Reading in the Age of Continuous Partial Attention

Retail-Inspired Ideas for Academic Libraries

Reading is an essential skill that improves with practice, not just when we are learning to read but as adults. College students may be out of the habit of reading except for required texts. Deep reading skills may be eroded by habits of interrupted and partial attention. This article explores ways to promote reading among college students through the implementation of best practices from retail and marketing.

As students increasingly question the value, expense, and practicality of higher education, and as enrollment and retention rates continue to drop, colleges and universities are more concerned than ever with bolstering student success. In fact, the ACRL Research Planning and Review Committee, in its list of top ten trends in academic libraries, observes that "student success continues to be an important focus for higher education institutions, where the trend towards performance-based funding and accreditation criteria includes an emphasis on learning outcomes, retention, and matriculation."[1] Universities and colleges are developing a variety of ways to prove their worth to a skeptical public. A new emphasis on skills such as time management, study, research, writing, and critical thinking helps students improve their academic record. Basic reading is a skill that students learn in the primary grades, but being able to decode words is not the same as being skilled at reading. Because—as the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) has found—"success in reading provides the foundation for achievement in other subject areas," the ability to read with proficiency and ease is a skill that is especially important.[2] The large US study conducted by the National Endowment for the Arts concluded that "reading for pleasure correlates strongly with academic achievement."[3] Research has also shown that reading fosters cognitive development by promoting higher-order reasoning, critical thinking, comprehension, writing skills, vocabulary, and grammatical development.[4] Simply put, if a student is not a skilled reader, her likelihood of succeeding academically is reduced. Colleges should be producing not just lifelong learners but also lifelong readers—people who find fulfilment, enjoyment, inspiration, and enlightenment in the activity of reading. This article explores barriers to reading fluency and ways that academic librarians can support student reading. The first part of the paper examines students' waning enthusiasm for books in an

Pauline Dewan

Pauline Dewan *is a reference librarian at Wilfrid Laurier University. Co-author of* Connecting Children with Classics: A Reader-Centered Approach to Selecting and Promoting Great Literature *(2018), she has also written a number of articles about reading for pleasure. She won the 2015 RUSA Press Award for her article, "Reading Matters in the Academic Library: Taking the Lead from Public Librarians." Pauline Dewan received her MLIS from the University of Western Ontario and her doctorate in English from York University (Toronto).*

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increasingly digital world. The second part discusses ways that librarians can inspire students to read—solutions inspired by research on consumer behavior and visual merchandising. Although academic libraries can follow the lead of retailers and attract readers by creating both a robust online presence and innovative services and programs, these ideas have been well covered in the literature.[5] This article looks specifically at ways librarians can lure readers by focusing on the library building itself—its layout and arrangement of contents.

Most college students possess basic reading skills. But while some are fluent readers who find the activity effortless and enjoyable, others find it a chore. In her study of avid readers, Catherine Ross observes, "Nonbook readers find any kind of reading hard work and view book reading in particular as something to be prepared for psychologically and performed only when long blocks of time are available. Confident readers, in contrast, say that they find book reading easy, something they can do 'just about anytime.'"[6] Only skilled readers find reading easy to do. Becoming an accomplished reader does not just happen by chance. Reading is an acquired skill, not an innate one; the more books we read, the better we become at it. Catherine Ross speaks of reading fluency in terms of Malcolm Gladwell's claim that it takes ten thousand hours of practice to become good at anything.[7] Reading only becomes effortless and pleasurable after we become fluent at it.

