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INTRODUCTION

Why This Book?

If you think this book is about “how to develop a logo and a tagline” or how to make yourself a recognized name in school library land, please return it before you crack the spine. But if you have the idea that there is more to school library branding than that, settle in and be prepared to be challenged. We suspect that the tagline and logo will likely emerge later if you want them. Name recognition may also occur. However, we decided to write this book because the specific challenge that we, as a profession, need to address is the importance of developing the school library brand in, of, and by itself in alignment with the National School Library Standards for Learners, School Librarians, and School Libraries. This is not a book about creating a personal brand—rather, it is about embracing a brand for the school library and the school librarian.

Throughout the book as we introduce and discuss various terms related to branding, we put them in bold type to underscore their conceptual importance and indicate their inclusion in the glossary. Additionally, every chapter provides a list of guiding questions to assist you in undertaking school library branding, a rebrand, or a brand rehabilitation.

Overall, we provide a focused exploration of and emphasis on brand behavior—its impact, influence, and integrity—including ways in which to use existing American Association of School Librarians (AASL) personas and develop additional learner personas (such as trauma-sensitive learners, special groups, and nonusers) through a brand audit. We also incorporate the use of data and community demographics analysis to assist the everyday school librarian in improving practice, thus increasing positive perceptions of the impact of our work. We further underscore that the focus is not so much on transforming image as it is on building brand credibility through customer service that is legendary.

Think about how often schools and school libraries have been advised or even admonished to act more like a business, recognizing that stakeholders expect us to provide competent management and effective and efficient use of resources to meet deadlines and produce results. Although we can counter such advice by noting that supporting the individual learning needs of humans who are in various stages of intellectual, physical, social, and emotional development is not like turning out a finite product or service, we are nonetheless in a business—the education/
information business. And to stay in business, we need a solid reputation for positive interactions and return on investments. In business, branding is a critical component of a customer’s decision to use a particular service or product. In the digital age, this decision is compounded by other customers’ experiences and interactions with a brand, which can make or break that brand. Compliments as well as complaints and opinions about a brand not only are spread by word of mouth but are online and viewable through a simple web search or through a wide variety of social networks. There is no way to simply ignore or dismiss customer dissatisfaction. Transparency and authenticity are the only means to survive and thrive in this digital landscape. All these societal and cultural shifts impact our business space as well. So, though this book is designed to get everyone thinking about the school library brand, we underscore that the focus is not so much on transforming the school library’s image as it is on building credibility through ongoing improvement and exemplary brand behavior. To align with and connect to the AASL Standards, we also present and analyze successful and unsuccessful business examples as well as school library examples to provide a framework of reference. We discuss the work of experts in the business and corporate world such as Jim Collins (*Good to Great*, 2001), John Kotter and Holger Rathgeber (*Our Iceberg Is Melting*, 2005), and Seth Godin to assist you in further understanding the importance of the business aspects of the school library.

Above all, however, this book is designed to help move us outside our comfort zone—and that is hard. As AASL past president, well-known researcher, and respected educator Ken Haycock once observed to us, attributing Mark Twain, “No one really likes change except a wet baby.” Nonetheless, the competitive, disruptive, innovative nature of the information access and education marketplace must be recognized, and we must be ready to respond through the development of strategic, prioritized action plans that help overcome perceived or real brand barriers. Likewise, we must maintain, expand, and encourage active two-way communication with our stakeholders and acknowledge that they have a say in what happens. We need to figure out a way to make the school library and school librarian undisputedly relevant and essential, or we will be innovated out of existence by someone else who gets it. If we don’t embrace this challenge, we may well end up like other relics of the past, with our dusty, fossilized remains on display in a museum where somewhat bemused tourists snap a photo or two and contemplate what we must have been like.

AASL has been striving to grow the *National School Library Standards* brand, of which we are all a part. The organization has worked on brand identity—the visible elements (such as color, design, logotype, name, symbol) that together identify and distinguish the brand in the consumer’s or customer’s mind—and you may be doing that as well. However, as school librarians, we are always rethinking how to convey who we are and what we do and why both are important to our publics. To
compete and remain viable, it is necessary to develop a name brand because, as a profession,

- we can help transform learning and community;
- we can provide access to resources that help level the playing field and close the literacy divides—foundational (reading, writing, and meaning making), digital, cultural, media, visual, ethical, data, game, computational, health and financial, and civic;
- we can impact student achievement; and
- we can provide a safe and secure environment for all learners.

So let’s begin and consider the opportunities and the possibilities that lie before us. Although we’ll glance over our shoulder at the past and lessons learned, our goal is to move forward, with a keen understanding of why and how our brand matters and the determination to ensure that others value it, too.
Brand or Brand Behavior?

