

Amplify Your Impact

Yvonne Dooley, Col. Ed.

The Challenges of Marketing School Library Programs

Eboni M. Henry

Introduction

As a librarian with more than 20 years of experience in both public and school library settings, I have developed a strong understanding of how effective communication and marketing can enhance library engagement. My collaboration with communications and marketing departments in public libraries has been instrumental to my success in promoting programs and services within school communities.

During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, social media became an essential tool for maintaining connections with students and parents by allowing me to share library resources, virtual events, and updates efficiently without relying solely on mass emails. Additionally, my background in English, complemented by coursework in communications, has been invaluable in shaping my approach to marketing library programs and crafting messages that resonate with diverse audiences. However, I recognize that many librarians may not have had the same training or background in communications, which can create challenges when developing and executing marketing strategies for library programs.

School libraries have evolved from repositories of books to dynamic learning spaces that integrate technology, foster collaboration, and support multiple literacies. However, the perception of the library's role has not always kept pace with this transformation. Effective marketing is essential to communicate the library's value to students, educators, and administrators. Yet, marketing within the context of school libraries presents distinct challenges due to structural, financial, and professional limitations. School libraries are dynamic learning hubs that foster literacy, creativity, and lifelong learning. However, many students, parents, and even teachers remain unaware of the full range of services libraries offer. Marketing these programs effectively can help bridge that gap—yet librarians often face significant challenges in doing so. Understanding these challenges is the first step toward overcoming them and ensuring that school library programs receive the recognition and engagement they deserve.

Limited Funding and Resources

Most school libraries operate with limited budgets that prioritize materials acquisition, technology upgrades, and staffing rather than promotional activities. As a result, marketing initiatives—such as digital campaigns, events, and printed materials—are often underfunded or absent altogether.

Without dedicated marketing staff, librarians must take on the additional role of marketer, often without formal training or support. Finding low-cost or free ways to promote library programs becomes essential but challenging. In many cases, the responsibility for marketing falls solely on the librarian, who must manage these efforts alongside other demanding instructional and administrative duties. Other school librarians and I use social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and X, to showcase our work and promote programs. According to Mamta Tomar's article, "Challenges and Strategies in Marketing Academic Libraries Using Social Media," social media-based marketing for libraries is promising, but practical issues such as content relevance, algorithm changes, and maintaining audience engagement constrain its effectiveness.¹ Some schools have amazing parent support and assistance to aid them in promoting programs and initiatives.

Lack of Awareness and Outdated Perceptions

Another challenge lies in public misconceptions about the library's purpose. Many stakeholders continue to associate the school library primarily with book lending, overlooking its contributions to research skills, digital literacy, and academic collaboration. This limited understanding reduces engagement and support from teachers, students, and parents. Changing these perceptions requires consistent communication and advocacy, which are difficult to sustain without institutional backing or marketing expertise. Overcoming this outdated perception requires consistent communication and creative outreach—but doing so takes time and resources that school librarians may not have. The American Library Association Committee on Library Advocacy has created a helpful [Advocacy Action Plan Workbook](#) for libraries and library workers to empower them stand up for what is needed and what they desire.²

Competing Institutional Priorities

Within schools, library programs must compete with numerous academic and extracurricular initiatives for time, attention, and resources. Administrators may prioritize standardized testing, classroom instruction, or extracurricular achievements over library-based learning. Consequently, library events and programs may receive limited promotion through official communication channels, diminishing their visibility within the school community and leaving the library's contributions less visible. This competition makes it difficult to schedule library events or secure time in assemblies, newsletters, or social media channels to promote programs.

Lack of Marketing Training and Expertise

School librarians are typically trained in information science and pedagogy, not in marketing or communications. This skills gap poses a significant barrier to developing effective marketing strategies. Without a background in audience analysis, branding, or digital media, librarians may struggle to design campaigns that resonate with their intended audiences. Moreover, marketing literacy is rarely included in library science curricula, leaving many practitioners to learn these skills independently. Most librarians are trained educators and information specialists—not marketers. As a result, many feel uncertain about how to design effective marketing strategies, use social media, or create engaging digital content. Without proper training or guidance, marketing efforts may not reach their intended audience or have the desired impact.

Technological and Policy Constraints

Although digital platforms offer cost-effective avenues for promotion, librarians often face technological and policy limitations that restrict their ability to engage with these tools. Some school districts impose strict rules governing social media use or website content, limiting opportunities for outreach. School websites might be difficult to update, or social media use may be restricted by district policies. Additionally, disparities in technology access—such as outdated websites or limited design tools—can impede the creation of visually appealing and interactive marketing materials. These limitations make it harder for librarians to reach their audience in modern and engaging ways.

Difficulty Measuring Impact

Evaluating the effectiveness of marketing efforts presents another challenge. Libraries often lack formal mechanisms to track participation, assess user satisfaction, or analyze the impact of promotional activities on library usage. Without quantitative or qualitative data, it becomes difficult to justify the need for marketing investments or to refine strategies based on evidence. Even when marketing is done, measuring its effectiveness can be challenging. How do you know if more students are visiting because of a campaign or because of a new assignment or free food? Without clear metrics or feedback systems, it's difficult to refine strategies or demonstrate the library's value to stakeholders like administrators and school boards.

Sustaining Engagement

Even when initial marketing efforts succeed, maintaining long-term engagement can be difficult. Library programs must continually adapt to changing curricula, turnover in educators, and new goals and technological contexts. Sustaining visibility requires ongoing innovation, collaboration with teachers, and a clear alignment between library initiatives and the school's educational goals. Even when a campaign or program succeeds, maintaining interest is an ongoing challenge. Students' attention shifts quickly, and school calendars fill up fast. Librarians must continuously adapt, finding fresh, relevant ways to highlight programs and keep the library visible in the school community.

Conclusion

The marketing of school library programs is a complex process shaped by financial, institutional, and professional challenges. Although librarians recognize the importance of promoting their programs, their capacity to do so effectively is often limited by external and internal constraints. Addressing these challenges requires systemic support from school leadership, professional development in marketing strategies, and the integration of advocacy into library practice. By overcoming these barriers, school libraries can enhance their visibility, demonstrate their educational value, and strengthen their role as essential partners in teaching and learning.

The challenges—from limited resources to competing priorities—can be daunting, but they are not insurmountable. By building partnerships with teachers, leveraging social media where possible, and demonstrating the library's impact on learning, librarians can gradually raise awareness and strengthen their programs' presence within the school. Those librarians and information professionals who have developed strong skills and found success in this area have an opportunity to pay it forward by leading trainings, webinars, and conference sessions that empower others

to enhance their marketing and outreach efforts. Ultimately, effective marketing ensures that the library remains not just a place of books, but a vital and celebrated part of the educational experience.

References

1. Mamta Tomar, "Challenges and Strategies in Marketing Academic Libraries Using Social Media," *Journal of Library and Information Sciences* 12, (2024): 1–6.
2. American Library Association, "Advocacy Action Planning: The Advocacy Action Plan Workbook," Accessed November 9, 2025. <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/advocacy-action-planning>.