Students today may not be reading enough books to become skilled in the activity. The 2015 American Time Use Study has shown that the average twenty- to twenty-four-year-old devotes seven minutes a day to reading.[8] According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, people in this age group are reading slightly less than they did a decade ago.[9] And the National Endowment for the Arts found that the percentage of eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds who read a book in the previous year was significantly lower in 2008 than it was a quarter century earlier (51.7 percent versus 59.7 percent).[10] Reading achievement levels have also dropped. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, 63 percent of twelfth-graders in 2015 and 59 percent of the same grade in 1992 achieved basic or below basic reading levels.[11] Furthermore, students' reading practices have changed. In "Reading Habits of College Students in the United States," Huang and colleagues found that students now read twice as much material from social media sites as they do from books for pleasure.[12]

THE AGE OF INTERRUPTION

Ironically, at no time in history has reading material been more convenient to access. The proliferation of personal devices, and in particular the adoption of smartphones by a large percentage of the US adult population, although not evenly distributed, makes reading material available virtually anywhere, anytime. People are able to personalize the experience by listening to books or reading them digitally in a variety of font types and sizes, background colors, and brightness levels. Yet rarely in the last century have so many students struggled to read book-length material. One professor calls it "the Anna Karenina problem," lamenting the fact that students seem unable or unwilling to read books. "Within twenty years," he asks, "will students manage to muster the dozens of hours of attention necessary to get through a lengthy novel like Tolstoy's nineteenth-century classic? If not, what does that mean for works of history that are even harder to read?"[13] The problem is certainly widespread. In his Pulitzer Prize–nominated work, *The Shallows*, Nicholas Carr writes, "I used to find it easy to immerse myself in a book or a lengthy article. My mind would get caught up in the twists of the narrative or the turns of the argument, and I'd spend hours strolling through long stretches of prose. That's rarely the case anymore. Now my concentration starts to drift after a page or two. I get fidgety, lose the thread, begin looking for something else to do. I feel like I'm always dragging my wayward brain back to the text. The deep reading that used to come naturally has become a struggle."[14]

Distractibility has become the signature phenomenon of the twenty-first century. Former Microsoft executive Linda Stone coined the term *continuous partial attention* to identify the state of mind that Carr has observed. Journalist Thomas L. Friedman describes continuous partial attention as "multitasking your way through the day, continuously devoting only partial attention to each act or person you encounter. It is the malady of modernity. We have gone from the Iron Age to the Industrial Age to the Information Age to the Age of Interruption."[15] Technological distractions are one of the biggest culprits in fragmenting our train of thought. Computers interrupt us with pop-up reminders, e-mail alerts, Tweets, chat messages, calendar alerts, and software-update reminders. We typically work in multiple tabs and windows on two or more screens. If our attention is diverted for a moment, it is often difficult to find our place again in all our open windows, tabs, and applications. Smartphones are an even greater problem since they are our technological companion wherever we go. Keeping our train of thought becomes a challenge when an incoming text, phone call, voice-mail alert, or task reminder interrupts us by dinging, vibrating, ringing, playing music, or popping up.[16]

According to a 2017 Pew survey, 92 percent of eighteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds own a smartphone as opposed to 77 percent of the general public.[17] Today's students have grown up in a culture of distraction that reduces their ability to focus, fragments the reading experience, and makes them less patient with book-length material. It has become increasingly difficult for them to find a place or a time free from the distractions and interruptions of mobile technology. Although distractions have always been a part of life, workplace interruptions are estimated to have doubled from 1995 to 2005.[18] Research shows that on a typical day, information workers spend three minutes on a single task before

being interrupted,[19] employees do not return to a disrupted task 33 percent of the time or more,[20] and 28 percent of a knowledge worker's day is consumed by interruptions.[21] Digital distractions are especially prominent in students' lives. James M. Kraushaar and David C. Novak found that students engage in multitasking behavior 42 percent of the time in class.[22] They average less than six minutes on a task before being interrupted by technological distractions such as social media or texting.[23] After examining students' computer logs, Terry Judd found that that only 10 percent of sessions were focused on a single activity.[24] Not surprisingly, studies have concluded that the college-age segment of the population engages in more multitasking and interrupted behavior than the general public.[25] Students who multitask while studying report lower task motivation and reduced ability to concentrate.[26]