What do you think of when you hear the term brand? Most of us would associate that term with a particular name, logo, tagline, and perhaps unique design elements that an individual, a company, an association, an organization, or other entity has developed and uses to distinguish itself, or its particular product or service, from others. The term also includes marketing and merchandizing to present and promote the product or service. When all these components are combined, the result is referred to as brand identity.

However, brand is much more than identity. This is especially true for school libraries. The school library brand is based on others’ expectations about school librarians and school libraries given their experiences at points of contact with us. As a profession we need to work on our brand identity. More importantly, however, school librarians need to concentrate on our brand behavior and deliver positive interactions in every encounter with our target audience. We need to provide quality products and services, not just say we do.

Branding is often the critical factor in an individual’s decision to use or not use a product or service. And particularly in the digital age, user interaction with a brand can make or break it. This interface is referred to as brand experience. Jeff Bezos was right on the money when he reportedly observed, “Your brand is what other people say about you when you’re not in the room.” Praise as well as complaints about a brand are communicated and shared through a variety of websites and social networks. It is just a matter of typing a brand name into a search engine to discover a myriad of reviews and opinions about it. As a result of this participatory societal and cultural shift, it is increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to conceal or obscure customer dissatisfaction. Businesses recognize that technology and communication
channels have empowered the average person and that transparency and authenticity are the only means to survive and thrive in a digital environment. This shift has impacted the school library “business” space, too. Although most schools and school libraries are considered nonprofit, make no mistake about it: school libraries are in business—the information and education business—and school librarians need to uphold a solid reputation for positive experiences, interactions, and returns on investments if we are to survive in an increasingly competitive environment.

Unfortunately, school library brand identity has often been shaped by forces outside the profession. The stereotypical image of a librarian projected by the advertising world has what is called stickiness in marketing circles—that is, it is an idea so memorable that it stays in the mind of the consumer or end user. “A brand is a psychological construct held in the minds of all those aware of the branded product, person, organization, or movement” (Kylander and Stone 2012). The advertising world’s perception of a librarian has had great staying power in the minds of the public. As noted by Gretchen Keer and Andrew Carlos (2015) in American Libraries, “There are numerous librarian stereotypes, with the most recognizable being the middle-aged, bun-wearing, comfortably shod, shushing librarian. Others include the sexy librarian, the superhero librarian, and the hipster or tattooed librarian.” And as if that is not enough, school librarians are also often up against the user’s memory of an underperforming school librarian, or worse yet, lack of memory of ever encountering a school librarian and, therefore, no idea of what should be expected. It is a struggle to change the impression some people have about librarians. So much so that many of us are singularly obsessed with it at times and go all out in our effort to change perceptions—usually by renaming ourselves or trying to stand out from the crowd by concentrating on our personal image instead of elevating the overall image of the profession. After all, “it takes more than a hat to be a cowboy” (Godin 2009). It is as if we think by giving ourselves a new name or being seen as one of the cool kids, we will somehow magically transform into a new and improved version of librarianship without acquiring the requisite skills, competencies, and dispositions that are the hallmark of professionalism. The only way to improve the school library brand is to assess where one is in terms of development and do the work needed to get to the next level. The only audience that school librarians need to impress is the learning community that we serve. So where do we go from here?

Creating a Brand That Sticks

The notion that schools and school libraries are confined to a physical space has been upended for some time now. Just as the business world has evolved to embrace e-commerce and two-way, participatory digital communication to remain relevant,
schools and school libraries have likewise needed to adapt to also include a virtual presence and employ both traditional and social media outlets to connect with defined audiences. However, we have not necessarily recognized what the commercial marketplace has always had to contend with—and that is the competitive nature of the landscape in which we now exist. There may have been a time when the provision of learning opportunities, information brokering, and curated collections of resources were the exclusive domain of the formal academic community, but that time is over. Learning and information are everywhere. If you have access to a smartphone, you have free access to a wealth of knowledge provided by a host of experts in almost every discipline via platforms such as YouTube, Khan Academy, and Duolingo. In addition, massive open online courses (MOOCs) provided by individual colleges and universities as well as services such as Blackboard, the Canvas Network, and Coursera allow open access to courses of study, with the option of receiving credit for a reasonable fee. And there are professional development and continuing education providers such as LinkedIn Learning (formerly Lynda) serving certification and recertification needs for licensure requirements. So who needs librarians when in many instances these providers offer credible services and meet the wants and must-haves of their users in an efficient and effective way? How do we convince people that what we provide is indeed different and important to them?

