Contagious marketing

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Source: *American Libraries*, JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2014, Vol. 45, No. 1/2 (JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2014), pp. 32-35

Published by: American Library Association

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/24602343

By Peggy Barber

Contagious marketing

How libraries can get more
word-of-mouth buzz

We live in a world of communication clutter. From the internet to endless TV commercials, newspapers, magazines, signage, the inside and outside of buses—ads are everywhere. But consider: What makes you decide to try a new restaurant, read a certain book, or see a particular movie? Is it because you saw an ad, or because a trusted friend, neighbor, or family member recommended it?

The most powerful marketing and communication strategy is word-of-mouth marketing (WOMM). But it's a big step to go from having just a few people talking about your library to having your message go viral, when everyone is talking about it.

Jonah Berger, associate professor of marketing at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School of Business, thinks he knows how to make that happen. In his book *Contagious: Why Things Catch On* (Simon & Schuster, 2013), Berger writes: "Contagious products and ideas are like forest fires. They can't happen without hundreds, if not thousands, of regular Joes and Janes passing the product or message along. So why did thousands of people transmit these products and ideas?" He says six basic principles (STEPPS) make things, from YouTube videos to policy initiatives, contagious:

■ **Social currency:** People care about how they look to others. Find the inner remarkability and make people feel like insiders.

■ **Triggers:** Top-of-mind means tip-of-tongue. Trigger people to think about your idea frequently.

■ **Emotion:** When we care, we share. Focus on feelings rather than function.

■ **Public:** Built to show, built to grow. Design initiatives that advertise themselves.

■ **Practical value:** News you can use. Package knowledge so that others can easily pass it on.

■ **Stories:** Information travels under what seems like idle chatter. Find a story that people want to tell that carries your idea along for the ride.

Most of these STEPPS should be easy for libraries, but librarians must make them happen. Take these principles and ask yourself the following questions (and add some of your own):

1. **Social currency:** How can libraries make people feel they have access to cool things before others do?

2. **Triggers:** What will prompt people to think of libraries?

3. **Emotion:** How can you deepen people's emotional connection to library services?

4. **Public visibility:** How can people recognize that others are library users or supporters?

5. **Practical value:** What useful information do libraries provide? How can that be packaged so that people absolutely must tell their friends?

6. **Stories:** How can you inspire people to share their library stories?

Marketing is all about how libraries can get organized, focused, and consistent in developing, communicating, and delivering their programs and services. Marketing is about:

■ **Listening.** It's not merely telling or selling; it's two-way communication.

■ **Them, not us.** It's about the library's community. Libraries build their services and collections based on what users want and need.

■ **People, not stuff.** It's more than a list of items in your catalog. It's how people benefit from your services.

Advocacy, advertising, public relations, partnerships, and word of mouth are a few essential marketing tools and strategies. But at the core of them all is the concept of two-way communication—listening as well as telling and selling.

Building a MARKETING COMMUNICATION plan

Use this outline as a map for developing your plan. Start with a one-year plan.

1. **Introduction.** Briefly explain why you are proposing this plan. Identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT). Include relevant research and observations.

2. **Communication goals.** The dream, the Big Picture. Don't list more than three.

3. **Objectives.** List no more than five achievable, measurable outcomes.

4. **Positioning statement.** What do you want people to think and feel about the library? What is your mission? What do you offer that the competition doesn't? Example: "The library is the best first stop for expert help in connecting children and youth to learning and discovery."

5. **Key message.** In 10 words or less, what is the most important thing you want people to know or do? Example: "Your library is the very best place to start."

6. **Key audiences.** Identify your audiences, both external and internal. Be specific.

7. **Strategies, tactics, and tools.** How will you listen and deliver the message? Core strategies include media publicity, displays, programming, special events, web pages, social media, email, direct mail, partnerships, outreach, and word of mouth. Develop an action plan and budget.

8. **Evaluation measures.** How will you know what worked and what did not? Refer to your objectives.

Marketing is a team sport. It starts at the top with the library director who must lead, or at least launch, a planning team that includes a handful of staff members at various levels, and perhaps also trustees and Friends. When this team works together on its marketing and communication plan, its members will own it, become its passionate spokespeople, and help build an even wider team. A suggested outline appears in the sidebar on page 33. It's tried, tested, easy to follow, and most importantly, it works.

Remember Berger's STEPPS principles. The most powerful device in your toolkit is word-of-mouth marketing. Why is that so effective?

There is no more powerful communication technique than one person talking with and listening to another, whether it's on social media (good) or live and in person (best). WOMM tops the chart. Not only

can libraries afford it, but they can also do it better than big commercial brands. What they can't do is wait for it to happen automatically. It is a tool. They have to use it.

