

Reading & reading audiences

Miranda McKearney

Organisations who neglect their core audiences do so at their peril, and for some years there was a danger that libraries were neglecting their readers, particularly adult readers of imaginative literature. The emphasis was all on information provision and in recent years on ICT. This was not a good idea, as any marketing person will tell you.

At the heart of what most people want from a library is access to books - I talked yesterday to the head of DCMS's Libraries Development Branch who had been doing a seminar with young people, couldn't get them enthused at all about community information and so on, but they lit up once they started to talk about books, teenage reading groups etc.

There are an awful lot of readers using libraries for accessing a good read, with a quite breathtaking level of transactions.

16.7 million people borrow books at least monthly

Libraries loan 501 million books a year

It's easy when contemplating gloomy news of cuts to forget just how significant this level of activity is. Book issues may be falling, but they still represent remarkable levels of activity. If you compare library loans of fiction with the number of novels sold through the book trade you begin to get a feel for the scale of the library operation:

52% of books borrowed from libraries are fiction - 262m

80m are purchased each year

It is possible to claim that libraries are the UK's most significant providers of the reading experience. A great many key constituencies are interested in readers, whether as citizens, customers, learners, and as the National Year of Reading showed, they have become a concern of central government. So this is vital ground for libraries to lay claim to.

If they claim this key cultural role of supporting and developing readers, they can place themselves very centrally on the agendas of other sectors. I was recently involved in a piece of mapping research commissioned by The Arts Council of England which looked at the relationship between libraries and other sectors. At first the whole picture was extremely confusing. (Missing acetate) But if you shift the focus of this map to centre on the reader things become much clearer. Libraries' purpose is to serve individual users, and most people using libraries still do so as readers. The confusing map suddenly becomes much clearer once you put the end user, the reader, at the heart of things.

In relation to readers libraries can claim a completely unique and central role. When the map is redrawn in this way it becomes clear that other sectors wanting to work with readers cannot ignore this central role. The public and the private sectors can reap many benefits by working in partnership with libraries and their readers.

The public library service is a national service delivered on a local basis. It offers the reach of a strategic national inclusive and democratic cultural agency reinforced by local knowledge. This is a rare and powerful combination within the cultural sector.

Let's look at the qualitative and quantitative evidence for this central role. Libraries deliver the reading experience through an unrivalled network of community sites -

4020 library sites,

684 mobiles

17466 service points in prisons, hospitals etc

They are extremely well used And they reach a broad spectrum of users AB 22% etc. Looked at qualitatively, libraries have a special relationship with readers.

All this work makes an important contribution to national life. Libraries stand to attract heavyweight support and heavyweight funding if they can demonstrate to policy makers just what a key contribution it is.

So how are libraries working with readers? There is a whole new movement, particularly with adult readers which is beginning to make a real impact. This is called reader development. This bit of jargon has penetrated even central government thinking and the DCMS has just announced that the focus of the Wolfson Fund is being switched from funding IT library initiatives to reader development projects. What is reader development?

NEW PARTNERSHIP STRUCTURES

Working from the confident basis that libraries' work with readers is hugely important, how can this core work be used as the basis for partnerships and innovate outreach work with key national players?

During the National Year of Reading two new organisations came into being which have been doing interesting work. If you work in public libraries you're probably aware of a growing interest in the potential of library development agencies. Central government is certainly interested - Chris Smith launched the feasibility study for a regional model - the London Library Development Agency, last autumn and the post of Director has just been filled.

These development agencies, LaunchPad and The Reading Partnership cover advocacy, partnership

projects, research, policy and national library promotions, they have different areas of focus. LaunchPad concentrates on profiling libraries' with children and The Reading Partnership on libraries' work with adult readers. are some of the things they've been doing in the last 18 months.

- The ASDA Big Read
- Waterstone's and libraries survey of the nation's reading habits
- The Reading Safari - national summer reading challenge for children
- Public Libraries & Readers - a new advocacy pack
- Kick Off! - a male reading promotion with Random House
- An advocacy campaign showcasing libraries' reader development work
- Industry briefings for publishers on how to penetrate the opaque library world

They have rapidly demonstrated the power of the library development agency approach. LaunchPad, for instance, took a £25,000 grant from the Year of Reading and with it developed a £500,000 *Reaching Parents* campaign - a library outreach programme in partnership with ASDA, Random House, Ford and London Transport.

I'll talk a little more about the ASDA relationship because it has important implications for how libraries can use the reader relationship to broker partnerships with major national organisations.

The main focus of the ASDA/public library partnership was a massive two week reading promotion, aimed at supporting families in developing their children's reading, awareness of the creative world of books. ASDA put up £250,000 which funded library outreach work reaching 6million shoppers each week.

The ASDA Big Read involved all 227 stores working with their local library service. ASDA staff were trained in storytelling, and the fortnight's promotion involved 450 storyteller visits to stores, 120 mobiles in car parks and 1000 ASDA & library staff. 2 million "busy parents" reading advice leaflets were distributed. Activity ranged from Scottish Ballet dancing out stories in Livingstone to Estelle Morris MP visiting a Birmingham store.

The person at ASDA Head Office running The Big Read said 'like many companies we are always looking for ways to work with the community. Because of the Year of Reading we were interested in teaming up with libraries but needed a way to work with them nationally. LaunchPad offered the chance to work with a small team who understood commercial priorities but who could also put us in touch with the whole library network. That was very appealing. Our involvement with libraries has shown us how to provide an ideal route to reaching the community".

In the run up to all this, ASDA staff were trained in story reading and exposed to the inspiration of professional storytellers, although we've concentrated on story reading skills. This was to raise their awareness of the spoken word and reading as parents in their own right, so personal development from

a corporate perspective. It is also to enable them to link back to the community through the library and many will be taking part in library storytimes. This has turned out to be a crucial piece of development work as it has produced a very simple mechanism by which business volunteers can work with libraries.

Why did ASDA get involved? We went in through their Corporate PR Department - we'd picked up news of a talk an ASDA person had done to a library conference, challenging libraries to look at the retail sector for lessons on being user friendly, growing book sales etc.

Then months later we got to present to the full Home and Leisure and Marketing team, we took our least likely looking librarians, including salsa dancing Trish from the LA. We guessed the right buttons to press and we weren't right on all of them but we were right on enough.

Corporate PR - community contributions social responsibility / back to basics

Corporate PR - Year of Reading

Staff development - personal and in the community

Book sales

Access to the library audience.

This meant that we accessed three pots of money - colleague development, corporate PR' home and leisure

Sitting between the entire public library system and the whole of ASDA is not a comfortable experience, but we found that although the whole reader development approach takes a lot of explaining, it also really captures the imagination of the commercial sector. There was lots we weren't able to do with ASDA for logistical reasons, but they were captivated by the breadth of our presentation which they thought was really imaginative. They loved, even if they couldn't do, the idea of book recommendations nestling in the fruit section - Oranges are not the Only Fruit or the Hungry Caterpillar in with the vegetables. And the idea of their Catalina Voucher incentive card triggering a book recommendation through certain purchases.

If libraries have a future then partnerships is one of the areas that must be developed. I believe they're a powerful advocacy tool, and that through partnerships of this kind libraries can access funding, raise their profile, shift that obdurate image, make friends in high places.

Libraries are the readers champion - as Terence Blacker said in the Independent "It has been left to librarians, the unsung heroes of the book scene, to counteract the idle snootiness of the literary establishment." and reading can be at the heart of these partnerships.