We know that the link between strong school libraries and student achievement is well documented. We also know that

[rounded in standards and best practice, school libraries are an integral component of the educational landscape. The school library provides an environment in which teaching and learning are the primary emphases. The school library provides a space and place for personalized learner success; learners are encouraged to explore questions of personal and academic relevance. Under the direction of a qualified school librarian, school libraries are instrumental in fostering literacy and teaching inquiry skills to support lifelong learning. (AASL 2018b, 54)]

The evidence is clear that school librarians and school libraries make a difference. What is needed now is unrelenting focus on attaining that elusive stickiness that comes with brand loyalty because when the essential conditions are in place, nobody does it better.

Knowing that the product school librarians and libraries provide is valuable and needed is one thing. The more important question for us is how do we ensure that the library stands out in the noisy space that is the school, where everyone is constantly jockeying for position, support, and resources (Ibrisevic 2019)? The best way to emerge from being boxed in or marginalized is by being memorable and by being intentional in the development of services that address end users’ needs and wants. We must focus on user engagement and positive experiences to develop loyalty and trust, knowing that increased engagement will lead to support, funding,
and stickiness. Building an effective and memorable brand relies on this baseline understanding of the direction in which your audiences are moving and on ensuring that they understand why you are relevant to the successful achievement of their goals. Remember this phrase: *Every encounter and transaction must support brand expectations*. For school librarians that means our dealings with stakeholders must always be positive or redressed to favor the user or provide a learning opportunity.

**Brand Perception**

As you reflect on your school library brand, consider what your stakeholders currently expect from their perceptions of your brand. First, who is the audience for your brand? Better, who are your audiences? Of course, we think of our learners first, but, to be most effective with our learners, we need to work closely with all stakeholders. Other educators expect us to design and co-teach inquiry collaborative lessons and units, and they count on us for collection development that meets all learners’ information and reading needs (AASL 2018b, 60). Parents or guardians want their children to find books in all formats that will excite them to read, have opportunities to develop critical thinking skills, and have access to technology with instruction that will help their children be safe and productive online. Administrators—building principals, school library supervisors (if you are lucky enough to have one), superintendents, business managers—want a school library that is aligned with the district’s mission and that is staffed by an expert in literacy, digital and information literacy instruction, collection development, and inclusion. They need an educational leader as their school librarian.

**RELEVANCE MATTERS**

As [school] librarians, we can offer the very best hammer in the world, but if your principal, your teachers, or your parents really need and want a wrench, a screwdriver, or a hacksaw, having a hammer, no matter how wonderful, is simply immaterial. They get it that you have a great hammer—it just isn’t relevant or important to them. Even if you think it darned well should be.

—Doug Johnson, retired school library and technology director, Minnesota ([Blue Skunk Blog](https://blue-skunk.blogspot.com), May 29, 2013)

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Perception is everything. Are we seen by our stakeholders as relevant to what they want and need? We want them to perceive that the school librarian and library are crucial to the school and that we offer these benefits:

- Schedules aligned with what works for users, borrowing policies that suit them, policies that make life easier for them, and access that is not controlled just to make the school librarian’s life easier.
- Experiences—collaborative projects, literacy instruction, book checkout, student opportunity zones—that support what our users need and expect.
- A positive attitude—“I have a job that makes users’ school existence better”—rather than a dismissive attitude—“School libraries exist so I can have a job.”
- Flexible partnerships that are for the good of the order due to the mutability of the school’s needs, not for the convenience of the librarian (too often the perception).
- School library advisory groups that value input of representatives from the administration team, classroom educators, parents, and learners.
- School librarians who are exceptional and are “exceptioners,” with fees and fines waived given special circumstances and policies waived when needed to benefit learners (e.g., a learner being temporarily allowed to eat lunch in the school library to mitigate a bullying problem).
- School librarians who are flexible, approachable, collegial, and valued as teaching partners and essential collaborators—not as babysitters or monitors for classes or an alternative study hall. The school library is seen as a learning environment—your classroom, not a multipurpose room.

What if your school library is perceived instead as being all about books and computers and rules, a closed program stuck on itself instead of being approachable, flexible, and focused on learners’ growth? If you strongly suspect that perceptions like these are the case in your school, you have a lot of work ahead to change those perceptions so that stakeholders instead hold expectations of what a strong school library program is and, in turn, what your brand represents. You need to listen; you need to gently nudge stakeholders in the direction that will help learners thrive as you work together. After all, school libraries are not candy stores; they are places where all stakeholders can get a solid meal, plus a great dessert! We have standards that show learners and educators what school librarians and libraries can do, and what users can expect. But to take that good program to the great program that exemplifies your brand requires leadership.

