Considerations in Organizing the Library According to the Bookstore Model: A Literature Review

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**Abstract**

A review of the literature on the topic of organizing the library according to the bookstore model reveals that most researchers are in favor of the library’s adoption of many of the non-profit characteristics that make bookstores successful. They recognize that libraries will have to change or adapt their ways if they want to compete with bookstores, retain patrons, and receive funding. However, even those in favor of the bookstore model caution libraries to maintain their goals and missions of serving the public first. Some researchers conclude that libraries should not align themselves with bookstores at all. Nevertheless, the themes that emerge from the body of literature are that the library should emulate the bookstore in terms of its aesthetic and inviting physical atmosphere, its economic decisions, its marketing externally, and its communication internally.

*Keywords*: library, bookstore model, physical atmosphere, finances, marketing, communication

Little children bound up its steps to participate in story time. Teenagers drop by after school to check their email or Facebook. Young mothers want literature on effective potty training. Senior citizens check out books on managing their finances during retirement. Public libraries provide a plethora of resources to diverse groups of people. Despite its very noble mission of fulfilling the entertainment, recreation, and information needs of library users (Rubin, 2010, p. 7), public libraries are facing difficult times in terms of declining patronage and budgets. Therefore, libraries must recreate or update their images and cater to patron preferences if they expect to survive and thrive in the twenty-first century. Some libraries began to address their needs by adopting the bookstore model, imitating the best, non-profit qualities of a bookstore in their libraries. The body of literature on this topic mostly favors libraries’ adopting the bookstore model and centers on four areas that public libraries should emulate from bookstores: physical atmosphere, finances, marketing, and communication. Of course, there is also literature that contends that bookstores and libraries fundamentally differ and that libraries should not model themselves after bookstores, though that literature is not nearly as prevalent as the literature praising the benefits of the bookstore model.

Defining the scope of this literature review began with searching full-text, peer-reviewed articles in the Library Literature and Information Science Full Text database using the search terms “bookstores and libraries.” One core article was found through Google Scholar and the references were pearl-seeded in order to identify more articles, which were located in a variety of databases and obtained by searching the ESU’s electronic journals. A master’s thesis recommended by ESU’s Library and Information Management Librarian also yielded more articles. The literature’s themes became repetitive, so the search of the literature concluded.

**The Public Library’s Role: Why It Should Act**

Many children who grew up in the 1980s and the decades preceding have fond memories of visiting the library, and though they more than likely did not realize it or appreciate it at the time, they were utilizing their freedom every time they checked out a book or participated in story time. Children growing up in the 1990s and the early twenty-first century may not have as much need to visit the library because technology has enabled them to make discoveries not in the pages of books but on the screens of the latest gadget. They view the web as more convenient for answering their questions, they may have been taught to avoid strangers, and consequently, they may feel uncomfortable engaging a librarian with their questions. What they do not realize, however, is that libraries are more important than ever. Librarians can help direct children and older patrons to the type of information that will lead them to think deeply about issues in our world today and to make informed decisions that will impact our world positively. No longer are librarians responsible only for the physical books in their library; they are also responsible for managing electronic information and helping patrons understand where to find reliable information. Helping patrons navigate the sea of irrelevant information is a crucial duty of an effective present-day librarian. Now, more than ever before, people need libraries because librarians “prepare students to be lifelong learners” (Rubin, 2010, p. 195). After all, everyone is a student in one way or another.

Even though libraries will continue to be essential, they must, nevertheless, find ways to adapt to the changing times. The literature emphasizes that public libraries need to understand their role in society. Woodward (2005) acknowledges that libraries have mission statements that contain lofty ideals that are good in theory, but can be hard to practice because there is not one bottom line on which to focus and to improve. A bookstore’s goal is to make money, and though that is not necessarily an admirable goal, they use it to sustain themselves and perhaps to achieve secondary community goals. Mackenzie (2006) points out that the Future of Public Libraries Conference highlighted the necessity of public libraries knowing their role of being enablers of learning, creativity, and community. He also contends that libraries can no longer be simply book providers, but they also must be information providers, “getting information to consumers in the way that they want” (p. 143). Mackenzie believes that bookstores and other retail stores, such as an Apple computer store, are meeting customer needs in a way that libraries should emulate. Furthermore, the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) (n.d.) report reveals that libraries need to act in order to meet the social and technical changes of the twenty-first century so that they can “be seen as an integral part of the local authorities’ wider social agenda, delivering life long learning, tackling social exclusion and providing the spaces local communities need” (p. 2). The report outlines ten trends that libraries must adopt to stay relevant, many of which come from a bookstore model, and argues that libraries must hold their own with bookstores.

