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Branding in the United Kingdom public library service

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Abstract

Purpose – To provide an overview of branding activity in the UK public library service.

Design/methodology/approach – A review of branding literature was undertaken. The primary research was conducted over a four-week period and consisted of a questionnaire survey distributed to heads of services in order to gain data regarding branding of the service.

Findings – The research indicated that heads of service do give consideration to branding in their marketing plans. Branding properly planned and developed may be one way in which the public library service can raise its image and allow employees to take ownership of the service.

Research limitations/implications – Owing to the time element involved in the gathering of data responses were not as high as previously anticipated.

Practical implications – A good insight into the application of branding in the UK public library sector which would interest practitioners and academics alike.

Originality/value – Contributes to the domain of knowledge which is weak in the area of branding in libraries.

Keywords Brands, Brand image, Marketing; Public libraries, United Kingdom

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to provide an overview of branding activity in the UK public library service. This is one of the oldest free library networks in the world but, in recent years, it has faced a variety of new challenges related to falling use and changing patterns of leisure. Could branding help improve the image of the service?

Principal among the factors influencing the development of the service over the last decade have been:

Central Government review

The election of a Labour government in 1997 ushered in a period of intensive review for the public library service. A raft of reports beginning with *Due for Renewal* (Audit Commission, 1997) and most recently the policy document for England and Wales, *Framework for the Future* (DCMS, 2003), have concentrated on the need to revive the system through a sustained effort of co-operation and user focus. Libraries have been entrusted with a central role in delivering lifelong learning, contributing to social inclusion and providing an equitable access to information and communication technologies. Examples of these initiatives are described below:



Best Value process

The Labour Government pledged its commitment to “Best Value” for managing and delivering local government services, thus replacing compulsory competitive tendering. (Scottish Office, 1997) This statutory obligation upon local authorities to deliver value for money services while maintaining provision consists of four distinct stages of review or the “4 Cs” as they are known:

- (1) Challenge why the service is delivered and who it is for.
- (2) Compare the service with its competition.
- (3) Consult the stakeholders of the service.
- (4) Compete by delivering better and more cost-effective services (DETR, 1998).

For UK public libraries this has meant they have had to include three elements to their planning process. In addition to best value they must also consider, annual library plans and local cultural strategies. Libraries must prove that they have considered all the elements of the “4 Cs” in their five year review. At the consultation level this has meant the user being even more involved with the service as one of the main stakeholders.

Social change

Many urban libraries have become separated from the central areas of towns and cities. In addition, the changing cultural landscape of the British Isles has led to a very different demographic profile for libraries in terms of ethnicity and user base (Audit Commission 2002).

Competition from external sources

Declining loans and visits are symptomatic of a very different competitive environment in which public libraries are operating compared to even a decade ago. Book stores, through lower costs and better marketing, have experienced an increase in sales of around 25 per cent between 1991 and 2001 (Audit Commission, 2002, p. 8). Competition for the leisure time of citizens has also marked the 1990s. The growth of the Internet has provided libraries with a rival both in terms of information provision, and as a leisure pursuit. Anyone with access to the Internet can obtain free information from literally millions of sources, downloads of music and games, not to mention electronic books (Audit Commission, 2002).

Budgetary changes

Core spending on libraries has fallen in real terms since 1991 (Audit Commission, 2002, p. 5). Local government financial pressures have led to branch cuts, reductions in service and hours, and a fall in the number of professional librarians over the last decade. For example in the UK over the last ten years there has been a cut in service provision (see Figure 1).

Nine percent fewer libraries are open for 30 hours or more a week and there are seven per cent fewer libraries than in 1992/1993 and some libraries have closed altogether (Audit Commission, 2002). These factors have helped to shape the development of a service in gradual decline. Annual visits in England and Wales have fallen from 353 million in 1993-1994 to 288 million in 2000-2001, book issues have declined by a quarter in the same period (Audit Commission, 2002, p. 9). However, it is

