

**Susan D. Ballard
and Sara Kelly Johns**

ELEVATING THE SCHOOL LIBRARY

**Building Positive Perceptions
through Brand Behavior**

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AASL

American Association
of School Librarians
TRANSFORMING LEARNING

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgments vii

Introduction: Why This Book? ix

1	BRAND OR BRAND BEHAVIOR?	1
2	LESSONS FROM THE BUSINESS WORLD	11
3	DEVELOPMENT OF A SERVICE CULTURE	25
4	SCHOOL LIBRARY BRAND VERSUS PERSONAL BRAND	35
5	OBSERVATION, DATA, AND ACTION	49
6	IDENTIFYING AND OVERCOMING BARRIERS	63
7	EXTREME MAKEOVER	83
8	COMMUNICATIONS PLAN	105

Conclusion 119

Appendixes

Appendix A. School Library Branding Persona Template 121

Appendix B. Checklist for School Libraries 123

Appendix C. Budget Summary Framework 139

Appendix D. Recommended Reading 141

Glossary 147

Works Cited 149

About the Authors 155

Index 157

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?

A brand is the set of expectations, memories, stories, and relationships that, taken together, account for a consumer's decision to choose one product or service over another.

—Seth Godin (2009)

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

[g]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*, May 29, 2013)

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

**FIGURE 1.1****Level 5 hierarchy**

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

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

Summary: The Two Sides of Level 5 Leadership	
Professional Will	Personal Humility
Creates superb results, a clear catalyst in the transition from good to great.	Demonstrates a compelling modesty, shunning public adulation, never boastful.
Demonstrates an unwavering resolve to do whatever must be done to produce the best long-term results, no matter how difficult.	Acts with quiet, calm determination; relies primarily on inspired standards, not inspiring charisma, to motivate.
Sets the standard of building an enduring great company; will settle for nothing less.	Channels ambition into the company, not the self; sets up successors for even greater success in the next generation.
Looks in the mirror, not out the window, to apportion responsibility for poor results, never blaming other people, external factors, or bad luck.	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.

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).

INDEX

A

AASL

See American Association of School Librarians

access

brand perception and, 5
data, 52
dynamic school library brands, 31
to educational materials, 3
intellectual access, 69
library fines and, 87
resources data, 53
scheduling facility access, 70

Access to Reading Materials (U.S. Department of Education), 87–88

accessibility, 65–66

action

questions for reflective practitioner, 61
recommended reading, 143–144
translating observations/data into, 58–59

ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) standards, 52

administrators

advocacy by school librarians and, 12
communication plan and, 106
funding/budgets and, 73
perceptions of school librarians, 74–75
school library website and, 66
school library's resources and, 78
social media plan, approval of, 113
testimonials from, 110

advocates

intellectual freedom and, 88–89
school library evaluation and, 123

“Advocating for the School Library Budget” (Kachel), 144

AEIOU process, 69

ALA

See American Library Association

ALA Bulletin, 51

ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom, 89

American Association of School Librarians (AASL)

AASL Standards, grounding practice in, 35

AASL Standards, school library brand and, 119–120

“Appropriate Staffing for School Libraries,” 144

Checklist for School Libraries and, 138
Developing Inclusive Learners and Citizens Activity Guide, 16–17

on leadership of school librarian, 5–6
on library staffing, 74

National School Library of the Year Award Program, 31–32

National School Library of the Year award rubric, 85–86

National School Library Standards brand, x
personas, use of, 9

personas by AASL Standards and Guidelines Implementation Task Force, 11–12, 15–17
personas for school librarians, 22

Position Statement on School Library Scheduling, 70

promotional materials from, 112

on purpose of school library/librarian, 71–72
on school librarians, 75

School Libraries Transform Learning Message Box, 108

School Library Evaluation Checklist, 100

on school library lessons, 4

on student achievement/school libraries, 3

Toolkit for Promoting School Library Programs, 146

as voice of profession, 35

American Libraries, 2

American Library Association (ALA)

on communications plan, 106

The Expert in the School Library: School Librarian–PSEL Competencies, 103

“Frontline Advocacy for School Libraries Toolkit,” 146

intellectual freedom resources, 89

personas for school librarians, 22

School Library Professional Standards for Educational Leaders, 79

Social Responsibilities Round Table, 51

on support of intellectual freedom, 65

as voice of profession, 35

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) standards, 52

“An Anthropologist in the Library” (Carlson), 49
An Introduction to Collection Development for School Librarians (Kerby), 97
 Andrews, Sandra D., 143
 Angelou, Maya, 120
 anthropology, 49–50
 “Appropriate Staffing for School Libraries” (AASL), 144
 Archimedes, 119
 attitudes, 75–76
 audience
 brand perception, 4–6
 communication vehicles for promotion, 112–113
 communications plan for, 105, 106
 establishing brand with target audiences, 106–107
 feedback from, 115–116
 personas for AASL Standards, 11–12
 school library website, accessibility of, 65–66
 targeted brand messaging for, 108–109
 testimonials from, 109–110
 user engagement/personas, 9
 audits
 diversity audit, 99
 facility audits for brand appearance, 91–94

