

Keys to success for public libraries

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Public libraries in New Zealand and to a lesser extent in Australia are thriving, whereas their counterparts in the United Kingdom are struggling after years of neglect. Many libraries in Australia and New Zealand boast over 60 per cent, some up to 95 per cent, of the community as 'active borrowers' whereas 20–25 per cent is more often the UK baseline.

The British library system has been under fire from several independent and government inquiries for massive underinvestment and dated buildings. The situation there is improving, but is still undermined by impossibly inappropriate and obscure buildings and traditional thinking in many councils. By contrast, many Australian and New Zealand library services are reinventing themselves, increasing their loans (not just visitor figures) and creating spacious buildings in prime locations.

Here are some of the innovative and simple commonsense practices that separate the average from the excellent in library services.

Bold leadership

Public libraries have, in the main, played the role of poor cousin in their organisations, struggling with ever-dwindling budgets while the triple Rs (roads, rates and rubbish) have taken the lead and the dollars. Hero projects such as bridges, tunnels and 'sexy' public works have been seen as vote-winners, while soft community-oriented projects are often seen as burdens.

In recent times, however, more enlightened councils have viewed libraries as investments — community assets. These library services usually have strong leadership; what I call 'bodacious, courageous, audacious' leadership. These library managers are able to

tune into their organisation, find out how they can best deliver services in line with their organisation's priorities and, most importantly of all, stick to their guns with gusto. Playford Library in South Australia is an example where the library manager showed tenacity in fighting for large space in a prime location and yet had the flexibility to work successfully with others on the project.


Team mix

As a white, middle-aged, middish-class female, I think I am well placed to say that our library teams consist of people just like me, who have designed buildings and services for the likes of us.

Firstly, sex. Women like to explore experience and relate to people on the shopfloor; whereas men are more likely to be purpose-driven, prefer self-service and need good signage to find material with no human intervention. Innovative library design provides services that especially appeal to men such as quick drop-off, drive-through, 24/7 services, express check-out, good signage and the coffee/newspapers/tables-for-one 'men's shed' concept. Women are catered for with great floor-walking staff, luscious impulse displays in power positions, comfortable sofas, soft lighting, attached wine/coffee bars and chat-friendly areas.




Botany Downs library, Manukau, New Zealand, with its wine/coffee bar




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Heading home after a day on the water at Torquay, Victoria 1967
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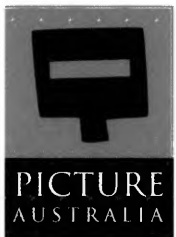
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Secondly, age and race. Businesses should reflect their client base in their team make-up. It is critical nowadays to recruit staff who are young and from a mixed cultural background. Libraries in Wellington and Manukau, New Zealand, provide great examples of mixed teams with young male staff from Asian, Islander and Maori backgrounds.

Recruitment is the key. Recruit for attitude and behaviour, and if necessary develop the library skills later. You cannot train people to have personality.

High-profile buildings with space for the customer

Some public libraries have removed large barrier-like counters (a hangover from the Brown system) and replaced them with smaller pods and floor-walkers.

Progressive libraries need to design and implement bold branding, aiming to create a solid presence in the community and banish dated community perceptions. A prominent high-street location is preferable to being relegated to a hidden park or at the back of the shopping centre alongside boring amenity businesses.

Adelaide City Library has learning spaces, and provides not just the living room of the city, but a kitchen too — a home away from home. This 'Living Room of the City' concept was adopted by Anthony Lewis of Palmerston North, New Zealand, whose library is a magnificent five-storey department store building. His team created boutiques rather than the traditional grid layout for books, to allow customers to browse in comfort. For a successful layout, 60 per cent of floorspace should be kept for browsing space rather than shelving.

Delighting the customer

The right product

Libraries need to introduce the concept of delight — impress your customers with services that do not necessarily cost much but are highly valued. Aim to create a more strategic approach to stock management (purchase, management and disposal) and service provision.

Libraries such as Brisbane, Hamilton and Auckland have introduced strategic asset planning for collections, the first two developing partnerships with suppliers to select material for target audiences.

Adelaide Hills is possibly the first library to provide SMS services alerting customers to book availability, as well as providing a range of services packaged under the banner of 'Services for Busy People'. Warwickshire (UK), Adelaide and many others are reducing queuing by having customers pick up reserved items from open shelves (and no, stealing isn't a problem). Norwich (UK) offers a self check-out system. Logan (Qld) has had a drive-through service for many years.

New Zealand libraries provide premium access to bestseller collections for a few dollars per week, and book club reading sets are widely available in UK libraries.

Information provision

Wiltshire (UK) has a superb partnership between the local health authority and Macmillan Cancer Fund to provide a cancer counselling and information service from within rooms in the library. Both paper-based and electronic information is provided by a Macmillan nurse, in addition to one-to-one sessions with clients.

Four libraries across the globe, including Brisbane and Christchurch, have a superb service whereby each library service opens for only six hours a day, but their communities have 24-hour access to a live interactive reference service. I know it works, having used such a service in Britain late on a Sunday night.

The recipe for a successful service

Libraries that can clearly articulate the benefits they provide their communities, and have the leaders to fight doggedly for the budget and strategies to deliver excellent services, are world-beaters.

Once the leaders are in place, next comes the team mix, the spacious buildings and great product. Sounds easy, doesn't it?

John Stanley Associates work with retailers, libraries and other service industries around the world in over 17 countries. Fiona Emberton consults to all types of retail businesses, but is a library specialist, having worked for over twenty years in the industry.



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