERSTLER

It seems we are both traveling to the same destination but using not only different roads, but different maps. Libraries are about preserving information access for the public. It is our hallmark, our “Prime Directive,” if you’ll pardon the *Star Trek* reference. And I have often used the description of libraries being for the common good in public talks about our mission. Libraries, much like public schools, public works, and public safety, are an institution that brings a higher quality of life to communities. What concerns me is that, unlike public educators, we are not seen as a profession. Public librarians often hear comments such as, “Aren’t you all volunteers?” Unlike public safety officers, we are not seen as necessary and vital, but an amenity; good to have, but something that perhaps could be done without.

I believe that unless we can change these perceptions, we risk becoming victims of our own helpful, resourceful nature. We do more with less, we fail to carve out an image of the professional librarian as the equal of other professionals, and we fail to demonstrate that we really do know what we are doing, because we do not use known business standards and practices. And so, we will continue to be marginalized.

NECTOUX

Never apologize for a *Star Trek* reference!

And we share the same concern (actually, we share many of the same concerns). I'm not sure why many in our community don't consider us professionals; I don't know why librarianship is not considered a profession. I remember telling a friend that I was going to graduate school to become a librarian, and he was genuinely surprised that there was such a thing as a master's degree in librarianship.

I don't know why, but I can venture a few guesses:

1. The public doesn't understand the knowledge and skill needed for a library to run successfully. And this is because . . .
2. Librarianship isn't taught in the public school system.

As an undergraduate, I briefly thought that I wanted to teach high school English. To get my degree in education, I was required to take a course in library science. Until that course, my sole understanding of libraries was that once I'd found the book I needed, "clerks" behind the "counter" would check it out for me. The key words in the previous sentence are *once I'd found the book I needed*.

- No one, until that college class, had ever explained to me the intricate, comprehensive classification system and complex cataloging standards that ensured that I *could* find that book.
- No one, until that college class, had ever explained to me why and how that book was in good enough shape to read once I'd found it.
- No one, until that college class, had ever explained to me the noble mission that not only guaranteed my privacy while borrowing the book I wanted, but that also guaranteed that I'd have access to *any* book, no matter the topic.

Why is this? Why did it take until college, and why did it take a particular degree choice, for me to be taught not only what librarianship is, but its innate value to the public and citizenry as a whole?

By the time our youth grow to young adulthood, it's already too late. We should be teaching them about our profession—a profession that brings "a higher quality of life to communities" (beautifully worded, by the way)—while they're still young and curious enough to care. Thus rebranding what we are isn't the answer; educating our youth about what we can do for them is a better approach.

BERSTLER

In truth, libraries are a unique, hybrid organization. We are part public service, part information storage, part education provider, and, underneath it all, we are really nice guys. In a recent staff training day at my workplace, the number one

reason staff gave for loving their jobs was that they get to "help people." This is who we are and why we do what we do.

The crucial point is that our drive to *help* is both our greatest strength and our biggest stumbling block. The diversity in our resources, the vast array of services we provide, the ability to create something from nothing—these things create our persona both internally and to those who use our services regularly. They are also why defining our profession is so very difficult when talking to those who do not utilize the library in their community.

I believe a shift is necessary in our semantics and our approach to establish a more fitting librarian image for the public. Such a shift should also position libraries squarely in the "relevant and necessary" column. Unless we can instill in the minds of decision makers, funding providers, and potential supporters a credible image of the library professional and the impact that professional has on the community, we are in trouble. It is not *what* we are that is the issue; it is *how we are seen*. Running your library as a business is a tool to make that point: it enables you to speak to the public in terms with which they identify, terms that carry the connotations needed to make our point.

NECTOUX

Earlier you stated that, although our patrons aren't buying from us, a "transaction" is still taking place. But what takes place between librarians and our patrons is not, by definition, a "transaction." I know that I'm being pedantic here, but it's important. There is no exchange being made. You're right that our patrons are requesting and we're providing, but we do not ask for anything in return for granting their requests. It is, for all intents and purposes, a free service. This makes us fundamentally ill-suited to think of ourselves as a business.

You are definitely right in saying that we both want the same goal. You're also right that we're suggesting and advocating different routes to reach that goal. And I don't necessarily think that's a bad thing, because I'll go a step further from your stated concern and assert that we're *already* in trouble, and we have been for many years. The reasons for this are too numerous for the scope of this column. But at this point, maybe it's wise to try different ways to solve the problem.

I think that part of my stubbornness in rejecting your proposal comes from the fact that, when I'm asked to explain what we do and what we are, the first words that come to my mind aren't "We are professionals," but rather, "We are educators who preserve information and provide access to it." If the person to whom I'm speaking doesn't respect or understand that, the problem does not lie with me or our profession. It lies with our education system, which, again, is a problem outside the scope of this conversation.

Another reason I don't agree with your proposal is that we can already see its results in many of our academic libraries, in aspects from librarians' job structures to libraries' physical space. Walk into far too many academic libraries these days,

and you won't see books anywhere, at least not on the first or second floors. You'll see the circulation desk, "study" areas, wi-fi hot spots, the "commons," and a coffee shop. This "new service model" stems from the idea that we should create the kind of space that *we think* students want. Who are the people who (1) think they know what students want, and (2) actually think it's a good idea for an institution of higher learning to cater to what students want rather than what they need? I may be wrong, but it doesn't seem to me that they are faculty or educators of any kind.

I worry that the results from these business models have moved us away from our stated mission. Consequently, the information that we hold has become less accessible. When this happens, we are no longer in service to our patrons, but rather to our budgets. And why wouldn't we be if we've relabeled ourselves as a business?

This topic is a difficult one because there are no easy answers. All along, while responding to your statements and ideas, I've heard and understood your concern. You're right: the public does not place enough value on us, and we've not done a satisfactory job communicating our value to them. This is a serious threat to our profession. I also acknowledge that your solution is currently the accepted answer to the problem.

However, I do not think that rebranding ourselves is the

answer. I think this is too simple (simple, not simplistic) a solution. I am extremely skeptical of easy answers to difficult questions. I think that mimicking the language and approach of business models would be (is) putting a Band-Aid on a problem that didn't start with us and is far larger than us.

We've all heard the horror stories: most students graduate from high school having never set foot in a library, far too many college freshman don't know how to write an organized paragraph or formulate a thesis statement, our youth rarely read, and they certainly expect that they should be able to "use the library" without leaving their dorms. We should not cater to this. We should not respond to this with appeasement or acquiescence. We should, rather, find ways to stop this wretched situation before it begins. Changing what we are won't ameliorate the problem because, again, that problem didn't start with us. Changing what we are will only make the problem worse.

Where libraries go, so goes democracy. At heart, we are educators and preservers of information. We're the gatekeepers of knowledge (this we agree on). Rather than switch our focus to a model that neither educates nor preserves, let's begin focusing once again on our mission: educating our citizenry, especially our youth. I think that starting there is where we'll find our answers.