Here are the elements you need to put WOMM to work: a good product, great customer service, a plan, a clear and consistent message, a prepared and committed sales force, and people willing to testify. None of these requirements should be difficult for libraries.

Many libraries are already using WOMM. As early as 2007, two library systems in Illinois received a federal Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) grant for training, planning, and implementing a WOMM approach. With the help of Library Communication Strategies (LCS), my consulting business in Chicago, 35 libraries participated and produced successful, measurable results. Their success was the inspiration for *Building a Buzz, Libraries and Word-of-Mouth Marketing* (ALA Editions, 2010), which Linda Wallace and I coauthored. *Building a Buzz* shares the experience of real WOMM projects in public, academic, and school libraries. Time and again, libraries discovered that staff education and involvement turned out to be the key components in completing successful projects.
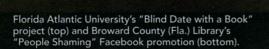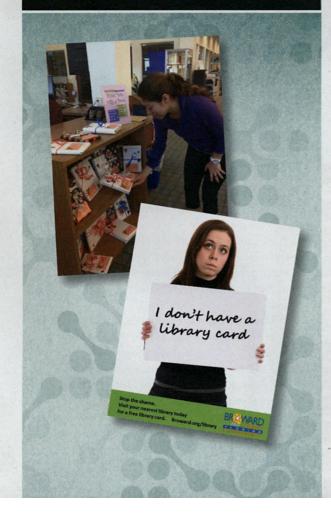
Recently the Southeast Florida Library Information Network (SEFLIN) contacted LCS to play a role in its 2012–2013 WOMM project, "Building Capacity: Teaching Libraries about Marketing and Grant Development," funded by an LSTA grant. The project was developed in response to needs that were identified in SEFLIN's strategic planning activity. Similar to the Illinois plan of action, LCS started with a WOMM training workshop, followed by development and implementation of a plan by each participating library. LCS reviewed and commented on its plans, kept in touch via a discussion list, and concluded the project and shared results at a "Word-of-Mouth Marketing Power Celebration" workshop in May 2013.

"Our people were empowered to do something and make changes," SEFLIN Director Jeannette Smithee says. "Too often you go to a training program and nothing happens. This was a training model with action. It made them use the information. They now have the WOMM template in place, with steps and tools, and have the benefit of lessons learned. They understand the importance of turning loyal customers into active champions." The SEFLIN team has produced a detailed report on the project.

Here's one good example. Broward County Library (BCL) focused its WOMM plan on promoting 24/7 online re-

Staff education and involvement are the **KEY COMPONENTS** in completing successful projects.

Florida Atlantic University's "Blind Date with a Book" project (top) and Broward County (Fla.) Library's "People Shaming" Facebook promotion (bottom).

I don't have a library card

Stop the shame.
Visit your nearest library today for a free library card. Broward.org/library

sources for customers. In 2011, these services were branded as BCL WoW (Without Walls). In his plan, E-Services Manager Stephen Grubb made the team's WOMM goals clear: "Staff members on the front line can play a vital role in communicating online services to our customers. In addition, customers can champion the library's cause by marketing these services to their friends and family." Library staff members receive a monthly email that announces the WoW of the month they are encouraged to promote. Each branch is given a supply of attractive palm cards for the service, with simple instructions to make it easy for the customer to give it a try. Messages about the featured service are also posted on Facebook and Twitter.

In his project summary, Grubb provided statistics on the use of six online tools. Since the plan was put into action in 2012, BCL has noticed an increase in the use of its online service offerings. For example, Freegal music downloads increased 400%, and online tutoring sessions via Brainfuse and Zinio magazine downloads more than doubled. The plan runs through 2014, the 40th anniversary of the library, when 40 different library services will be showcased (one each week) at the top of the library's home page, in social media, and in its *eConnections* weekly newsletter. The Weekly WoW service received an award from the National Association of County Information Officers for the design of its web banner.

BCL is actively seeking "library superfans" and has begun sharing several of its powerful stories in the library's print newsletter, *Connections*, and on Facebook. In addition, the library system is creating a buzz with its humorous "People Shaming" series of photos (see the example on page 34). When asked if WOMM has been useful, Grubb says, "Many staff members were already spreading the word" but this campaign has made it easier for them to do so by simply giving them the tools to market services to customers, family, and friends. "The results have been tremendous," he says.

So how can you use word-of-mouth marketing to make your libraries contagious and essential? You command a vast array of users who can be mobilized to send the message that libraries are mainstream, not marginal. You can put WOMM to work by developing a plan, building a team, empowering staff, Friends, trustees, volunteers, and users to tell their friends—and bring their friends. It's only a few STEPPS away. ▌

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Broward County Library's promotional materials for its online resources, BCL WoW (Without Walls).