How and Why People Become Accidental Marketers

The general public just doesn't value libraries as much as it used to. That change in attitude has led to less respect and, often, less funding. You don't have to do any in-depth research to find out how our field got into this predicament, but here's a brief synopsis.

How Did We Get Here?

Back in the old days—about 20 whole years ago—most libraries were still enjoying the status they'd always had. They were important because they held information and other treasures that weren't available elsewhere. Enter the internet in the mid-1980s. It was set up to make information sharing easier and faster, initially only for organizations such as the military and research universities. Of course it's hard to keep a good thing quiet, and in 1988 the internet was opened to commercial interests. The Mosaic browser was released in 1993, and as more-user-friendly interfaces were created and more cities were wired for internet connections, usage grew exponentially. As it became easier to access and share information, libraries' proud place as The Great Repository was diminished. And now, with a solid generation of "digital natives" (kids who always had this technology growing up) in place, too often we hear the question, "We have the internet; why do we still need libraries?"

Hence, our current situation. When many of today's librarians were studying for their masters' degrees, there were no classes in marketing or promotion because nobody really needed them. (Ditto for classes in fundraising, business practices, computer technology, and many other subjects that matter today.) Consequently, many people who've worked their way into management positions don't have any background in the subject. Sadly, the "everything's already online" mindset has now made it absolutely crucial to promote libraries' valuable, authoritative collections and librarians' expertise in finding trustworthy info. Trouble is, many of today's library schools *still* don't teach much marketing.

Where Are We Now?

So most library managers don't have this expertise, nor do many new hires. And we're already deep enough in that budgets have been slashed, and therefore people can't afford to hire extra staff (let alone professional marketers) to fight the myth that libraries don't matter anymore. This is a Catch-22, and one that we're going to have to work hard to dig out of.

It's essential that we change this situation, and change people's minds about libraries, for several reasons. Chief among these, of course, is saving our own jobs. But it's more than that. At the risk of sounding pompous, I'll say that I think we need to save people from themselves, from their own ignorance. If the supposedly learned mayors and deans and governors and CEOs and legislators truly believe that we don't need libraries, and they stop funding them, what will happen to the world's records? All the history, the memories, and the treasures? You can't just lock them up in old buildings and hope nothing will happen to them. They need active preservation—and often digitization. And what of the new information being released today? Who will organize and interpret it?

Piling documents into computer folders isn't enough. Who will help new generations learn about their world? What about literacy? I don't want to get too philosophical, so I'll stop here. Suffice it to say that, if you're reading this book, you understand many of the reasons why libraries, in one form or another, need to continue no matter how much technology gets involved with information.

This belief that libraries aren't essential anymore pervades too much of our society. It's time to fight it as if you're fighting for your very existence—because you are.

For additional motivation, check out some examples of how society views our industry. The 2007 documentary *The Hollywood Librarian* (www.hollywoodlibrarian.com) contains a nice historical glimpse of how librarians have been portrayed in various movies. Each issue of the newsletter *Marketing Library Services* (*MLS*; www.infotoday.com/mls) includes a department called "Spectacles: How Pop Culture Sees Librarians," which mentions new movies and books and comics and advertisements that portray us to the world. "Spectacles" is written by Ruth Kneale, a special librarian who has studied society's view of librarians for years. Kneale also maintains the website You Don't Look Like a Librarian! (www.librarian-image.net), which is full of fascinating (and sometimes maddening) examples of how the media portrays librarians. I'm sorry to report that the image of the shushing spinster lives on. But Kneale's site is a fun way to learn about how the world sees you, and it even includes data from some studies of librarian images.

How Accidental Marketers Are Born

So here we are, with ugly old stereotypes still haunting the profession and few people educated in the ways to paint more complimentary, updated images. Budgets aren't what they used to be, so

staff members are stretched thin by the need to fill many roles with fewer people. Still, day-to-day chores must go on.

Somewhere along the way, a children's librarian needs some signs to announce an upcoming storytime. She seeks out someone who's a little more creative than she is, or someone who knows more computer graphics programs than she does. She finds a helpful colleague—let's call her Kate—to make her signs, and they look pretty nice. So when someone else needs a program flier, this person asks Kate to design it and to print some copies on colored paper. They look good. Soon, people start leaning on Kate not only for the computer work, but also for the text: "Should we name the program this or that? Would it work better at 11 AM or 3 PM?" Now Kate is giving what seems like casual advice but is actually shaping the library's offerings and outreach. Kate gets herself labeled as the "expert" on fliers and eventually that translates into being the expert on promoting programs. And you all know what happens then to someone like Kate, who has an aptitude for a little extra duty—suddenly it's part of her job. As her coworkers involve Kate earlier and earlier in the process, she becomes the go-to girl, and suddenly she's seen as "the marketing person." Yet she has no background in or real knowledge of marketing. After all, she only started out by changing some typefaces and pasting in clip art to make some nice-looking signs … and another accidental marketer is born.