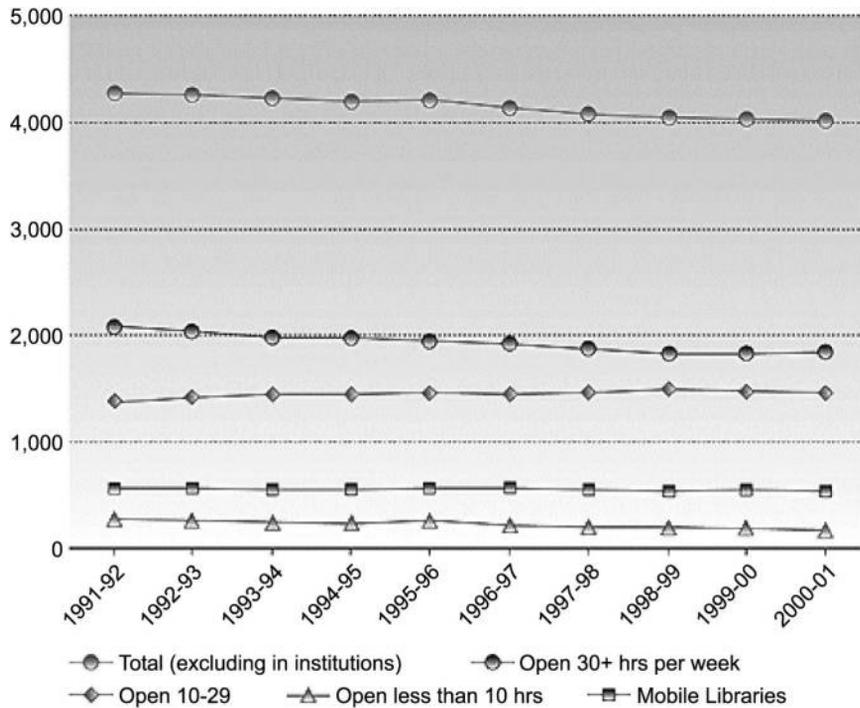


Figure 1.

Source: The Audit Commission (2002)

not all doom and gloom over the same period. Public libraries now have 14,500 ICT terminals and two thirds of public libraries have found good examples of reader development programmes such as Bookstart, in association with the Book Trust and Boots Books for Babies. Both initiatives work on the premise that it is never too early to introduce even the youngest of babies to books and reading. Health visitors deliver free packs of books to parents and carers of children as young as seven months in order to develop a lifelong interest in reading. In the UK, the Chancellor Gordon Brown has included funding for Bookstart in the 2004 spending review and Bookstart has also been launched in India (www.bookstart.co.uk).

It is in this context that many librarians have developed a greater interest in the application of marketing methodologies in attracting and retaining users. Branding, the “art and cornerstone of marketing” (Kotler, 2003, p. 418), has moved from a peripheral interest into the heart of a number of UK library authority marketing plans. In its most encompassing form it has led to wholesale service change, as in Tower Hamlets, where community libraries have become Idea Stores (www.ideastore.co.uk). Idea Stores arose when the residents of Tower Hamlets in London stated that they wanted libraries in areas which were accessible. Ideas Stores are recognisable as brightly coloured buildings located in shopping centres and combine traditional library services with lifelong learning and cultural activities. Further examples of similar initiatives are iKnow in Gateshead libraries and REAL in Glasgow City

Libraries. There are also some international examples of similar strategies. In Finland the Helsinki Mobile Library has become the Information Gas Station or iGS (<http://igs.kirjastot.fi/index3.html>). A further extension of the service has seen users accessing the library via e-mail, SMS or digital television (Berndtson, 2002). The Michigan eLibrary or MeL (<http://mel.org/index.html>) as it is known is a branded information gateway offering access to services such as journals and indexed Internet resources. Users are also able to access online databases using their driver license as identity.

Branding strategies however are not confined to such dramatic changes in identity and direction. Many libraries have chosen to brand individual services under the public library umbrella. In addition, externally branded services such as learndirect (www.learndirect.co.uk/) and the People's Network (www.peoplesnetwork.gov.uk/) have a presence in almost every library in the UK. Both are Government sponsored initiatives. Learn Direct is a network of online courses supporting the Government's life long learning ethos. The People's Network is a project which has connected all UK public libraries to the Internet, again supporting Government objectives in lifelong learning and social inclusion.