Many students have become used to replying to a text message, checking social media, or listening to music while performing other activities. The constant checking of mobile devices in all possible venues has become so common that few notice its interruptive quality. The ability to multitask is viewed as an enviable trait and proof of a nimble mind. But the steady barrage of interruptions and self-interruptions is detrimental to their ability to concentrate. When people multitask, they divide their attention between two tasks, and these tasks vie for the same limited cognitive resources. Threaded cognition theory postulates that sequential multitasking (switches of more than a few seconds such as writing a paper while also instant messaging a friend) is more problematic than concurrent multitasking (switches of a second or less such as glancing at the time while writing a paper).[27] Toggling between activities adds significantly to the time it takes to do something since people must go back and review where they left off with the primary task before restarting it. Restoring the original context of a suspended task takes time and effort."[28] Because of resumption lag, or the time it takes to restart the initial task after an interruption, it takes longer to rapid-toggle between tasks than it would to do them sequentially.[29] Multitasking has been shown to not only diminish productivity but also interfere with learning, impede academic performance, reduce reading comprehension, and make it more difficult to concentrate on academic texts.[30]

Studies have demonstrated that people's brains are not suited to multitasking unless those tasks are fairly simple or highly practiced.[31] Attending to multiple stimuli causes a bottleneck in working memory and overloads cognitive capacity.[32] Moreover, people overestimate their ability to multitask and deal with distractions; respondents in one study were aware of their switching behavior only 12 percent of the time.[33] The cumulative effect of a multitasking lifestyle is an erosion of attention and decreased ability to focus on sustained activities—especially ones such as reading that require an attentive mind-set. Books nurture personal thoughts and ideas, but students need time to reflect on what they read. When they toggle between tasks and face multiple interruptions, they deprive themselves of this necessary time. Furthermore, a multitasking lifestyle makes it more difficult to carve uninterrupted chunks of time out of their days to read book-length material.

MOBILE READING

Although print books are still preferred by a number of people,[34] reading has become a far more mobile activity than ever before. We know that for the first time in history, more people worldwide are accessing the internet through mobile rather than desktop devices.[35] Google, as a result, prioritizes mobile-friendly websites in their rankings. In his discussion of "the tyranny of the 'itty bitty living space,'" web usability expert Steve Krug writes, "For decades, we've been designing for screens which, while they may have felt small to Web designers who were working overtime trying to squeeze everything into view, were luxurious by today's standards. But if you thought Home page real estate was precious before, try accomplishing the same things on a mobile site."[36] He reminds web designers that one way of dealing with the constraints imposed by miniature screens is to leave things out. What does this mean for readers? They become accustomed to the short rather than the long version of a story, the abbreviated account rather than the full narration. As e-mail has given way to texting, and blogging to Tweeting, so have our reading habits correspondingly changed. If the reading material that we always have on hand is viewed on a miniature screen, our daily experience with reading makes us believe that short is the default setting for reading. Constant reading of snippet-length items on miniature screens affects our experience with all material.

Increasingly, students' reading experience is inextricably linked with their smartphones and other devices. Mobile technology is especially prevalent in the college-age segment of the population. The 2016 ECAR Study of Undergraduate Students and Information Technology found that 61 percent of undergraduates own two or three internet-capable devices, and 33 percent own four or more.[37] In addition, 29 percent of post-secondary students now own wearable devices.[38] As the ECAR researchers claim, "Our data demonstrate clearly that American college and university students have a strong and positive orientation toward digital technologies."[39]

INTERNET WRITING AND READING

Internet writing differs dramatically from traditional forms of writing. Steve Krug observes that when creating web content,

> we act as though people are going to pour over each page, reading all of our carefully crafted text . . .
>
> What they actually do most of the time (if we're lucky) is *glance* at each new page, scan *some* of the text,

> and click on the first link that catches their interest or vaguely resembles the thing they're looking for. There are almost always large parts of the page that they don't even look at.
>
> We're thinking "great literature" (or at least "product brochure"), while the user's reality is much closer to "billboard going by at 60 miles an hour."[40]