This, of course, is only one example. Sometimes a staffer will man a library table at a local fair, and thereby become the expert on outreach. Or the person who arranged for the library to be included in new-student orientation finds himself dubbed the new freshman liaison. Or the woman at the regional co-op who types up simple news releases for the members is seen as the PR person. Accidental marketers can be born in many ways; you get the idea.

Since the people who fall (or are pushed) into this extra work are often below the management level, these important tasks end up

being done by someone who's paraprofessional or entry-level or part-time. Or they're done by a degreed librarian who's also working the reference desk and overseeing staff and serving on committees, and just doesn't have much time to spare. What's more, when tasks just fall into people's laps like this, the work isn't seen as essential, and the "position" (such as it is) doesn't really have any official standing to decide what should be done or to ask for resources. Consequently, even though promotion and marketing should be cornerstones of an organization's mission and strategic plan, in the library they end up being afterthoughts tacked onto an already-full job description. This is one the biggest problems with the way libraries are run today. And while the situation *has* improved over the years, it's still nowhere near as good as it needs to be.

Just How "Accidental" Are We?

As I explained in the Introduction, I've been the editor of a newsletter called *Marketing Library Services* since 1994. In that time, I've spoken with countless library promoters, many of whom admitted that they never intended to become marketers, or that they had no training in marketing, or both. This lack of background shows. It's not that someone without formal training cannot become a good marketer; it's more that they don't have the time or will or energy to really understand what marketing is about. Plus, as long as someone is complimenting them on their work, they think they're doing just fine. So, many people plan library events and make fliers for them and believe that they're *marketing* when, really, all they're doing is planning events and making fliers. Technically, that's more like *promotion*. And while many, many librarians—even experts and speakers and writers— use the "M" word for those basic tasks, that doesn't make it accurate. As you'll learn in this book, promotion is just a tiny part of

marketing. True marketing is a process of asking people what they want, then creating and delivering it, then asking people how well you did. I'll dig into that in later chapters.

At any rate, I had all of this anecdotal evidence that many librarians and information professionals lack training, but I wanted to substantiate it for the purposes of this book. So I sent out an online survey to some email discussion lists. It wasn't exactly scientific, and I got just 89 responses. Yet, the answers and comments jibed pretty well with what I've come to believe over the many years I've been in the field. Let me share some results.

The first question I asked my colleagues was what percentage of their jobs involved marketing and promotion. I wanted to know because most folks I've talked to are either part-time employees or full-timers who got this work tacked on to their regular jobs. Just 26 percent of my respondents said that "pretty much all" of their jobs was marketing or promotion. The rest of the answers were spread across the board. What this tells me is that plenty of library managers don't assign marketing work as a full-time, high-value, priority task. (According to my results, 72 percent of the respondents were full-time employees. So most people in my sample were full-timers who had marketing as just part of their jobs.) Table 1.1 shows all of the answers for these two questions.

The big question—whether respondents had intended to become marketing/promo people—was split down the middle. Exactly 50.6 percent did intend to and 49.4 percent did not. The accidental marketers' comments on how they ended up doing this work were interesting. At least half a dozen enterprising individuals said they saw a need for it and so they just started doing it. A handful of solo librarians commented that if they didn't do it, nobody else would. Some admitted that their jobs had morphed to include promotional activities. One specifically said she had "started as a programming person, began promo on my own, because existing PIO [public information officer] was overloaded.

Table 1.1

Question: About how much of your job is library marketing or promotion?	
Choices	**Response**
Less than 25%	19%
25 to 40%	16%
Roughly half	13%
55 to 75%	11%
76 to 90%	15%
Pretty much all of it	26%
Question: How many hours a week are you employed by this library?	
Choices	**Response**
Less than 20 hours	2%
20 to 29 hours	7%
30 to 35 hours	19%
36 to 40 hours	72%

Did not get good media coverage. I applied for and received a PIO position, which morphed into marketing and fundraising over the years." Another admitted that when the job was created, "this aspect was lumped into" it. Here are a few paraphrased comments I'd like to share:

- I fell into it. Not much had been done previously.
- Fear of losing the library altogether to a contracted-out service company. I was disappointed to find out our customers did not know about services.
- I felt it was important due to the changing users in a 21st-century library.
- The director felt I was talented/creative with publicity.
- As people left the department, my job expanded to include those responsibilities.
- Anytime you are providing a service, you end up promoting it.
- I was encouraged to take marketing and PR courses because I love writing.
- All front-line staff have the responsibility of promoting the Library Resource Centre. As a group, we decided that every encounter could be a chance to promote the LRC's services.