Objectives of research paper

To achieve this research paper's objectives, an e-mail survey of the 208 UK public library services was undertaken with a view to addressing four key questions:

- (1) What has driven the increasing interest in branding as a marketing tool?
- (2) To what extent is branding penetrating the marketing philosophy of the UK public library service?
- (3) Are branding strategies best applied in a national or local context?
- (4) Can branding help to reverse falling usage and promote the changing public library service mix?

In closing, some conclusions will be offered not only on the status of branding currently, but also on the applicability of brand strategies to the problems and challenges facing the public library sector.

Branding as a marketing tool

Branding in its various guises is an ancient practice. The history of brands can be seen through some of its key basic attributes:

- Awareness. Roman and Greek traders used symbols to communicate goods sold in an age of illiteracy.
- Differentiation. From the latter stages of Ancient Egypt to the medieval guilds tradesmen would mark goods to highlight the origins of their work.
- Guarantee. This differentiation soon became a mark or guarantee of certain qualities.
- Legal protection. In later centuries protection of particular products through copyright laws encouraged trademarks and names (de Chernatony and McDonald, 1998, p. 28).

Commercial branding in the modern sense developed as a key aspect of the marketing philosophy of the major American consumer packaged goods (CPG) manufacturers in

the early twentieth century (de Chernatony and MacDonald, 2003, p. 36). New branding applications in the later part of the twentieth century have been in corporate, service and industrial markets.

Definitions of branding

Definitions of branding tend to reflect its multi-faceted nature. For a broad definition it may be useful to begin with the American Marketing Association:

A name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers (AMA, 2003).

This product-based definition focuses on the differentiating aspect of branding. Brands however serve a variety of key roles "at the interface between product design, customer relationships and marketing communication" (Rowley, 2001, p. 97). More encompassing interpretations of branding currently focus on added value, and the relationship between the user and the brand at the more intangible level of perception and prestige:

A brand is essentially a marketer's promise to deliver a specific set of features, benefits and services consistently to the buyer (Kotler, 2003, p. 420).

de Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley (1998) have further highlighted 12 main strands of interpretation from the branding literature:

- (1) Legal instrument.
- (2) Logo.
- (3) Company.
- (4) Shorthand.
- (5) Risk reducer.
- (6) Identity system.
- (7) Image in consumer mind.
- (8) Value system.
- (9) Personality.
- (10) Relationship.
- (11) Adding value.
- (12) Evolving entity.

This broad scale provides an ideal basis for exploration of the many aspects of brand definition.

Branding in information and library services

While service branding has been a growth area since the 1960s, the influence on public libraries has been limited. In an atmosphere of fiscal constraint pursuing branding may have been seen as an unnecessary diversion of time and money. In addition, many library services have lacked the assistance of professional marketing personnel. The impression of branding a commercial tactic may also have been viewed as at odds with the public service mission of a municipal library sector.

This background of reduced funding and a limited level of marketing knowledge helped to stifle the development of branding in public libraries. In the academic literature McCaughan (1991) provides an advocacy of the application of branding to information services. Similarly, Wolpert (1999) stresses the lessons that can be learned by library and information services from the commercial sector's use of branding (Wolpert, 1999).

In practical terms applications of branding may fall across several categories. Libraries may choose to brand an individual service along "product" lines. They may also play host to branded services that are essentially externally originated and delivered locally such as *learnDirect*. Individual libraries themselves may be branded, alternatively the local authority may choose to brand the service as a whole. National strategies tend to be more focused on promotion and advocacy. A national strategy may provide benefits of scale by spreading the cost of brand development across the network.