B

Ballard, Susan D.
 A Checklist for School Libraries, 138
 “Diving Lessons: Taking the Data Literacy Plunge through Action Research,” 143
 information about, 155
 Monthly Memo, 76–78
 service culture of Nordstrom, 25–27
 Baltimore County Public Schools, 32
 Barber, Peggy, 9
 barriers
 brand barriers, identifying, 84–87
 circulation policies, 63–64
 facility, 68–70
 funding/budgets, 73
 identifying, 120
 inadequate resources, 78–80
 intellectual freedom, supporting, 65
 marginalization, 70–72
 monthly memo, 77
 as opportunities for brand growth, 63
 personality, 7478
 professional development, 80–81
 questions for reflective practitioner, 82
 recommended reading, 144
 school library website, 65–67
 selection policies, 64
 staffing, 73–74

The Basics of User Experience Design (Interaction Design Foundation), 142
 Bezos, Jeff, 1
 “BFTP! Keeping Your Library Collection Smelling F.R.E.S.H!” *The Adventures of Library Girl!* (LaGarde), 145
 big-picture planning, 99–100
Bite-Sized Marketing (Dowd, Evangeliste, & Silberman), 107
 Bober, Tom
 on brand experience, 46
 on school library brand, development of, 37
 on school library brand/personal brand, 42
 book challenges, 88–89
 books
 circulation policy barrier, 64
 circulation policy review for strengthening literacy, 87–88
 See also collection
 Boston Public Library (BPL), 29, 30
 Brackbill, Dustin, 16
 brand
 barriers, identifying, 84–87
 barriers, website review for visibility/consistency, 90–91
 brand appearance, 91–94
 creating brand that sticks, 2–4
 dynamic school library brands, 31–33
 as element of brand identity, 1
 establishing brand with target audiences, 106–107
 evolved public library brands, 29–31
 messaging, 108–109
 tagline as reflection of, 108
 See also school library brand
 brand behavior
 aligning actions with, 119
 recommended reading, 141–142
 of school libraries, 1
 testimonials validate, 109–110
 brand challenges
 big-picture planning for resource equity, 99–100
 budget request form, 101
 circulation policy review for strengthening literacy, 87–88
 data mapping for vibrant collections, 95, 97–99
 facility audits for brand appearance, 91–94
 intellectual freedom, preparing advocates for, 88–89
 monthly memo, Inez Gordon, 96
 perceptions, changing for brand rehabilitation, 94–95
 professional development/continuing education, 102–103
 staffing comparisons for equitable service, 100, 102

- summary of, 103–104
 - website review for visibility/consistency, 90–91
 - brand collateral, 107–108
 - brand development
 - advice about, 44–45
 - barriers to, 120
 - common themes of, 37
 - questions for reflective practitioner, 48
 - brand expectations
 - brand perception and, 5
 - every encounter/transaction must support, 4
 - positive memory, creation of, 72
 - brand experience
 - adjusting/improving, 46–47
 - description of, 1–2
 - school library facilities and, 68
 - testimonials about, 110
 - brand growth
 - barriers as opportunities for, 63
 - professional development/continuing education for, 102–103
 - resources for mapping, 79
 - brand identity
 - elements of, 1
 - of school libraries, 2
 - brand image, 107–108
 - brand look, 107–108
 - brand loyalty, 3
 - brand management
 - advice about, 44–45
 - questions for reflective practitioner, 48
 - school librarians on, 41–42
 - brand perception
 - barriers and, 63
 - overview of, 4–6
 - brand rehabilitation
 - guiding questions for, ix
 - perceptions, changing for, 94–95
 - See also* rebranding
 - branding
 - brand experience, 1–2
 - brand perception, 4–6
 - creating brand that sticks, 2–4
 - leadership and perception, 6–8
 - of library zones, 69
 - questions for reflective practitioner, 10
 - school library branding, ix–xi
 - user engagement/personas, 9
 - “Breaking Out of the Library Mold, in Boston and Beyond” (Seelye), 31
 - Brier, David, 59
 - “Bringing Design Thinking to the School Library” (Deisley), 142
 - budget
 - big-picture planning for resource equity, 99–100
 - Budget Summary Framework, 139–140
 - communications, return on investment, 116
 - data, 55–56
 - data mapping for, 95, 97
 - school library brand and, 73
 - budget request form, 101
 - Budget Summary Framework, 100, 139–140
 - business, school libraries acting like, ix–x
 - business world, lessons from
 - empathy map, 18–21
 - persona vision, 22
 - personas, change process and, 14–17
 - personas for AASL Standards, 11–12
 - questions for reflective practitioner, 23
 - recommended reading, 142
 - service culture example, 25–27
 - user-centered design, 12–14
- C**
- calendar
 - library calendar of events, 111
 - for PD/CE, 103
 - Calzada, Becky
 - on brand development/management, 45
 - on brand experience, 47
 - on school library brand growth, 40–41
 - Camden Hills Regional High School, Rockport, Maine, 32
 - Canva, 113
 - Carina the Community Member, 17
 - Carlos, Andrew, 2
 - Carlson, Scott, 49–50
 - Carnegie, Dale, 11
 - Carroll, Kathy
 - on brand development/management, 45
 - on brand experience, 47
 - on school library brand, development of, 37
 - CBS Sunday Morning*, 142
 - Cellucci, Anita, 37, 63
 - ensorship, 88–89
 - change
 - ability to change, 120
 - based on observation, 50
 - focus on most immediate areas for, 83
 - management, 22
 - school library rebranding and, 60
 - Chattanooga Public Library (CPL), 29, 31
 - Checklist for School Libraries, 123–138
 - Children’s Book Week, 111–112, 114
 - Children’s Internet Protection Act (CIPA), 54
 - Chow, Anthony S., 66
 - Chronicle of Higher Education*, 49
 - CIPA (Children’s Internet Protection Act), 54
 - circulation policies
 - barriers, 63–64