**Refutation: Why the Library Should Not Use the Bookstore Model**

Despite the value and increased patronage that could result in the short term from public libraries using the bookstore model, there are those who are wary about what the focus on consumerism could do to the library’s mission of promoting citizenship in the long run (Rooney-Browne & McMenemy, 2010). Unlike Woodward (2005) who views the bookstore’s focus on a single goal as admirable, Rooney-Browne and McMenemy (2010), view the bookstore’s single goal of generating revenue as antithetical to the library’s commitment of meeting needs and serving the public good. Bookstores want to make a profit, so they would steer readers to buy bestsellers, disallowing a diverse range of stock. If libraries also pushed their patrons to bestsellers, the quality and diversity of the resources may decline. Public services, such as libraries, should not operate under the private sector’s rules because the distinction between consumerism and citizenship would be blurred. Additionally, not only would the mission and quality of materials decline, libraries following the bookstore model would suffer in terms of staff knowledge. Fialkoff (1996) contends that trained librarians are much better than bookstore clerks in their knowledge of books, that the library’s organization of Dewey Decimal or Library of Congress can help patrons find the exact book they are looking for, and that libraries can offer patrons more range and depth in out-of-print and backlist titles. He claims that “whatever the good intentions of the superstores of the world, they are, and always will be, mere shadows of a good public library” (p. 92). Finally, Kniffel (1997) decided to informally test the claim that bookstores are a threat to libraries by spending an hour in each one and asking a reference question. Though he had a pleasant experience at the bookstore, he really got what he was looking for at the library, and he distinguishes between being a customer at a bookstore and a patron at a library because the bookstore helps a person buy something, and the library helps a person know something. Certainly, libraries will need to weigh the costs before modeling themselves after bookstores, but with careful planning, they can still emulate the positive qualities of a bookstore while retaining their own positive qualities.

**Themes in the Literature: Libraries Should Emulate Bookstores’ Physical Atmosphere, Finances, Communication, and Marketing**

Though the different authors of the literature may package their argument differently or have slightly different focuses, they all agree that libraries still need to exist; they still have a place in society. Yet, according to most literature, the bookstore does some things better than a library does, and these four areas—physical atmosphere, financing, marketing, and communication—are what they do better. The public library is not “selling its soul to the devil” by modeling itself after the bookstore; rather, it is considering what aspects the bookstore does well and implementing what works for it in its community and serving its patrons in the best way possible.

**Physical Atmosphere**

People tend to return to places where they previously had positive experiences. The smell, color, lighting, and layout contribute greatly to a bookstore customer’s positive experience, and libraries would do well to emulate the atmosphere bookstores create (Rippel, 2003; Woodward, 2005) or even that other retail stores, such as an Apple computer store, create (Mackenzie, 2006). Mackenzie (2006) cites architect Peter Bohlin’s comparison of Apple stores and libraries and how both should be designed so that they “are magic to be in, places where people love to be” (p. 141). Rippel (2003) and Woodward (2005) offer librarians practical suggestions for how they can use the bookstore as a model to create ambience. Rippel (2003) complains that many libraries often smell uninvitingly of must and mildew, whereas bookstores often smell invitingly of coffee and pastries. Not only is the smell of must and mildew unpleasant, it may also be unhealthy for staff, patrons, and the books. Woodward (2005) suggests that libraries should clean their buildings often, change filters in the heating, ventilating, and air conditioning (HVAC) system often, open windows, use fans, and invest in some dehumidifiers. Because smell affects our attitude so significantly, libraries should want patrons to think positively.

Smell may not be the first thing that enters a library board member’s mind when considering how to update a library and neither may color, but color is surprisingly another simple way to attract patrons. Woodward (2005) asks library stakeholders if they can even describe the color scheme of their local library or if “one simply has a vague sense of ‘blah’” that comes from “dirty beige carpet; dingy, colorless walls; and dark book stacks” (p. 93). Though there may not be a perfect color scheme for a library, librarians need to analyze their spaces and select colors that fit the purpose and not let the paint get too old.

