

The Librarian's NITTY-GRITTY GUIDE TO CONTENT MARKETING

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Get Over Yourself

***“Success flows to organizations that inform,
not organizations that promote.”***

—Jay Baer, *Youtility*

Several years ago I was asked to come up with a presentation about how to improve the online presence of a library. The organization wanted me to talk to a group of new library directors, not only about websites, but also about social media work. At first, a lot of disparate things tumbled through my mind: usability, accessibility, metrics, engagement, and all sorts of other buzzwords. Any one of these things would easily rate an hour of discussion, but I needed to narrow it down to something that was meaningful and could be conveyed in a short amount of time. What were the things that really mattered? With only an hour, what needed to be the big takeaway?

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I spent some time considering the most common online mistakes I've seen by libraries. I looked at a lot of library websites and social media accounts. While the number of issues was many, I kept coming back to the idea of finding what all or most of the issues actually had in common. Why did I keep seeing the same mistakes, over and over? Why were so many problems related to how libraries attempt to promote themselves? After a lot of thought, I realized that there was really just one underlying concept that makes anything actually effective online. Without doing this one thing, it won't matter what kind of fancy-schmancy website a library has or how many different things it posts to social media channels.

They needed to get over themselves.

An effective online presence really comes down to not putting one's ego first. That could be the collective ego of the library as an institution, the ego of the director, the ego of the board of trustees, or the ego of that territorial staff member who controls the library's online content with an iron fist. It's easy to tell, online, when a library is operating from ego or not. Think about the following scenarios and whom they actually aim to please:

- + Social media accounts that only post program and event announcements
- + Event announcements that are only about those at the library, not the community
- + A library blog that gets virtually no engagement (and staff keep writing it, anyway)
- + Social media accounts that sit, inactive, for days, weeks or even months
- + Blog posts full of paragraphs of text and little else
- + Maintaining online content, such as links lists or pathfinders, that metrics show gets few (if any) visits
- + A website full of pages that haven't been updated in months or years

- + Online program announcements that tell readers how exciting the program will be, but provide no description of actual benefits to be gained by attending

I've seen each of these scenarios multiple times (and I'm betting you have, also), and the one thing they all have in common is that the library prioritized the needs of itself over those of its users. Many libraries only do what's easy or comfortable for them online. Sometimes there are logistical reasons for this, but mostly there aren't, and good planning should have prevented the vast majority of them, anyway.

As soon as any person or entity's ego overrides the needs of the user, the library, as a whole, loses. People will only care about your library's content if it has some value for them. Content that is completely self-serving or self-promotional is an active turnoff. When libraries, like so many other organizations, are struggling to get their online content seen, it's hardly a good idea to continue with strategies that are known to turn people away.

I encourage you to take a long, hard look at what your library does online. Are you really doing it for the online patron, or to please someone/something internally? A library is only effective online when it realizes that the people reading the content matter more than the people creating it.

While the rest of this book is about content marketing and how to do it better, it's essential that you first make a cognitive leap. Stop thinking that everything your library does online is purely about promoting itself, and at least begin to understand that you need to have the benefit for the reader in mind first and foremost. Jay Bauer, a digital marketing expert and author, refers to this idea as "Youtility"¹:

Youtility is marketing upside down. Instead of marketing that's needed by companies, Youtility is marketing that's wanted by

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customers. Youtility is massively useful information, provided for free, that creates long-term trust and kinship between your company and your customers.²

For many libraries, this idea represents a huge shift in the online marketing paradigm. Social media, in particular, has long represented little beyond a promotional opportunity for libraries, with little understanding that social media was never designed for marketing. (For more about this, see my previous book, *The Librarian's Nitty-Gritty Guide to Social Media*.) Libraries represent an abundance of information, but few if any ever capitalize on that asset to make themselves invaluable, or a Youtility, to their communities.

The fact that libraries have not generally taken advantage of this kind of strategy is somewhat bewildering, considering that they are probably one of the organizations least likely to ever run out of content. This situation is probably due to the perspective that most libraries have about marketing in general: still very much entrenched in the broadcast model of sending promotional messages out to the masses (especially only about events), rather than considering how those messages might actually be useful to the masses.

Think about it this way: If your library was considering a renovation to its physical space, would it do it without considering the needs of patrons? Sure, the library's staff would be asked for opinions, but would a library seriously undertake a major overhaul without consulting any end users? Unlikely. Most libraries do surveys, either formally or informally. Some libraries even put out furniture and carpet samples for comparison, and ask patrons for their votes. Some have public meetings. The methods vary, but the goal is the same: The library wants the space to be as useful and appealing as possible for its patrons.

Today, most libraries are very clear that they primarily exist to serve their communities. Yet, these same libraries often fail to apply this logic to what they post online. We inherently understand that

we need to make our physical spaces useful and appealing to the people who see and use them. Why don't we do this with the content our libraries produce for people online?

The true core of marketing has never been about promotion. Marketing supports the goals of a business or organization, and promotion is but one way to do that. Philip Kotler and Nancy Lee, marketing professors and authors, write:

Marketing's central concern is producing outcomes that the target market values. In the private sector, marketing's mantra is customer value and satisfaction. In the public sector, marketing's mantra is citizen value and satisfaction.³

Note the end goal for each target audience in the above quote is not to promote anything; it's not even to sell more goods or services. It's to make the recipients happy. Consider how different that is from how most libraries think of marketing goals. Getting more patrons into a program serves the library, not the patrons. Same for increasing circulation statistics or door counts. Those goals are actually byproducts of the real goal: to increase the library's value to its patrons.