Paradoxically, the incredible wealth of reading material on the internet has fostered the habit of reading less. In *Letting Go of the Words*, Janice Redish recommends that web creators allow readers to "grab and go" because users are "bombarded with information and are sinking under information overload."[41] Download times, small screens, aversion to scrolling, and concerns about printing quantities are additional reasons for keeping words to a minimum.[42] Her advice to website creators is "Cut! Cut! Cut! And cut again! . . . Break down the wall of words."[43] Web writers, as she points out, typically start with the conclusion first because busy site visitors may not read beyond it. Sentences on websites generally consist of ten to twenty words, and paragraphs only one sentence. Ideas are often converted into lists for digital readers.[44]

Online reading is characterized not just by skimming and scanning but also by jumping from one hyperlink to the next—all activities that interrupt linear thought processes. Typically one link leads to a second and then a third, and readers do not return to the original material. Hyperlinks, as Nicholas Carr observes, "don't just point us to related or supplemental works, they propel us toward them. They encourage us to dip in and out of a series of texts rather than devote sustained attention to any one of them."[45] The reading experience is further fragmented by digital page layouts that break content into multiple sections, incorporating features such as sidebars, scrolling text, advertisements, and a variety of multimedia content. In other words, screen reading steadily chips away at our capacity to concentrate on one thing at a time.

However, not all screen reading is equal. E-books, which college libraries are increasingly buying, are a more ambiguous category. Although e-books are often read on smartphones and tablets, they differ from other digital content. E-books follow the same linear format as their print counterparts and contain minimal use of hyperlinks and pages fragmented into multiple sections. As a result, the e-book reading experience is closer to that of print. Studies have found that there is no difference in reading comprehension between digital and print formats,[46] but students do multitask more while reading e-books than they do print.[47] Research has shown that, although students love the convenience of e-books, they believe that print facilitates concentration thus prefer print for academic reading.[48]

Maryanne Wolf and Mirit Barzillai point out that reading is a highly complex activity, involving both hemispheres of the brain as well as "great amounts of attention, effort, active imagination, and time."[49] They distinguish between deep reading, which they define as "the array of sophisticated processes that propel comprehension and that include inferential and deductive reasoning, analogical skills, critical analysis, reflection, and insight," and distracted reading, which online material fosters."[50] Digital reading, they argue, discourages deep, reflective reading. The online reader engages in skimming, an activity that is pursued so often that it affects all reading, not just screen reading. They point out that people are developing new neural pathways that are rewiring their minds and changing the way they read.[51] We can assume, adds Carr, "that the neural circuits devoted to scanning, skimming, and multitasking are expanding and strengthening, while those used for reading and thinking deeply, with sustained concentration, are weakening or eroding. . . . [Moreover,] we willingly accept the loss of concentration and focus, the division of our attention and the fragmentation of our thoughts, in return for the wealth of compelling or at least diverting information we receive. Tuning out is not an option many of us would consider."[52]

CAPITALIZING ON OUR WEALTH OF BOOKS

Considering the multiple threats to reading today, we should do whatever we can to motivate students to read. We need to promote books so that students will pursue reading as a favorite activity and become increasingly skilled at it. Although many academic librarians do not typically consider the promotion of reading as part of their mission, in the 1920s and 1930s college librarians thought differently.[53] They actively promoted the reading interests of students by creating leisure-reading collections.[54] It was not until the mid-twentieth century that recreational reading collections began disappearing from academic libraries.[55] Although academic libraries are far more than warehouses of books, the fact remains that the single biggest commodity in our buildings is books. Despite this wealth of books, many students only borrow them for classwork and essays. Some rarely enter the book stacks, restricting their reading to items placed on reserve by their professors. Yet this is a period in life when intellectual curiosity is at a peak. As Julie Gilbert and Barbara Fister discovered, students have a far higher interest in reading than is typically believed.[56] Although 93 percent of students in their study said they read for pleasure, a large percentage of librarians believed that students do not particularly enjoy reading. The surveyed librarians were ambivalent about the role academic libraries should play in reading promotion.