When I asked survey participants whether they had had any formal training in marketing before their current jobs, 52 percent of them said they had. Of those, 76 percent said their training had been "very helpful," while nearly 22 percent rated the training "somewhat helpful." This is a testament to the value of real marketing education.

The next question asked whether respondents had had any formal training *after they began* doing marketing work. About 67 percent had. Those who hadn't gotten any education since starting cited the answers "no money" and "no time"; these were tied at 14 percent each. Only four people (out of 22) chose the answer I feared most, "administration doesn't think it's important." I was relieved to see so few give that reason for lack of training. Table 1.2 shows the percentages for each possible answer.

Table 1.2

Question: If you haven't gotten any formal training since you started doing marketing work, why not?	
Choices	**Response**
No time	54%
No money	14%
No desire	14%
Admin doesn't think it's important	18%

Author's Note: For these questions, I defined "formal training" as classes, workshops, seminars, or a degree; "anything other than reading or learning on your own."

Finally, I asked these staff members what they did on their own to learn about marketing, and gave them six choices of answers; they could mark as many as applied to them. Every possible answer scored between 80 percent and 92 percent, with "read articles" at the top of the spectrum and "ask colleagues" at the bottom. Other choices were "read books," "read listservs," "read websites or blogs," and "attend conference sessions."

The Need for More Marketing Education in Library Schools

One reason I was so interested in whether library staff members who do promo work had had much education in the field is that I haven't found much evidence of this incredibly important topic

being taught in MLS or LIS programs, even today (at least not in the U.S.). My limited research found few schools teaching real marketing courses. Most schools include bits of marketing in other classes, like those on library management. But I'm here to tell you that a few days' or weeks' worth of lessons in the midst of another topic does not prepare anyone to do solid marketing. (If it did, I wouldn't be writing this book or editing my newsletter or contributing to the blog.)

My own small survey looked at 89 people who range from very new librarians to old pros. Just over half had library school degrees. Of the rest, 17 claimed degrees in marketing or business, and of the 28 who wrote in "other" degrees, about a dozen had degrees in journalism and/or communications. So half the folks doing this work have some public relations background but no library degree. This side of the coin presents its own challenges, because it's hard to be an expert communicator about something you don't fully understand. Although they're lucky to have writing or PR or business knowledge, the nonlibrarians I've talked with need a good bit of time to get to know the library world. I've heard them jump into conversations to ask a colleague what abbreviations such as LC or MLA or OCLC mean. These are terms that librarians take for granted. There's an awful lot for outsiders to absorb.

But I want to get back to the other side of the coin, the respondents who reported having library school degrees. Of those 49 people, only nine had any marketing or promotion classes while in library school. That's barely 20 percent. Even if a better sample showed twice that number, it wouldn't be enough. As those on the communications side would tell you, there's just as much librarians don't know about their field. There's a lot to absorb if you want to be good at publicity or promotion. So those rare people who have both library and PR-type knowledge are especially dear. Our world needs many, many more of them.

If libraries are to stay in business, marketing should never be tacked on to the end of a job description or handled by part-timers who don't have the right knowledge base. Could you imagine a major corporation doing that? What if the companies that manufactured Coke or Pepsi or Macs or PCs treated marketing as an afterthought? Libraries are businesses, too. They have managers and budgets and products and services and customers just like the big brands do. And they also have serious competitors, now more than ever. So marketing is absolutely essential, and serious skills are necessary to do it right and to keep your business afloat.

It's because I believe this so sincerely that I decided to write this book. Library schools don't prepare their students to do professional-level promotion, and most libraries don't have the money to hire extra employees who do have the necessary education. Consequently, there are lots of accidental marketers out there. Rest assured, accidental colleagues, I understand you. This book is intended to be your A-to-Z guide for all those things you sort of picked up but never properly learned. It delves deeply into a few essential topics to provide you with a rock-solid foundation of knowledge, and it explores many other topics and points you to further info on those for whenever you're ready.

What to Expect From This Book

While I could not completely cover all marketing-related topics here, I think you'll find *The Accidental Library Marketer* to be a very practical, useful, and I hope even interesting guide that will explain all of those things you've been wondering about (plus a few things you didn't even realize you *should* be wondering about). And while you can obviously choose to start with a certain section to learn about a particular thing, I've written the book to be read in full. If you study each chapter in order, you'll learn the basics first, then build from there to end up with fairly complete knowledge of

marketing as it applies specifically to libraries. Along the way, you'll find lots of fun, fresh ideas to use for your own marketing tasks, no matter what type of library you work in.

Oh, and I'm funny too. Very, very funny.