Advantages of branding

Branding can help to promote services and enhance the user experience. Branding may bring the following advantages:

- *Awareness*. In a competitive environment for delivery, branding of a service will increase the level of awareness among users. Branding pursued professionally can be a valuable method of highlighting the range and variety of services offered by the library. Particular services, such as business or specialised reference services, may utilise a branding strategy to communicate their presence and expertise to potential users.
- *Loyalty*. Good brands make users feel valued. Existing users will be reminded of the benefits of the service and will be better able to identify them. A well promoted service will encourage more use and help to introduce users to other aspects of the offer, branded or otherwise. The branding process helps to move the focus from transactional measures of service outcomes to a more relationship orientated model.
- *Promotion*. National or regional strategies can act as powerful advertisements for library services. The American Library Association's *@yourlibrary* campaign (www.ala.org/ala/pio/campaign/campaignamericas.htm) is a five year branded programme of library advocacy designed to enhance the standing of the library within society and challenge traditional stereotypes. A branding strategy may be an effective way to transform the image of the library in the minds of the target audience.
- *Prestige*. A well-branded service acts as an advertisement for the library if staff and user expectations are fulfilled. Confidence among staff may increase as a result of the enhanced prestige associated with the service. Service quality depends on the ability to deliver the promises of the brand at every potential point of contact, branding will encourage staff to take ownership of this responsibility.
- *Clarity*. Effective branding means a focus on the qualities and objectives of the product or service. In library terms this can mean a clearer understanding of what the service is for, what the library hopes to achieve by providing it and what expectations in terms of delivery are at the centre of the relationship

Potential drawbacks of branding

Brands are inevitably expensive to create and maintain. Successful brand strategies require a professional approach and a consistent level of support at all levels of the organisation. Kotler reminds us that a brand is essentially “a marketer’s promise to deliver” (Kotler, 2003, p. 420). The relationship between perception and experience is critical to the success of branding services. A poor experience or failure to deliver expected benefits may have the effect of diminishing confidence in the library’s other services by association.

National brand strategies may be a cost-effective alternative to locally originated efforts but equally may be undermined by the scope and variety of services offered across the country. In addition, with libraries operating under the aegis of local councils any brand strategy would have to be compatible with the mission and objectives of the council’s own marketing plan.

Methodology

The methodology chosen for the research project was a combination of desk based research and self-administered questionnaire. The collection of primary data was pursued through the use of an e-mail survey to chief library officers. As heads of service it was felt that these respondents would be responsible for the strategic direction of the service and have the required level of marketing knowledge and the authority to speak for their area.

Initial research in June 2003 involved visiting the library service web sites of the 208 local authorities to browse marketing and branding activity. Distribution of the survey took place over a three-day period in August 2003.

Survey returns were completed by the head of service, marketing officer or appropriate substitute.

Results and analysis

The 208 surveys issued prompted 48 replies. The response rate of almost a quarter of those surveyed produced enough information to identify some relevant trends.

Growth of branding in libraries

One key point of interest for the study of branding techniques in library and information services are the factors that have led to their use. The majority of respondents felt falling usage to be at the heart of the willingness to try new marketing strategies such as branding (see Table I). The success of commercial competitors such as bookstores was chosen by 58 per cent as another factor likely to have influenced interest in branding. These results tend to bear out the twin factors of falling usage and growing competition as vital drivers of new marketing interests in the profession.

Benefits of branding

The expected benefits of branding fell heavily across three main categories (see Table II).

One key aspect of branding strategy, the impact on retention and recruitment of staff, was not rated highly by the librarians surveyed. Retention of current staff was selected by only 10 per cent, while attraction of new staff fared marginally better at 25 per cent. Organisational branding as a means of raising morale and encouraging ownership of the service at the staff level is one potential method of improving service quality and reducing employee turnover. The low importance given to this area by those surveyed may represent a narrow view of branding as a means of promotion and differentiation.

Much has been made of the opportunity to neutralise poor perceptions through the use of branding:

The biggest challenge is to change public perception of what libraries are and can offer people. If we can make people think “wow – a library” then we’ve cracked it (Comment from respondent).

Research would clearly be needed to establish a clearer picture of how both staff and users perceive libraries before any branding efforts are pursued.

Other responses offered to this question included the attraction of new funding partners. A focused branding strategy for individual services may help in the increasingly important bidding process that is a feature of many special projects in public libraries.

