

What's the strategy of your public library?



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What's the strategy of your public library service? I doubt it's a question you ask. But if you are a public library user maybe you wonder why libraries are closing or opening hours are being reduced? You might pause to ask why your library doesn't offer ebooks while some others do. If you are a librarian you might want to know what rationale is used to judge whether users should be charged for access to the Internet. Should service provision be outsourced to a commercial company? Can you identify what Richard Rumelt calls, in his book 'Good Strategy: Bad Strategy', 'a guiding principle' against which these things can be judged?

No doubt the library already has a strategy. But is it a good strategy? Rumelt argues that most organisations, whether they are commercial companies, social organisations or the military, do not have good strategies. In his view, a key criterion for good strategy is 'a cohesive response to an important challenge'. Looking at library strategies and some recent reviews of library services, I see little evidence of any in-depth analysis of, or response to, what I believe is a fundamental technology-driven challenge. Where is a 'cohesive response' to the diverse and growing competition now confronting public libraries? If we take an inclusive view, we see that the library business is booming. Members of the public have access to a growing number of diverse digital 'library services' ranging from Google to Magic Town. And if you doubt their credentials as library services, check out their mission statements. Even if public libraries are being used more, they are still losing overall 'market share'. Does that matter?

The digital challenge

I suggest that the 'digital challenge' is a more fundamental threat to public libraries than the current harsh economic climate. It's an opportunity too. The internet means digital content, once created, can be moved around

the world to be copied and shared at almost no cost. A digital book is a very different thing from its printed cousin. Technically it is what economists call 'non rival'. My use of an ebook need not rival or stop your use. In the print world, if I borrow a book from a library someone else can't have it. To satisfy demand libraries have to ration or buy more copies. So it's not surprising that some publishers and creators of content are very concerned about the technical ease with which content can be copied and shared. The current heated debate around copyright is a symptom of that. Measures such as 'Digital Rights Management' (DRM) constrain free sharing. Publishers such as Penguin appear to view public libraries as a threat to their business so, at the time of writing, refuse to license their ebooks to most public libraries. In many cases a library or an individual does not own the ebook. They merely have permission to use it under conditions set by the publisher. It's more akin to a typical software licence.

There is opportunity too. Publishers and others can better connect with the end user the reader. One of the key factors here is data. We have very little information about the use made of print books. The digital world offers a host of opportunities to collect and analyse data and devise new services to readers. If you are reading an ebook on some devices you'll be able to watch as the 'book's pulse gets stronger as comments are added and more readers are reading'. In addition you'll be able to see 'what others thought of what you just read and get interesting stats, such as how many others are reading with you'. A recent Library Journal & Bowker 'Patron Profiles' report recommended that libraries adjust their strategies based on the rise of tablets, other devices and downloaded media. How should public libraries respond to this changing market? What is the unique or special value they add? How can they avoid being 'disintermediated'? Resources are limited for all organisations, so trade-offs have to be made. What opportunities should libraries seize? A good strategy will help make sense of these issues.

Strategy

There can be a lot of confusion around defining strategy. Strategy is not well-intentioned but vague goals. Strategy is **not**:

- vision: where we want to be - an indeterminate future goal
- mission: why the organisation exists - the motivation for being in the business
- values: what we believe in and how we will behave.

The above may be valuable but they are not strategy. I commend the plain speaking of Richard Rumelt: 'A good strategy has...a kernel [that] contains three elements: a diagnosis, a guiding policy and coherent actions.' In an interview, the guru of 'disruptive innovation', Clayton Christensen, said: 'You never want to ever say: "Well those idiots failed because they had the wrong strategy"...You have to ask: Why did they have the wrong strategy?...Almost always, they've used the wrong process to come with the strategy.' So what should the right process be? One effective approach I have used with libraries was inspired by work done by David Collis and Michael Rukstad. They argue that if the employees of an organisation cannot easily articulate the strategy then it probably isn't a good one. They break the process down into three deceptively simple elements:

- **Objective:** The single precise objective that will drive the organisation over the next 3-5 years or so. Of course, a library will pursue a number of goals but it can be very helpful to pull them together in one overriding objective. Needless to say, that objective will need to be measurable.
- **Scope:** Who are your customers? What services should you provide? Often this can be most helpfully understood by identifying what the organisation will not do: what needs it will not address. For example most public libraries do not provide free online full text access to scholarly journal articles. They leave that to academic libraries.



• **Advantage:** This is the most critical aspect in developing an effective strategy. It means really understanding the distinctive value that the organisation brings to the customer. What key advantage does a children's library service have over Magic Town?

Can you articulate your library's strategy in these terms? This clear, no nonsense, approach to strategy is not easy to put in place. It demands time spent in analysing the context, understanding customer needs and a realistic appreciation of the organisation's capabilities. I believe this will be time well spent.

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