A new hospital library: a marketing opportunity

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A new or remodeled library presents a unique marketing opportunity for the hospital librarian. Furthermore, a well-designed library markets itself through its convenience, attractiveness, and ease of use. A marketing approach to library planning takes into account needs of users and of library staff and considers the librarian’s relations with the architect as well as with hospital employees. This paper describes ways to combine library planning with marketing techniques and specifies aspects of the library that contribute to its good image.

Closing and downsizing have been key words in hospital librarians’ discussion over the past decade. Nevertheless, some hospital libraries are surviving and even growing, frequently because the librarian has understood the importance of marketing. A new or remodeled library presents a unique marketing opportunity.

How can a librarian make the most of this opportunity? This article will suggest an approach, based on the following imperatives:

Recognize that the library is a place, as well as a collection and a service center. Users see it as a place they go to read; to find information; and, sometimes, to find a quiet place to think, write, and reflect. Attractive libraries find their place in hospital tours, which can enhance the library’s image.

Plan for a user-friendly library. Visualize yourself walking in as a stranger, and ask whether you could find reference shelves, online catalog terminals (or the card catalog), current journals, or CD-ROM stations. The plan of the library, as well as signage, should help guide the user to information. A staffed information desk (even if it is the only desk of the only staff member) should be visible from the entrance. In addition, users need adequate work spaces, an environment that allows concentration, and a feeling of security.

Think broadly. Although there are functional areas that the library must provide, there are optional areas that can enhance the library’s image and its usefulness. Such areas include conference rooms, electronic classrooms, exhibit areas, individual study rooms, and separate special-collections areas. Few hospital libraries will have all of these, but they should be considered during the planning stages.

Make the library staff comfortable (even if the “staff” is one person). An inefficient workplace is a deterrent to good service, and lack of private space sends a message that staff lacks value in the institution. Ideally, every staff member will have a desk or workstation.

Be image conscious. Just as people have images by which we judge their competence, likability, and status, so do departments. In any institution, some departments are seen as highly professional, trustworthy, and proactive, while others are seen as unreliable, inefficient, and unpleasant. The most beautiful library in the world cannot overcome a poor service attitude, but you can predispose users to see the library staff in a good light by providing an attractive and functional library.

Use the opening as a springboard for an effective public relations campaign for the library. Several libraries have built a year-long campaign around a new facility and have won a John Cotton Dana Award for their efforts [1–2].

In his book Marketing the Library, Leerburger lists “atmospherics” as one of three major methods of marketing available to librarians. By this he means “designing the library building with consideration for the people who use it. It also implies consideration for the patron’s comfort psychologically as well as physically... The building must exude a welcoming feeling” [3].
GETTING STARTED

In order to tell your architect or designer what you need, you will have to answer some basic questions:

- How many users do you have?
- How do they use the library? Consider such questions as what percentage simply locate and copy articles; what percentage sit in the library to write papers or grants; what percentage use CD-ROMs for searching versus those who request searches from a librarian?
- Which services do you currently offer, and what facilities are necessary for them? Which services do you plan to offer in the foreseeable future, and what additional facilities will they require? Think not only of floor space, but also of wiring, sound buffers, and additional office space if more staff is added.
- How much space is now devoted to housing the collection? At what rate is your collection growing? Are there space-saving alternatives for housing the collection that might be used in a new library?
- Given your users, your collection, and the services you provide or expect to provide, what are your space needs? Some helpful formulae for estimating space needs can be found in books dealing with that topic [4-5].

As long as you are gathering information, this is an excellent time to do a market audit. If you let users know that the questions you are asking will have a bearing on design of a new library, they will have an increased interest in answering them. A marketing audit involves the examination of one’s environment, an analysis of present strengths and weaknesses from a marketing perspective, and new opportunities based on changes in the organization and new technologies available. Many good marketing texts can explain the details of a marketing audit, but some specific considerations for hospital librarians are listed below.

Environment

Is your hospital expanding or downsizing? Is there an increased emphasis on outpatient services? Is your hospital assertively marketing itself to the community as a health resource? Has the hospital added new departments or research initiatives? Is the hospital fairly compact or spread among many buildings or separated locations? Are you located close to other health sciences libraries? Is collection sharing a possibility? Where do members of the medical staff in private practice get most of their information? If you have not recently (in 1994 or 1995) been surveyed by the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations, study the current information management chapter to see how well you are meeting those standards.