Potential drawbacks of branding

Perhaps not surprisingly in the resource conscious public sector, cost was identified as the major drawback of a pursuit of branding (see Table III). Other difficulties in evaluation and confusion were also highlighted, and just under a quarter of responses underlined the potential for staff resistance to change. It is likely that in a non-profit

	%
Falling usage figures	72.9
Success of commercial rivals	58.3
Government policy initiatives	45.8
Externally branded services	25.0
User demand	10.4
Branding of other sectors	10.4
Other	12.5

Table I.
Factors driving interest
in branding

	%
Raise profile	93.8
Attract new users	91.7
Counter negative stereotypes	83.3
Recruitment of staff	25.0
Retention of current staff	10.4
Other	8.3

Table II.
Potential benefits of
branding

setting, such as libraries, branding will create suspicion if not explained and planned properly to all stakeholders, particularly those at the front end of the service who are responsible for delivering the service experience to users.

Other replies bear further exploration as they cover a variety of areas of risk for libraries:

- *Cost of failure.* Concern was expressed at the potential for a failed branding strategy and the associated implications.
- *Loss of current "brand".* Care must be taken to ensure that the positive elements of the library service are carried through into whatever branding strategy is pursued.
- *Loss of current users.* Alienation of current users emerged from a number of responses. There is a general fear that radical changes in marketing may weaken the current loyal base of users.
- *Dilution of the public service role.* Another aspect of public library service is the idea of civic mission. Suspicion that branding may be another part of the creeping commercialisation of a community resource may be at the core of such concerns.

Current branding use

Just under half of the respondents had used branding in some form. Of those, 57 per cent had not used a consultant to aid the process. There is a clear risk of pursuing branding without professional marketing advice. Confusion among staff and users may be increased, and failure may be more likely.

Reaching non-users

Falling usage has been highlighted in this survey by over 70 per cent of respondents as one reason for the growing interest in brand strategies in librarianship. The challenge of engaging non-users would seem to be at the heart of library concerns as book issues and library visits continue to fall. With that in mind the library services were asked how they could best reach non-users (see Table IV).

Responses confirmed the recurring theme in the literature that marketing is an area where the most productive improvement could be made: 94 per cent of heads of service felt better marketing would result in the attraction of current non-users. Few managers regarded an extension of branch numbers useful. Branding was favoured by almost 40 per cent of respondents as a means of reaching non-users. The principal message from

Table III.
Potential drawbacks of
branding

	%
Cost	89.6
User confusion	31.3
Staff resistance	22.9
Other	8.3

this section is that there is still much work to be done in improving public library marketing strategies.

National or local?

One aspect of the library literature has been the possibility of national solutions. (Leadbetter, 2003, p. 32). A national branding approach would be most attractive on the grounds of cost, one of the key drawbacks identified an earlier section of the survey. Those who were in favour of more local solutions made specific comments on the unsuitability of a national approach to local problems in the public library context. A local approach would involve different approaches, according to user group and the services being offered. (Bateson, 1992, p. 450). Overall, 57 per cent favoured a national approach, with 27 per cent for local and 21 per cent unsure. The high level of support for national versus local, at over 50 per cent, is certainly an interesting return given the currency of the topic.

The library question

Idea Stores (www.ideastore.co.uk/) have raised some hackles in the profession. The discard of the word "Library" reflects a concern that negative perceptions were so entrenched the service could only be repositioned under a different "brand". The local authorities surveyed were asked whether this radical move was one that they would consider for their own service: 23 per cent of respondents would drop the word library with a further 35 per cent prepared to consider it, with around 40 per cent opposed. These figures combined with the belief of 83 per cent of respondents that branding could help counter negative stereotypes reflect a deeper concern that libraries are losing the marketing battle. Comments on this issue reflect the divergence of opinion:

Building a brand image takes a lot of time/expense and the library brand has been there for over 150 years, why not build on it rather than throw it away? (Comment from respondent).

I have always been dubious about the word library and librarian as they have such variant meaning in the community (Comment from respondent).

The idea should be to change the image of the word, rather than lose the word completely (Comment from respondent).

Several comments on the longevity of the Idea Store brand were also made, typified by a Scottish response:

We're celebrating 150 years of public libraries in Scotland this year. I can't envisage celebrations of Idea Stores in another 150 years (Comment from respondent).

	%
Better marketing	93.8
Use of branding	39.6
New services	35.4
More branches	14.6
Other	22.9

Table IV.
Strategies for reaching
non-users

Idea Stores, and the concept of the complete rebranding of the library, can be seen to have provoked strong reaction within the service. The development of Idea Stores may have helped raise the profile of branding. Equally it may also have created a distorted view of what branding is and what its key characteristics are.