Librarians should consider the value-added potential of the thousands of books sitting on their shelves. This bounty of reading material often remains markedly underutilized. According to the Association of Research Libraries, circulation of academic library books is in a downward spiral: between 1991 and 2015 print circulation decreased 58 percent.[57] E-book circulation accounts for some of the decrease, but nevertheless the majority of books that libraries own

remain on the shelf. Although academic libraries typically own far more books than retail stores, they are far behind them in promoting their products. The retail industry pays close attention to the research on consumer psychology and shopping behavior, research that helps them attract customers and sell their products. Library books, like merchandise in a store, should be arranged and displayed in a way that tempts customers to borrow them. Unlike bookstores, academic libraries can be intimidating and uninspiring places. Too often they discourage all but the most committed readers from finding a good book to borrow.

THE SCIENCE OF SHOPPING

Studies of consumer behavior are a rich source of ideas that academic librarians can adopt. Paco Underhill's classic book *Why We Buy: The Science of Shopping* applies the tools of anthropology to the retail environment. Underhill writes that he would not have had to invent a scientific method of analyzing shopping behavior if anthropology had been paying attention to

> every nook and cranny [of a store] from the farthest reach of parking lot to the deepest penetration of the store itself, . . . and not simply studying the store, of course, but what, exactly and precisely—scientifically—human beings do in it, where they go and don't go, and by what path they go there; what they see and fail to see, or read and decline to read; and how they deal with the objects they come upon; . . . and not just paying attention but then collecting, collating, digesting, tabulating and cross-referencing every little bit of data.[58]

When a store hires his firm, Underhill sends out a team of observers who carefully note every movement of the shoppers within it. He also videotapes the activities of customers to discover patterns of behavior. One of his most significant findings is that the longer shoppers stay in a store, the more likely they are to buy. The length of time a shopper remains in a shop depends on how pleasant and comfortable the store experience is.[59] Remodeled library spaces have also boosted business. A 10.7 million–dollar renovation to the Cambridge Public Library, for example, increased circulation by 70 percent.[60] A place with the right atmosphere tempts customers to enter the building, remain in it, and do business.

Smart retailers pay considerable attention to the store itself—the layout, the aisles, the fixtures, the sight lines, the focal points, the displays. Their goal is to increase the shopper conversion rate—the percentage of consumers who become buyers. Libraries, too, should think in terms of conversion rates—about ways to increase both gate count and circulation statistics. Although students can read our e-books, only a portion of our collections are available electronically. The fact remains that our print books will not circulate unless students visit the building. For some students—especially first-year students—libraries can be unapproachable, intimidating places. A 2016 Pew study found that 45 percent of sixteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds had not visited a library in the past year, and 17 percent of this age group had never visited a library.[61] Retailers pay much greater attention to non-buyers than libraries do nonreaders; like our store counterparts, we need to consider ways of attracting the uninterested. Those who seldom read for pleasure and those who read but rarely choose their books from libraries can be persuaded to think differently.

A first step in attracting readers is to recognize the difference between impulse and destination customers. Surveys from the library consulting firm Opening the Book have shown that three out of four library visitors are impulse customers. The rest are destination customers who know what book, item, or service they want. The much larger impulse-customer group are not sure what they want and hope that they will spot a book that helps them make a decision.[62] Academic libraries have traditionally attracted fewer impulse customers than public libraries since many students enter the building for a course-related book. Nevertheless, many of their destination visitors also could be potential impulse customers, given the right circumstances. Most students do not have the time or the knowledge of how find a book for pleasure in an academic library, but if they saw an interesting book that caught their attention, they would borrow it. Although choosing a library book would save them the money that they might otherwise spend in a bookstore, academic libraries do not make it easy, convenient, or tempting for students to do so. Research has shown that library customers only find what they are looking for 60 percent of the time, so it is not surprising that they often turn to other venues.[63]