Lighting is important inside and outside the library both to make customers feel safe and to highlight certain areas of the library (Rippel, 2003; Woodward, 2005). Rippel (2003) argues that libraries should vary the levels of brightness so that various parts of the library and/or collection can be highlighted. Bookstores generally have low lighting overall with spotlights highlighting special displays.

Finally, libraries can learn a few tips from bookstores about the layout of the building. Rippel (2003) alludes to experts in customer behavior who claim that people entering a store drift to the right and then move through it counterclockwise. With this behavior in mind, bookstores put their bestsellers on display immediately inside the front doors on the right. The checkout counters are situated to the left of the front doors. Therefore, what greets bookstore customers is exactly what they came to the bookstore to see. Unfortunately, even though most patrons come to the library to look at books, what greets library patrons is either empty space or the circulation desk. Another layout consideration libraries should emulate is the power aisle (Rippel, 2003). Power aisles link customers to all parts of the store, and they house the major displays. Librarians should arrange their aisles and displays by observing movement patterns in their libraries and arranging major displays near the areas that get the most foot traffic.

Because a library’s goal is to meet the needs of the public in its community, it follows that they should intuitively be welcoming places. However, the CABE (n.d.) report titled “Better Public Libraries” cites Market and Opinion Research International (MORI) (n.d.) research that claims that the library’s current designs create barriers that are intimidating because of the imposing circulation desks, formal layouts, and uncomfortable furniture. The report claims that people compare their experience at the library with their experience at a bookstore, and they like the bookstore better. Therefore, the report concluded that they want libraries to be more modern and welcoming, like bookstores. The designers of a new library in Knutsford, England recognized that people want comfortable buildings and libraries, and so the resulting Knutsford Library has a 40% increase in use over the old library in town because its building was both functional and aesthetically pleasing, in part due to its maximized wall spaces for shelving and optimized daylight (CABE, n.d.). Other features of modern library architecture similar to a bookstore that the CABE (n.d.) report highlighted were street level entrances, atriums and top-floor cafes, bookshelves at human scale, the “living room in the city,” domestic or club furniture, open-plan design and circulation, contemporary cultural market-place, and networked space. These features certainly would be more inviting for library patrons and would help libraries change their image and draw once reluctant people in.

Even though the title of Steve Coffman’s March 1998 article in *American Libraries* is titled “What if You Ran Your Library Like a Bookstore,” he opens his argument by asserting that it is actually the bookstores that are emulating libraries’ ambience because the large number of books, public spaces and restrooms, and story time and summer reading programs encourage customers to linger in the store. This piece of literature is the only one to contend that bookstores had something to learn from libraries in terms of the physical atmosphere. However, his article quickly departs from praising the public library, and his main concern is addressed in the next section.

**Finances**

Coffman (1998) reveals that bookstores can do almost everything libraries can do and more on a much smaller budget. Bookstores cost about 30% less to run than libraries do; staff salaries and stretching public-service hours account for this difference. Bookstore staffs are trained to do perform multiple duties at the store, while librarians are trained to do specialized services, and that specialization is why libraries must hire more workers and pay them more than bookstores pay their workers. Coffman believes that by hiring fewer workers at lower salaries and stretching their hours over increased hours of operation, the library would be able to purchase more books and technology and offer more programs. Though Coffman’s proposal would hurt librarians financially, he claims that, more importantly, the patrons would not notice much difference with the decrease in true reference librarians. He cites data from the National Center for Education Statistics’ *Public Libraries in the United States* (1994) that shows that library patrons asked just one reference question for every six books that were loaned out and that about 69% of patrons never ask a reference question. Therefore, Coffman believes that booksellers, who have an extensive knowledge of books and literature, would easily be able to assist questions about books, which is what patrons need 85% of the time. Even when patrons do ask a question, he points out the library literature on “half-right reference” suggests that reference librarians cannot answer or produce an incorrect answer half the time.