You will need to be—and be perceived as—a leader, a school librarian role first defined by AASL in *Empowering Learners: Guidelines for School Library Programs* (AASL 2009). The addition of this role was an awakening for many school
librarians already familiar with the roles of instructional partner, information specialist, teacher, and program administrator. The leadership role was affirmed in the *National School Library Standards for Learners, School Librarians, and School Libraries*:

> The school librarian is “a teacher and a learner who listens to and acts upon good ideas from peers, educators, and learners” (AASL 2018b, 14).

Andy Warhol is often quoted as saying, “Perception precedes reality.” It is crucial that your users (learners, educators, staff, community) perceive your leadership as promised by your school library’s brand. Leadership will elevate you and your program from “good to great,” a business world concept defined by Jim Collins (2001) that works in the library world as well. You can have a really good school library program, but if no one knows about it, it will never be a great school library program. It takes leadership and hard work to have a great program that lives up to its brand, work that is driven by dedication to the belief that strong school libraries make a difference in the lives of learners.

**Leadership and Perception**

We can take lessons from the business and the nonprofit worlds and benefit from their expertise in leadership. One of the most highly regarded gurus in this area is the aforementioned Jim Collins, author of *Good to Great* (2001) and *Good to Great and the Social Sectors* (2005). The big takeaway from both books is that there are levels of leadership that contribute to organizations (including school libraries), with the ultimate, most effective leaders being the Level 5 Executives who build “enduring greatness through a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will” (Collins 2001, 2005).

Collins developed this leadership hierarchy after his five-year study of successful good-to-great companies uncovered similar characteristics in leaders across all the companies studied—even though his team was not looking for such characteristics. The data showed that leadership mattered, and this hierarchy resulted (figure 1.1). The formula HUMILITY + WILL = LEVEL 5 (Collins 2001, 22) was a constant in the great companies. Collins explained that Level 5 leadership is not only about modesty and humility but also about fierce resolve, the determination to do what needs to be done to make the company great (36). We contend that great school library programs require outstanding school librarians who are humble and have the resolve to do whatever it takes to ensure that their programs meet the needs of everyone in their school communities. The following description sounds exactly
like the people in the school library profession whose programs are regarded as indispensable in their school districts:

Level 5 leaders channel their ego needs away from themselves and into the larger goal of building a great company. It’s not that Level 5 leaders have no ego or self-interest. Indeed, they are incredibly ambitious—but their ambition is first and foremost for the institution, not themselves. (Collins 2001, 21, emphasis in original)

In fact, when we asked in a survey how she developed her school library brand in relation to her school/program, its needs, and its culture, school librarian and Level 5 leader Iris Eichenlaub responded, “My job is to constantly assess and adapt and respond to the needs and interests of our community. If the library is exactly the same in five years, I am not fulfilling my mandate” (Eichenlaub, survey response to authors, 2021).

Sometimes moving from good to great feels hard because of the introverted personalities of a large percentage of school librarians (an anecdotal conclusion from our years of experience in the profession). However, you can “flip the switch” (Johns

Figure 1.1
Level 5 hierarchy

Source: Collins 2001. Reprinted by permission of Curtis Brown, Ltd. All rights reserved.
Summary: The Two Sides of Level 5 Leadership

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professional Will</th>
<th>Personal Humility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Creates superb results, a clear catalyst in the transition from good to great.</td>
<td>Demonstrates a compelling modesty, shunning public adulation, never boastful.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrates an unwavering resolve to do whatever must be done to produce the best long-term results, no matter how difficult.</td>
<td>Acts with quiet, calm determination; relies primarily on inspired standards, not inspiring charisma, to motivate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sets the standard of building an enduring great company; will settle for nothing less.</td>
<td>Channels ambition into the company, not the self; sets up successors for even greater success in the next generation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looks in the mirror, not out the window, to apportion responsibility for poor results, never blaming other people, external factors, or bad luck.</td>
<td>Looks out the window, not in the mirror, to apportion credit for the success of the company—to other people, external factors, and good luck.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 1.2**

Summary: The two sides of Level 5 leadership

Source: Collins 2001. Reprinted by permission of Curtis Brown, Ltd. All rights reserved.

2015, 169) when you conclude that you are providing and promoting a program that can give learners the chance to graduate ready for college, a career, and life. It’s not about you per se; it’s about the school library. You can do it. You may have downplayed your leadership qualities, but they are there—and it is worth the time and effort to move yourself up that leadership hierarchy. You will need to assess, reflect, seek professional development opportunities, develop a personal learning network, and promote/market the strengths of your library, your brand.

Figure 1.2 is a visual depiction of this Collins quote: “To spot a Level 5 leader, look for situations where extraordinary results exist but where no individual steps forth to claim excess credit—humility” (Collins 2001, 36).
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