Academic libraries have traditionally paid scant attention to what retailers identify as visual merchandising, a concept defined as "the art and science of presenting products in the most visually appealing way."[64] The goal of visual merchandising is to present products in a way that makes them appear irresistible. A visual merchandiser's mission is to attract shoppers into a store and encourage them to stay by providing them with a positive retail experience. As Alannah Weston observes, visual merchandisers are the people "backstage that are stage-managing and producing the whole effect." If store buyers are the ones who provide the content, visual merchandisers are the people who "bring it to life."[65] Presenting products to their best advantage helps sell them. Librarians can sometimes forget how unappealing a good book appears when it is surrounded by tattered volumes that should have been discarded long ago. We should also remember that a poorly lit, musty smelling, or drably decorated room negatively affects a person's desire to borrow a book. Thinking in terms of visual merchandising would be a sea change in many academic libraries. Libraries should consider the image they project, the atmosphere they create, and the overall impression that customers associate with their institution. Visual merchandising involves both the

exterior (the façade, landscaping, and store windows) and the interior (layout, displays, in-store graphics, signage, and arrangement of furnishings and products) of the store.

THE BUILDING EXTERIOR

Retailers know that their first mission is to lure non-buyers into the store—to move them from outside to inside. They do this by creating attractive store exteriors and tempting store windows. As Jennifer M. Mower and her colleagues have observed, the building exterior plays "a critical role in building a first impression of a store and attracting customers into it. When deciding to shop at smaller boutique stores, customers rely on external cues such as window displays to help form an impression of the store and its merchandise even before stepping foot inside the store."[66] Most customers, observe Claus Ebster and Marion Graus, "decide whether to enter a store within a few seconds of observation. Therefore the main aim of exterior design is to first attract the customer's attention and then convey a certain image that entices the customer into the store."[67] Like retailers, librarians will never tempt customers with their merchandise if they are unable to draw them into the building. Although few libraries have the opportunity to design a new building, existing libraries could improve their façades by using striking signage and attractive landscaping. One library in Canada, for example, displays large colorful banners with catchy book-related sayings on its exterior walls to entice potential readers—sayings such as "Library lovers never go to bed alone" or "One card to rule them all."[68] Adding attractive gardens near front entrances is a relatively inexpensive way of improving the appearance of a building. Research has shown that shoppers are more likely to patronize stores and stay in them longer when they are beautifully landscaped.[69]

Few libraries, and even fewer academic libraries, consider the store window as a marketing tool. Yet, in the retail world, a store window is often the single most important element for attracting potential customers to cross the store threshold. Sankar Sen and colleagues found that "consumers may enter a store because they are intrigued by or like the image of that store, as inferred from its window displays. In other words, inferred, store-related information, such as store image information, is . . . likely to serve as a diagnostic input into the store entry decision."[70] Mower and her colleagues also found that attractive window displays enhance "shoppers' liking of the store exterior and increased patronage intentions. Attractive store window displays communicate information about the retailer to consumers, and for smaller stores this information is important to attract customers."[71] Not every library contains a storefront window, but those that do could follow the lead of booksellers, many of whom create book displays that draw readers into their store. These may be readers who might not otherwise have thought to do so.

STORE DESIGN AND ARRANGEMENT

Once inside the store, the potential reader gains a first impression of the building interior. Smart retailers pay close attention to the research on store layouts and customer behavior. Effective store design takes into account the ways customers walk and the places they look; as Tony Morgan argues, "It understands our habits of movement and takes advantage of them, rather than ignoring them or, even worse, trying to change them."[72] In *Inside the Mind of the Shopper*, Herb Sorensen observes that there are predictable flows of traffic in a store, migration patterns that the retailer needs to take into account.[73] Underhill's ethnographic studies have found that people walk to the right when they enter a store and proceed in a counter-clockwise direction. As a result, the front right section of any store is "prime real estate."[74] Morgan discusses store layout in terms of platinum, gold, silver, and bronze zones, observing that platinum areas always attract the most attention.[75] In libraries, the front-right, or platinum section of the building, is the perfect location for an eye-catching display of books that will tempt customers to read. But in too many libraries, the layout has more or less evolved over time, often with no consideration of customer behavior. Library consultant Rachel Van Riel points out that the platinum areas of libraries are frequently filled with self-service kiosks, holds shelves, and copy machines—furnishings that create a poor first impression of the space and are suited to destination customers who would have entered the building anyway.[76]

