

'The third place': the role of the library in today's society



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'X' has long considered that it provides the third place for consumers, a welcoming, accepting environment between home and work. Perhaps we all need a third place, in whatever form we find it, because it is a place for our minds to feel at ease.'

What is 'X' and where is the quote from? The author, John Simmons, could easily be talking about a modern library. Alas, the book is called *My sister's a barista* and 'X' is Starbucks. This is a great book for librarians to read. It follows up on work done by Ray Oldenbury, the Florida sociologist and author of *The Great good place*. In that book he explains that we need three places in our lives — home, work and a third place.

In my talks, I often refer to the third place historically being the church. It was the safe meeting place that in many societies was eventually replaced by the market square. Eventually the marketplace disappeared and now we need to start looking for a new third place.

For some, the third place is the pub, for others the gym and, eventually, for many it became Starbucks or another coffee house.

The role of the library

I am a great believer that the library has a role in today's society. In Starbucks, coffee is the product, not the experience, and the same applies to libraries. The books, CDs and videos are the products; the library is the experience. It is how you put that experience together that matters. This is part of your marketing strategy.

I must also stress that Starbucks is not the competition. They should be an ally. Coffee, or alternative drinks, can be an integral part of the library experience for consumers, which is why you will find Starbucks in Barnes and Nobles bookshops in the USA and Bookers in the United Kingdom. Starbucks UK is an advocate of libraries and supports client book donations to improve literacy.

In today's society the library should be one of a number of 'third places' in the consumer's mind. In some library districts the library is a huge success in providing that place. The City of Gawler in South Australia, for example, has 120 per cent active community library use (not only do all the residents use it as a third space, but they also attract consumers from other councils). Other libraries cannot attract even 15 per cent of their population into the library — these councils have not discovered the third place.

We are all different

As the quote at the beginning of this article suggests, our expectations of a third place are all different and you cannot please everyone.

Recently, a friend of our office manager arrived in Perth from New Zealand.

This friend had no idea what our business did. She complained to our manager about New Zealand libraries. She refuses to go into them. She stated that they were too busy and noisy and were used by young people, plus they served coffee, not like libraries used to be. As I mentioned, you cannot please everyone, but what a great problem to have — complaints because you are too busy!

Take a lesson from Starbucks

Starbucks is the fastest-growing retailer in the world. Today, alone, they will open three new stores. The average Starbucks advocate uses them eighteen times a month, plus the non-advocates have helped develop the coffee and tea-drinking industry by using their competitors.

What can a library learn from Starbucks? These are my tips:

Adapt to the local community

Starbucks studies the demographics of each local market and adapts the store and product mix to the community. The City of Adelaide in South Australia does this extremely well. It has small shopfront libraries dedicated to business people or youth or tourists. Too often libraries neglect certain segments of the community.

Get into the local community

Starbucks, like libraries, is part of the community as are the partners in the business. Starbucks partners are encouraged to engage in needy community projects with Starbucks support. Librarians are in the same position; they have to get out of the library to promote the library.

Go wireless

High-speed wireless internet access is now part of life in 'third places'. Starbucks led the way, McDonalds followed. Libraries also need to go wireless to be perceived as being in tune with today's customer.

Internal customers are the key

Starbucks policy is to really be in tune with their internal customers (or partners). The aim is to exceed the internal customer's expectations. If you can achieve that, you will exceed your expectations with external customers.

Keep reinventing the library

Never tamper with the core of what you do. This is what Starbucks is especially good at. Starbucks never changes their coffee formulae or offer, but they do change the displays. Once you have your merchandise strategy correctly laid out, don't change it. Learn from the Starbucks story and become the 'third place'.

John Stanley is a marketing consultant with over twenty years' experience working with libraries to assist them with their merchandising, training, image and customer service. John Stanley Associates produces an e-newsletter specific to library retail. If you would like to receive a regular copy, please visit <http://www.johnstanley.cc> or e-mail newsletter@johnstanley.cc.

Digital amnesia — don't forget!

Registrations are coming in fast for the Digital Amnesia seminar to be held in Canberra on 21 April at the National Library of Australia. Check the April events pages on the website for full details.

We have just confirmed that Senator Abetz, Special Minister of State, will be launching the new version of the Australian Government's publications online website, <http://www.publications.gov.au>, at the seminar at 11:00am. Since planning began for this seminar, there has been much interest in the topic and we are expecting lively discussion. ■