



# OPINION

Each month, OPINION features contributions from invited guest writers. The opinions expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect those of the Australian Library and Information Association.

*Janette Wright has just taken up the role of Chief Executive Officer and State Librarian at the State Library of Queensland. As someone who has worked in different sectors of the industry – public libraries, government, and commercial and not-for-profit suppliers to the industry – Janette says her perspective on the 'business' of the library industry is not typical of the sector. Is she right?*

Many librarians used to reject the term 'industry', preferring to describe our collective sector as a profession. I believe our sector can be both – and that in describing our collective buying power, our advocacy for our clients, the promotion and marketing of our services, and the business-like way in which we deliver services and manage resources – we must recognise that we are an 'industry'.

Early in my career, I left library education to work for a library system vendor. When I returned to the library education field I was struck by the number of students who did not understand the fundamental terminology of commerce. Many students wrote about a library as a profit centre, used the word 'profiteering' and confused revenue with profit. Then I realised what had changed in the intervening years was my understanding of the commercial world.

So where do public libraries fit, in this commercial world?

Firstly, I don't regard public libraries as a business in the usual sense of an entrepreneur taking a risk with their own capital to test a product or service in the market. Of course, to be effective, public libraries must be managed in a business-like way, but are they business enterprises? I don't think so and I'll explain why.

I strongly believe in the public library as a 'public good', something provided for the benefit of everyone which is best provided collectively rather than everyone providing their own.

Another example of a public good is the public road system. It makes no sense for everyone to provide their own piece of road because to work, the roads must be part of a system. For this reason, roads have traditionally been provided from the public purse, as a community responsibility. However in recent times we have seen that we can incentivise the use, or non-use, or the roads by charging fees such as tolls and road taxes. By charging for road use we have been able to supplement investment in road infrastructure. This new business model for road systems has revolutionised our private transport systems, and it has been made more feasible through the use of smart technologies such as the electronic tagging of vehicles.

So while I contend that a public library can run in a business-like way, and derive revenue from entrepreneurial activities, it is essentially a public good which is best provided at a community level to achieve network benefits (like the roads), and economies of scale.

However, like the road system, we can now track and incentivise specific activities which will benefit the overall community and its economy. An example is the way communities can be encouraged to contribute and edit online content, so that libraries are no longer passive receivers of the output of the publishing industry. Libraries can participate in commissioning, co-creating, editing, and distributing content for different target markets while at the same time designing and delivering high-level user experiences.

I believe we need to preserve free access to public libraries. They are, after all, one of the last remaining civic spaces in our communities. However, a public library can increase its resources for

investment through the use of new business models and technologies which allow them to meet the related service needs of the market.

An example is crowdsourcing, a new way to generate funds for projects which relies on the technology (the internet), and directly involves clients in creating and contributing to new activities. This type of community participation and engagement does not rely on a fee-for-service model which can create barriers to access to public library services for some communities.

I like to think of the public library as a 'park for the mind', a place you can visit without having to pay, where you can play on your own or with others – and no-one tests you on the way out.

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IN THIS COMMERCIAL WORLD?”

JANETTE WRIGHT: IT'S  
TIME TO GET USED TO THE  
WORD 'INDUSTRY'