Many academic libraries use a multifloored grid layout that is not only "sterile and uninspiring"[77] but also a findability barrier to all but the most committed book readers. Underhill has found that because shoppers do not like people passing too close behind them, they avoid narrow aisles—something that the grid layout of libraries encourages.[78] Sorensen points out that because open spaces attract customers, retailers should consider adding a foot or two to the width of aisles.[79] Libraries could also consider chevroning their aisles by placing them on an angle. Research has shown that such aisles make merchandise more visible to strolling customers.[80] Another design that some newer libraries have adopted is a "discovery layout," which uses curved bookshelves staggered throughout the space. This arrangement makes books more visible and the space more inviting for exploration.[81] To encourage both browsing and reading, libraries could also consider carving out a space as a boutique area. For example, a popular-reading collection area, or a "power wall" unit that houses books of topical interest, or even a nook that contains "New and Hot Books" could help stimulate interest in reading.[82] Matthews reminds us that libraries are facing real competition from big bookstores that market themselves as places to read and relax.[83] Libraries that house cafés could tap into this demand for a stress-relieving oasis area.

Academic libraries that are unable to change their layout can rethink the way they use shelf space. Retailers know

that products placed at eye level sell significantly better than anywhere else.[84] The second best place for merchandise, according to Ebster and Graus is at "touch level," or waist high, about three or four feet off the ground. Products at "stretch level," or six feet above the ground, do not sell as well as those at eye- and touch-levels. The merchandise is more difficult to retrieve and items at stretch level impede the view of the store. Retailers who have eliminated stretch levels have found their stores airier, more inviting, and less crowded.[85] Stoop level is the least desirable area for merchandise. As Ebster and Graus observe, "Shoppers don't like to bend down or—in the case of elderly or disabled people—may be unable to bend down. Furthermore, stoop level is not usually in most shoppers' fields of vision while walking through a store. Consequently, stoop level is retailing's equivalent of the boondocks, where low-margin merchandise finds its place."[86] College and university libraries typically make use of all these levels. But by using shorter bookshelves, eliminating stoop levels, and moving low-use books to storage areas, academic libraries can increase the likelihood that the remaining books will attract more customers and circulate better.

THE POWER OF LIMITED CHOICE

Although the trend is slowly changing in some places, academic libraries typically try to squeeze too many books into too small a space. Aisles are too narrow, shelves are too high and too low, and books are too tightly packed. Some libraries would love to create an airier space but cannot deselect the necessary books to do so. In "The Art of Weeding," former *Library Journal* editor Ian Chant reminds us that "taking out unwanted items makes those left behind stand out. Circulation frequently rises after a weeding project, however counterintuitive that may seem: when people can browse the shelves (or the online catalog) without having to sift through older material they're not interested in, they're more likely to find something they are looking for—or something they didn't know they were looking for. Meanwhile freeing up physical space devoted to books that never leave the stacks makes more room to buy new materials that will circulate."[87]

Bookstores know that a shelf filled only with spine-facing books makes the books invisible. The information on a spine is visible in such a narrow space and is so crowded in a sea of similar products that it has difficulty attracting customer attention. Using a mixture of front-facing and spine-facing books breaks a shelf into smaller, easier-to-view sections. But academic librarians rarely adopt such an arrangement because they cannot fit as may books on a shelf. Sheena S. Iyengar and Mark R. Lepper's study of jam purchasers demonstrates that "an extensive array of options can at first seem highly appealing to consumers, yet can reduce their subsequent motivation to purchase the product."[88] Too much choice can be overwhelming for decision-making. One of the single best ways that academic librarians can promote books and encourage reading is by making the texts stand out in small groups. A select number of books should be turned face-out on shelves, especially books that have wide reader appeal. Research has shown that increasing the number of product facings on a shelf especially attracts the attention of younger and more educated consumers—the single-biggest target audience of academic libraries.[89] Products placed at the end of an aisle in a store—displays known as endcaps in the retail world—stand out from the rest of the merchandise and provide customers with a visual cue to what is inside the aisle.[90] Sorensen found that shoppers noticed endcaps sixteen times per shopping trip, as opposed to nine times for product displays and four times for display bins.[91] The ends of bookshelves are a natural place for displays that encourage reading.

