



# kenchadconsulting

**Same message: new messenger?**

*How can public libraries compete with free commercial services? Can they offer a service that's more relevant, engaging, personalised, cheaper, faster and easier to use? Who will create it?*

(Reproduced with permission from CILIP Library + Information Gazette.  
4th May 2007 [www.cilip.org.uk/publications/gazette](http://www.cilip.org.uk/publications/gazette))



**kenchadconsulting**

16 Regency Court  
Brentwood Essex CM14 4LU

Tel: +44 (0)7788 727 845

Fax: +44 (0)1277 225 726

Email: [ken@kenchadconsulting.com](mailto:ken@kenchadconsulting.com)  
[www.kenchadconsulting.com](http://www.kenchadconsulting.com)

Registered in England & Wales - Registered No. 6099834

The free public library paid for by taxation created a business model that, by the 1960s, had effectively put an end to commercial circulating libraries that had operated since the 18th century. In the 21st century the commercial sector is fighting back by offering free or very low-cost web-based services. Free global internet search, low-cost book delivery, free digital content and online social networks to share content are all competition to traditional library services. Google defines itself in its mission statement as a global library business. It has been estimated that, as of March 2007, Google has already digitised one million volumes.<sup>1</sup>

**Google defines itself in its mission statement as a global library business.**

What's the role for libraries in this new environment? The web is transforming ways of doing business and user expectations. Using Google Book Search, I can find and view online (for free) the text of, for example, Dickens's *Hard Times*. It also gives me links to online services where I can buy the book. *Hard Times* is available for as little £0.01p plus £2.75 p&p.

The web has already challenged academic library services. In 2005, when library staff at the University of Wales in Bangor were threatened with job cuts, the university consultation paper making the case for the cuts stated: 'Librarians do not deliver "value for money" when compared to the internet.' Bookshops, too, are under threat. In a controversial article in the Sunday Times last year<sup>2</sup> Bryan Appleyard said:

'I... stopped buying in bookshops years ago. Why bother? Online, Amazon and AbeBooks have everything I need... and AbeBooks, especially, is absurdly cheap.' Does he bother to use public libraries? The reality for many users is that the public library is not free. It's true I can borrow the book of *Hard Times* for free but if I want the spoken word CD I have to pay a fee despite the fact that Naxos offers it as a free download. Borrowing a book can incur travel costs and if my library service does not stock the book I want I might have to pay something like £2.50 for an inter-library loan. Then there looms the potential fine for an overdue book. So suddenly £2.76 for what you might consider a 'permanent loan' that is delivered to my door in days does seem 'absurdly cheap'.

In the recent MLA consultation paper *A Blueprint for Excellence*<sup>3</sup> John Dolan proposes a public library 'core offer' to include 'global, interactive information, resources and communications service 24/7, for learning knowledge and inspiration'. Doesn't this largely already exist? Isn't the real question, how can public libraries compete with existing free commercial services? Can they offer a service that's more relevant, engaging, personalised, cheaper, better, faster, comprehensive and easier to use? Who will create it? What skills do they have? How much will it cost? How will it be funded? Will users have to pay?

**“ Librarians do not deliver “value for money” when compared to the Internet. ”**

- 1 See 'Google Book Search. Libraries and Their Digital Copies' by Jill E. Grogg and Beth Ashmore. Information Today 23rd April 2007. [www.infotoday.com/searcher/apr07/Grogg\\_Ashmore.shtml](http://www.infotoday.com/searcher/apr07/Grogg_Ashmore.shtml)
- 2 'A novel use of technology'. By Bryan Appleyard. 15 October 2006. [http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts\\_and\\_entertainment/article668357.ece](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/article668357.ece)
- 3 [www.mla.gov.uk/resources/assets/B/blueprint\\_11126.pdf](http://www.mla.gov.uk/resources/assets/B/blueprint_11126.pdf)

The web gives business a global reach enabling them to take advantage of the 'Long Tail'. 'As the costs of production and distribution fall, especially online, there is now less need to lump products and consumers into one-size-fits-all containers. In an era without the constraints of physical shelf space and other bottlenecks of distribution, narrowly-targeted goods and services can be as economically attractive as mainstream fare'.<sup>4</sup> AbeBooks, for example, provides a catalogue of books far more extensive than almost any public library: it claims 100 million 'listings'. These services build a community of users and weave their way into our lives. In March AbeBooks launched its BookHints book recommendation service in conjunction with the Web 2.0 social software service LibraryThing.<sup>5</sup> At LibraryThing, more than 10 million books from the personal libraries of booklovers have been catalogued, tagged and rated out of five.



*Future*, the Government's long-term strategic vision for the public library service, recognised the fragmentation of services as a key challenge. 'There is a danger of drift and stagnation in a highly fragmented system.' Chris Anderson, Editor of *Wired* magazine, who first introduced the Long Tail trend, suggested that libraries could '...[connect] their individual collections into a vast super collection that can go further down the Tail than any single institution could afford'.<sup>6</sup>

**Libraries can certainly do much more to leverage their existing IT investment.**

How should the UK public library community react? I see little evidence of any serious analysis of the competition to public libraries that these new web-based business models enable. I do however see many ways in which public libraries could better harness their assets. They remain a trusted and much loved service. We don't just need information: we need relevant and authoritative information. Libraries can certainly do much more to leverage their existing IT investment to introduce new services and run existing services at lower cost. They can also work together more effectively. Back in 2003, *Framework for the*

**I think it's time for libraries to fight back.**

## About US

*Ken Chad Consulting works with organisations such as government, local authorities, universities, colleges and schools to help leverage technology to realise the full potential of their library and information function.*

Ken Chad Consulting Ltd. Registered Office: c/o Ridgewell & Boreham Accountancy Services, 24A Crown Street, Brentwood, Essex CM14 4BA  
Registered in England & Wales - Registered No. 6099834

<sup>4</sup> [www.thelongtail.com/the\\_long\\_tail/2005/09/long\\_tail\\_101.html](http://www.thelongtail.com/the_long_tail/2005/09/long_tail_101.html)

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.abebooks.co.uk/docs/CompanyInformation/PressRoom/BookHints.shtml>

<sup>6</sup> 'Q & A with the author of the Long Tail'. Pages 10-11. OCLC Newsletter. April/May/June 2005. [www.oclc.org/news/publications/newsletters/oclc/2005/268/thelongtail.htm](http://www.oclc.org/news/publications/newsletters/oclc/2005/268/thelongtail.htm)