Of course, Coffman’s cynical view of the value of degreed librarians misses some key issues. Libraries are responsible for maintaining the records and knowledge of our world, preserving it for generations to come; they are not just responsible for promoting the latest bestseller and demoting it to a sidewalk sale when it is off the bestseller list. To preserve that knowledge, workers must be trained in the complex organization systems of the library and archives and must be well-versed in metadata, something that only degreed librarians can truly do well. Additionally, librarians may have more of an incentive to truly serve their customers than bookstore employees do. Woodward (2005) claims that librarians willingly accept less than ideal salaries and working conditions because they truly want to help people. She questions, “Isn’t it possible that we can provide better service [than bookstores] because we can bring more of ourselves to the job?” (Woodward, 2005, p. 40). Perhaps skimping on trained, degreed librarians is not the answer to saving cash-strapped libraries. There are plenty of other ways for libraries to rejuvenate themselves on a very small budget.

Woodward (2005) argues that the greater visibility a public library has, the larger its budget will be, and “the effort will more than pay for itself” (p. 205). She provides thirteen relatively inexpensive tips from removing out-of-date signs and making new ones to creating a children’s nook in order to revitalize the library. Libraries must make a list of priorities and at the top of that list is satisfying the patrons’ needs, so they need to reallocate budgetary items so that the public services will be minimally affected. Finally, as argued above, libraries cannot skimp on trained, degreed librarians, but they also cannot deal with tight budgets without increasing their volunteer staff (Woodward, 2005). Volunteers may be useful in sprucing up the ambience of the library and working with paid staff to work through Woodward’s thirteen steps.

**Marketing**

Marketing is a crucial aspect of the bookstore, and it should be a crucial aspect of the library as well. Despite the negativity and focus on commercialism that often accompanies marketing and advertising, Woodward (2005) maintains that libraries must do it for two main reasons. First, the definition of marketing embraces the idea that it helps people understand what their customers want and helps them provide those services to the customer. Second, people really do need the resources and services offered by libraries, but many people do not know that. Woodward (2005) posits that just like libraries often do not have a clear mission statement, they do not have a clear marketing plan. Creating a clear marketing plan, then, is obviously the first step in the process to attracting patrons to the library.

The literature emphasizes that one way that libraries can draw people in is through their websites. It certainly seems as though bookstores and Amazon have mastered the web and have gained many loyal customers through their online services. Since the majority of this literature was published, the web has actually been so successful that it has forced some physical bookstore chains, such as Borders, to close their doors. Librarians pride themselves on disseminating and diffusing knowledge, so it only makes sense that libraries would have effective websites in order to reach more people with that knowledge. It is not “just a trendy frill worthy of scant attention” (Woodward, 2005, p. 159) because patrons may not be physically attending the library, but they are using it online because they can have access to databases and contact with librarians through e-chat. Woodward (2005) suggests that the library must identify a community of users who may not gravitate toward the library building but would take advantage of a website. The group that most often fits this profile is teenagers, and so librarians should have them in mind when they design their web resources. Mackenzie (2006) promotes the idea of following a retail store’s website design by making the catalog user-friendly and by allowing people to pay fees and book meeting rooms online. For example, the Phoenix Public Library in Arizona uses some of the same software that online retail stores use, including retail-friendly headings instead of the Library of Congress Subject headings so that users can feel more comfortable navigating the website. Finally, library websites could also imitate Amazon’s reviews and reader’s advisory (Orkiszewski, 2005). Orkiszewski suggests that libraries could either write their own reviews or link to Amazon content. If libraries want to distinguish themselves and win people over, originality could be the key, and it would promote a sense of community and relevancy if local librarians were the ones recommending the books. Perhaps, a patron could read a review online, quickly visit the library to check it out, and then give his or her own feedback to the librarian when the patron returned the book. Creating user-friendly websites certainly can be advantageous to libraries and have the potential to be even better than bookstore websites because of the breadth of knowledge librarians could put on there and know how to organize it effectively.

Even though websites and social networking sites are the primary focus of marketing and advertising in the twenty-first century, other kinds of print promotional materials are also important for libraries to consider as part of their marketing plans. The library need not hire an expensive professional to get the job done. Desktop publishing allows librarians or library volunteers to create professional looking publications that will inform the public of various events and programs going on at the library. Woodward (2005) provides some steps for librarians to take to create a product that could rival a bookstore’s publicity department, but it does take commitment.