Impulse customers are less likely to find a good book to read if it does not somehow stand out from other books. Displays give customers ideas for reading material and a manageable focus for selection. A group of books on an interesting theme can catch readers' interest and call attention to books that would otherwise go unnoticed. But in order for displays to be effective, they must be located in the right spot. Displays set up in areas where customers typically have to wait or even pause are more likely to be noticed than in other locations. According to retail experts, areas next to elevators and escalators, as well as point-of-purchase locations, are hot spots where customers have idle time, making them a captive audience for displays.[92] Retail industry statistics indicate that point-of-purchase displays in supermarkets raise sales between 1.2 and 19.6 percent, depending on the product.[93] Placing display racks such as new books or popular materials on the right, rather than the left, and in areas where customers are not intent on task-focused behavior will also attract their attention.[94] In academic libraries, the circulation desk as well as the lobby are immediate candidates for attention-grabbing book displays such as new books or popular materials. Retailers make displays stand out through the use of intensity and contrast or by introducing surprising, new, or unusual stimuli.[95] The theme of the display itself could be innovative, unusual, or topical. The goal of every display is to make customers feel that they cannot live without a product.[96]

APPEALING TO CUSTOMERS' EMOTIONS

In-store graphics are also an essential component of visual marketing because they are particularly effective at evoking customer's emotions and subconscious desires.[97] Martin Lindstrom points out that when shoppers look at an outfit on a mannequin, they buy it not just for the clothes but also for the image and the attitude that the display projects.[98] Graphics of people achieve the same goal. Customers subconsciously believe that if the person represented is young, vibrant, and energized, so will they be if they purchase the product. Buying the merchandise is in effect buying the

experience. As Helga Dittmar observes, the typical message conveyed in advertised products is that "we can move closer from how we are now (our actual identity) to how we would like to be (our ideal identity) through acquiring and consuming the symbolic meanings associated with the consumer goods through the idealised models promoting them."[99] Mannequins and graphics of people allow customers to imagine the experience that they will enjoy with the product. For this reason, Rachel van Riel, Olive Fowler, and Anne Downes argue that libraries need to use graphics that are reader-centric, not book-centric.[100] They describe a successful library campaign that used posters with the theme "Get Lost." One poster depicted a young woman who is totally mesmerized by a book and oblivious of her surroundings.[101] Readers tap into the emotions that such graphics evoke and are inspired to read. As Jonah Berger points out, "Marketing messages tend to focus on information. . . . People think that if they just lay out the facts in a clear and concise way, it will tip the scale." But what we really need to do is tap into feelings because they are what motivate people to action.[102]

"With a good visual merchandising strategy," claim Ebster and Graus, "products will almost sell themselves."[103] Smart retailers, observes Sorensen, take an active role in selling "by superior understanding of shopper behaviour and by creating the right store design, navigation, and selection so shoppers are presented with what they want when they want it."[104] At a time when the value of higher education is being questioned, librarians need to think in terms of customer conversion rates and return on investment. Academic librarians buy books to support the academic program of their parent institutions, but they should also consider the value-added service of these books. The more students read, the more fluent they will become, and the more likely they will develop the habit of lifelong reading. If today's students have grown up in a culture of distraction that reduces their ability to focus and makes them less patient with book-length material, it is not too late to help them. Adopting and adapting retail-inspired strategies is one way that libraries can attract students to the activity of reading.

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