Strengths and weaknesses

Are you using new technology to improve speed and access to information? Is your library crowded and messy or pleasant and inviting? Are you located conveniently for your users, or are you at some distance from them? How is off-hours access provided to staff?

New opportunities

Could you offer additional services if you had appropriate space? Could the library be the location for shared equipment (such as copiers, fax machines, scanners)? Is there a need for public-access computers that the library could provide? Should you provide for electronic delivery of information to offices and laboratories? Do you know what your users feel that they need from the library?

Involve the entire library staff in initial information gathering, including any volunteers you may have. Encourage the staff to keep a new library in their thoughts as they go about daily tasks and to note especially any barriers that should be eliminated in a new design. You will also need to gather information from your users.

Questionnaires are useful for gathering information from a large number of people. If you use one for your market audit, be sure to include all groups that have access to your library, such as medical staff, nursing staff, allied health professionals, administrators, secretaries, hospital auxiliary members, patients, and other potential user groups. You can send a survey to all of them or to representatives from each group.

Focus groups are also helpful in information gathering and can be used in addition to a more broadly based questionnaire. You can invite users to participate in a focus group or use a group already in existence, such as the library committee. Be careful not to ask only those people who will echo your own ideas. Make it your objective to get some surprises in these interviews.

Finally, include other librarians in your planning. This can be done in a formal way by employing a consultant, but it can also be done informally within a consortium or by visiting other libraries. When an initial plan is drawn, show it to librarians who have experienced a move or renovation, and ask for their suggestions.

It is extremely important that the library director meet with the architect throughout the design process. Although there are some architects who specialize in designing libraries, a hospital librarian will more likely work with an architect who specializes in hospitals. Recognize that the architect will not automatically see you as a person whose needs are important relative to other staff members. Therefore, it is time to market yourself to the architect.
Begin by answering all information requests carefully and thoroughly. When you quote standards for space requirements, explain their source. Include drawings of traffic patterns, both from the entryway and around busy areas such as the service desk. If you can locate plans for hospital libraries you consider well designed, you might share these with the architect. When you know the size and shape of your library, you could even draw scale designs of your ideas for arranging the library. Remember that architects are visually oriented, while librarians tend to be verbal; go the extra mile to make communication effective.

Be involved with every area of planning: floorplan, selection of colors, choice of furniture and equipment, installation of wiring and telephone lines, and the final move into the library. Look at all of these from a user’s perspective, as well as from the library expert’s viewpoint. Some marketing considerations include

**Floorplans.** Seek an open, flexible design with as few permanent walls as possible. Use shelving to divide areas for current journals or reference materials and well-designed workstations to provide public computing areas.

**Color selection.** If you will re-use furniture from your current library, be sure that colors will harmonize. If you have the opportunity to choose distinctive colors for the library, use them in motional materials you may publish to get the maximum identity benefit for the library.

**Furniture and equipment.** Talk with a variety of vendors, including those who sell office furniture. Read reviews, and talk with librarians who are using the furniture and equipment you are considering. Do not limit yourself to standard library furniture. According to Brown, “In the past, libraries were seen as specialized institutions with stereotypical needs in furnishings... Now that librarians are interested in marketing their services... planning the library interior is not such a limited task” [6]. Brown also recommends that the selection process include determination of what the furnishings should accomplish for the particular library involved and consideration of what is available on the market or what can be obtained to fulfill the requirements.

**Wiring and telephone lines.** It is less expensive to build in needed wiring than to add it later. If you are not now providing Internet access, design it into the new library. Remember that you will need online access in staff areas but possibly also in public areas. Do not forget public-use telephones for staff members who need to answer pages. Install a card reader or keypunch security system at the door if needed to ensure the safety of off-hours users. Finally, lighting is most important in a library; if lights are perpendicular to shelving, you will continue to have adequate lighting even if shelves are moved, added, or changed to compact shelving.

**Moving the library.** This is a complicated process even for a small library and will be made more difficult if you must maintain regular service during the process. Look for alternatives, such as stationing one staff member in another health sciences library to handle reference questions and copying for your users or arranging for another library to cover these needs for you (at an appropriate fee, of course).

Finally, you will be in your new library. This offers an excellent marketing opportunity—the grand opening. Invite a speaker, serve refreshments, and invite your local library community as well as the hospital staff. This allows your administration to see your library as the focus of attention and admiration from those outside the hospital.

If you have been successful in creating a self-marketing library, people will choose to visit it because it is comfortable and pleasant, they will feel positive about it because they can readily find the information they seek, and you will find ways to use it that will attract users to the area.

**REFERENCES**


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