**Communication**

Once libraries have marketed externally, they can market internally by promoting their people and visions like bookstores do. Effective communication by librarians and signage is crucial for patrons to have a good experience in the library. For example, though a librarian must be very organized and disciplined, he or she must also relate to and sympathize with patrons, practicing customer service techniques that are often taught in retail stores (Tarbett, 2011). Megan Tarbett, once a merchandise/department manager for Barnes and Noble, is now the circulations library assistant for the West Virginia Library Commission Reference Library, and she offers five customer service lessons she learned from the bookstore that she uses in the library every day: put the book in the patron’s hands, look up a book requested by a patron in another library if it is not in your own, get patrons quickly through check-in and check-out, greet every patron with eye contact and a smile, and don’t take it personally if a patron is in a bad mood (p. 335). Once librarians establish rapport with their patrons, the patrons will return the favor with loyalty and will return to the library (Dalmau, 2002). Reading is a shared love between librarians and library patrons, so there is little convincing that librarians must do to show the value of books. Nevertheless, if they can market books and reading through an intense and real passion of their own, they are marketing their own libraries. Patrons need to see that librarians truly believe they are “fortunate to work with books. There is a higher value on this pursuit than many others and these notions are highly marketable” (Dalmau, 2002, p. 30).

Another way to keep patrons coming back to the library is through in-house communication, such as effective signage that focuses on visibility and color contrast (Rippel, 2003; Woodward 2005) and the organization of information. In fact, Woodward (2005) asserts that signs are one of the most important ways to facilitate communication between the library and its users because “the effectiveness of the library depends on its ability to tell the public what it is all about, to publicize its mission, to encourage the use of its materials, and, most of all, to make sure users have a positive, productive experience” (p. 119). Bookstores do well in having particular shapes, colors, and designs that designate certain things in the store, and so libraries should consider having that same kind of uniformity and to make sure that the signs are in the right location. Effective signage requires planning; librarians should never make random decisions when it comes to creating and placing signs. Rippel (2003) cites studies that the colors and the shape and size of the letters on the sign are important for readability. Black letters on a yellow background and black letters on a white background top the list for readability, while blue on yellow and white on green are least readable. Though no one can argue about the necessity of signs, Rippel (2003) notes that Barnes and Noble does not use too many signs because they expect staff to interact personally with customers, and librarians should have that goal as well. Finally, public libraries may want to consider changing their cataloguing system to be more user-friendly. For instance, some public libraries are following the bookstore model of arranging adult fiction by category or genre, which may help some patrons and confuse others (Maker, 2008). If a library did categorize by genre, librarians would have to separate popular fiction from literature, which actually becomes more of an issue of deciding which reader market to target rather than deciding what genre the books fits in. Furthermore, many librarians would not like to make decisions for patrons regarding which books are supposedly better than others. Nevertheless, changing the way books are categorized from the traditional Dewey Decimal Classification or the Library of Congress Classification scheme to the alphabetical or genre classification scheme that bookstores have is something libraries may want to consider as a way to attract more patrons.

**Conclusion**

No one can deny that the public library offers exciting possibilities: the library “is not a shop but it offers people as much choice as a department store;” the library “is not a college but it’s a place where you can ask to learn any skill you like” (CABE, n.d., p. 12). But unfortunately in the digital age, people are decreasingly likely to visit the library and take advantage of its services. Though the bookstore model may not be the perfect model for a public library, or it may not entirely fit the needs of a particular public library, the underlying issue of the library adapting to meet the needs of its users in the twenty-first century remains. Even Rooney-Browne and McMenemy (2010), who expressed quite a bit of skepticism about the bookstore model because of the associated commercialization that could occur, acknowledge that “unless public libraries pursue alternative revenue streams it seems unlikely that they will be able to develop their spaces and services to reflect societal changes and shifts in user demands” (p. 463). The bookstore model, despite its flaws, offers some exciting possibilities of ways that public libraries can enter bravely and triumphantly into the twenty-first century as they maintain a level of relevancy that society cannot deny.

The literature’s view of the bookstore’s physical atmosphere, marketing, and communication as transferable to the library is strong, while the view of the bookstore’s finances is a little weak and may overlook the necessity of maintaining the elements that help libraries to be more than just non-profit bookstores.

Library literature would be well served if research on the bookstore model could be applied to other libraries, such as academic and school libraries. Both of those types of libraries are also losing users, and they have an even more specific user group that could benefit from the best qualities of the bookstore.

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