Final comments

The open section at the end of the survey provided a useful snapshot of attitudes both to branding and to the wider problem of marketing the public library service. Comments in this area were generally positive towards the idea of branding but some salient warnings were made:

You can't brand a service that doesn't know what it wants to be. Library services are being pulled backwards and forwards between ICT centres, leisure facilities, training providers etc. . . . Local authorities try and hang a lot of initiatives; objectives and targets off libraries (as do regional and central governments) without really understanding the complicated position local libraries have within communities (Comment from respondent).

On a similar level the difficulty of using brand strategies in the public sector was raised, reflecting possible issues of stakeholder concern:

Library staff across the country share a cynicism and negativity generated by year on year reductions. They are asked to do more with less. Branding can be perceived as superficial or overly commercial by staff so the integral message and style of a re-brand must link to the culture of the organisation and views of staff (Comment from respondent).

Most comments also tended to focus on the funding and sustainability aspects of marketing. While branding may be seen as a possible answer to a marketing dilemma the issue of "more with less" is at odds with a credible branding approach. Cost concerns are a major stumbling block for the pursuit of branding strategies in the public library setting. Without proper investment and maintenance branding approaches may ultimately fail.

Conclusions

Public libraries in the United Kingdom are experiencing a period of declining use. This research has attempted to identify ways in which specialised marketing, through the use of product, service or organisational branding, could help to reinvigorate public libraries and reverse negative perceptions of the service.

Research aim: Factors driving interest in branding

Branding in the public library context has been a peripheral interest. With the development of Idea Stores and more sophisticated marketing techniques it is now an area of interest for most library services. The factors driving this have been concern at falling usage, the success of aggressively branded rivals such as bookstores, and to a lesser extent, government policy initiatives intent on promoting a more user-focused service.

Research aim: Identify the extent of branding usage in public libraries

More than half survey respondents had used branding in the context of their marketing plan. Almost half used the service of a professional brand or marketing consultant. This reveals a more widespread practical use of branding than may be inferred from

the recent library literature search undertaken in relation to this study (Rowley, 1997; de Saez, 1993; Wolpert, 1999; McCaughan, 1991).

Research aim: National versus local approaches

Given the currency of the issue, strong views have emerged from the survey. Half of respondents would foresee a national branding approach as more effective than a local one. National advocacy branding approaches along American lines may help deliver a sustainable marketing strategy with all the benefits of shared resources and costs. The potential weakness of a national approach is also one of the library service's greatest strengths: its extraordinary diversity. Branding nationally would by necessity be of a basic nature. Professionally planned this may be enough to begin the process of countering the negative perception of the service identified by 80 per cent of those local authorities who replied.

Research aim: Are branding strategies a potential solution to falling usage?

Branding, properly planned and developed, may be one way in which the public library service can improve its image and raise the morale of those involved in delivery. Branding focuses on the service, it involves a sustained period of self-examination and honest appraisal of strengths and weaknesses. Branding the organisation could bring key benefits in terms of countering negative perception, attracting new users and raising the profile of the service. One potential benefit of branding may be the reversal of long-term decline in visits and status. Among the barriers perceived in the application of branding, cost was the main concern. The most obvious answer, a shared approach on a national basis, may raise questions in the applicability of central solutions to local problems. This underlying tension is, however, common to the marketing of all services.

The future for branding in public library services

Branding of services in the non-profit setting has brought benefits of awareness, clarity and loyalty. Branding can help to refocus a service on its goals and objectives and make users feel valued. Branding can also encourage employees to take ownership of the service, with the associated benefits for morale and performance. In a user driven environment, service providers should explore every tactical avenue for improvement in the service experience. Branding, on a service, library or national level, may help libraries respond to some of the key challenges they face in the decades ahead. Reversing the trend of under investment, falling usage and negative perception needs a planned and multi-faceted marketing, service and facility improvement strategy. Branding, with its emphasis on the needs of the user and the potential of the service, represents a key opportunity for those libraries willing to invest the time and resources in its application.

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