Content marketing, done well, can help a library to meet this goal (I'll discuss this more in chapter 3). More importantly, content marketing can help *patrons*. This is the cognitive leap you'll need to make: understanding that being useful and relevant is much more important than the need to send the message.

Thinking about the Payoff

I was once asked what advice I would give someone just starting out in public speaking. Would joining Toastmasters help? Speaking in front of a mirror? I'm still not sure what the best advice would have been, but I explained how I came to be comfortable

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with presenting. In my first career, I was an environmental/outdoor education teacher. My job was to keep inner city kids interested in things like the life cycles of frogs and the dietary habits of turkey vultures,⁺ possibly while it was cold, pouring rain, and the kids had no expensive Gortex raincoats. One learned very fast to make these topics interesting, or 1) the final evaluations from the visiting parents and teachers would rip one to shreds and 2) the kids would probably beat them to it out of sheer boredom.⁺⁺

However, “interesting” is a tricky word and can mean something different from one person to the next. I discovered quickly that I needed to replace that word with the word “relevant.” It was my job to make my classes relevant to those kids, to the point where they not only weren’t bored, but could make some kind of personal connection to the information I was providing. Without that personal connection, that information would almost assuredly go in one ear and out the other. In other words, it was my professional responsibility to give them a reason to care.

So let’s bring this around to libraries. Of course, we’re concerned about our own relevancy in this increasingly digital era. But I think we get very focused on this aspect and can lose sight of the fact that we, too, have a professional responsibility to give people a reason to care. True, many libraries are seeing large increases in usage. The sagging economy suddenly propelled us to relevancy in the eyes of people who were/are trimming budgets. However, I want to bring this down to a more micro-level approach. Think about individual services you provide in your library and how they are marketed.

⁺Turkey vultures are actually very cool birds. Most predators won’t mess with them because one of their primary methods of defense is voluntary regurgitation; yes, that’s right—they throw up on their enemies. And, remember what turkey vultures eat. Carrion. Fun times. (And of immense interest to kids, of course.)

⁺⁺I actually LOVED this job.

Remember, my job wasn't to make every kid that came through our program want to join Greenpeace, the Sierra Club, or to immediately go out and save the world; it was to connect them personally to the environment as a whole through connections to smaller, digestible parts. Libraries could be doing the same thing. For every event your library wants to promote, ask the question, "What does this mean to me, Library?" In this instance, "me" is the average patron who has way too many demands on her time, is desperately seeking a new job, trying to sell his house, finishing a degree . . . you get the idea. What will the average "I don't have time" person gain from this? Will this story time expose my child to literacy activities that will help him in school? Will my cover letters stand out? Could my house sell faster or for more money?

At the most basic level, every patron is asking, knowingly or not: "What's in this for me?" If you can successfully answer that question for them, you have made that personal connection. Personal connections can result in more broad-based support and make the library more valuable to those that the library can connect with.

We, as human beings are inherently selfish. When presented with anything new, the question in our heads is always and immediately going to be: "What's in it for ME?" When your library promotes anything, it has to answer this question clearly for the message recipients. This is how you create value in the mind of your library's patrons: by showing that value front and center.

So, think a bit differently. Every time you interact with a patron, are you connecting them to something that's truly relevant to them, or just pushing something the library hopes people will come to or do?

Just "telling people about your library's stuff" isn't enough. People need to know, plainly, what the payoff is going to be for them. If the payoff isn't clear, you're doing it wrong: there's no value proposition for the reader. Therefore, your content is, to them, useless.

Ready?

If you think you've already made this leap, from being only promotional to being actually useful, then you're cleared to move forward. If not, well . . . feel free to keep reading, but realize that you will be putting time into efforts that are unlikely to give you a good return on your investment. If you're going to put time into creating content, you might as well make the time worthwhile; create content that will do more than garner occasional comments and will help your library to meet actual goals.

I recognize that it can be very difficult to remove ego(s) from library marketing. Internal politics can derail even the best-intentioned plans. I've seen library staff get very defensive about online content they manage, when told it needed improvement. I've seen a library's administration form a public relations committee specifically to help bypass an incompetent PR manager. I've heard countless tales of "so-and-so doesn't 'get it'" from staff across the country. I suspect you might have horror tales of your own.

Collectively, libraries need to realize that online content marketing has to make this jump to maintain relevancy. Over the past decade, we've seen libraries of all types focus more tightly on concepts such as customer and user experience. The vast majority of libraries work hard to please their patrons. Online content is one area where, sadly, less progress has been made.

Let's *all* make the leap from promotional to useful.

Get Over Yourself



BOTTOM LINE: Get over yourself and get the ego out of the process. Put the needs of online patrons first, just like you probably already do for them, offline. Without doing this, the rest of this book won't make much of a difference in your content marketing.

NOTES

1. Jay Baer, *Youtility: why smart marketing is about help not hype* (New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2013).
2. Ibid.
3. Nancy R. Lee and Philip R. Kotler, *Marketing in the Public Sector: A Roadmap for Improved Performance* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: FT Press, 2006).

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