- circulation policies (*cont'd*)
 review of, 87–88
- Coatney, Sharon, 141
- Cockcroft, Marlaina, 87
- collaboration data, 54, 55
- collection
 data mapping for vibrant collections, 95, 97–99
 inadequate resources barrier, 78–80
 selection policies and, 64–65
 weeding for growth, 79–80
 weeding/deselection policy, 98
- collection development plan
 applying framework, 73
 for determining funding needed, 99
 planning for growth, 78–79
- collection map
 Curriculum Map Evaluation Worksheet, 98
 for vibrant collections, 97
- Collins, Jim
 discussion of work of, x
 hedgehog concept, 108
 leadership hierarchy, 6–8
- color palette, 107
- communication
 data, 54
 emphasis on, 120
 promotion/outreach, traditional vehicles for, 112–113
 with stakeholders, x
 two-way communication, lack of, 72
- communications plan
 establishing brand with target audiences, 106–107
 feedback, evaluation, sustainability, 115–116
 goal of, 106
 image building, 107–110
 importance of, 105
 promotion/outreach, 111–115
 questions for reflective practitioner, 117
 recommended reading, 146
 return on investment, 116
- community
 data, 56
 partnerships, 111–112
 perceptions data, 57–58
 personas for accurate profile of, 56
 school library brand aligned with needs of, 58–59
 school library rebranding, questions for, 59–61
 testimonials from, 110
See also learning community
- community events, 111–112
- community librarianship, 51
- community outreach, 111–112
- “Co(mmun)ity-Constructed Library”
 (Eichenlaub), 32–33
- competencies, 42–43
- complaint, 76
- Conifer Research, 69
- consistency, 90–91
- contact information, 66
- continuing education
 for brand growth, 102–103
 for school librarians, 80–81
- Cooper, Alan, 15
- COVID-19 pandemic
 Chattanooga Public Library’s service culture and, 29, 31
 school library websites and, 67
- Craddock, IdaMae
 on brand development/management, 44
 on brand experience, 46
 on school library brand growth, 40
- Creating Your Library Brand: Communicating Your Relevance and Value to Your Patrons* (Doucett), 146
- Creative Companion, 121
- credibility, x
- Cronin, David, 15
- crosswalk, 103
- Curriculum Map Evaluation Worksheet, 97, 98
- curriculum map, updating, 97
- customer
 branding as critical for, x
 school library rebranding and, 60–61
See also learners; users
- D**
- Daffy Duck cartoon, 60
- Dam, Rikke Friis, 142
- Dani Differently Abled persona, 21
- data
 access data, 52
 additional data sources, 57–58
 budget data, 55–56
 collaboration, social networking, communication data, 54
 community data, 56
 demand-driven services, 51–52
 demographic data, 56
 for elevating school library brand, 120
 in facility audit, 92–93
 instructional/usage data, 116
 perceptions data, 57–58
 physical space data, 52
 questions for reflective practitioner, 61
 recommended reading, 143–144
 resources data, 53
 school data, 57
 school district data, 57

- for school library budget, 73
 - school library rebranding, questions for, 59–61
 - staffing data, 53
 - student data, 57
 - translating observations/data into action, 58–59
 - usage data, 54–55
 - data mapping, 95, 97–99
 - Definition of an Effective School Library* (AASL), 71
 - Deisley, Laura, 142
 - demand-driven services, 51–52
 - demographic data, 56
 - deselection, 98
 - “Design Thinking Resources” (IDEO U), 142
 - Developing Inclusive Learners and Citizens Activity Guide* (AASL), 16–17
 - Dickinson, Gail, 45
 - disability, learners with
 - persona for, 18–20
 - persona profile: Dani Differently Abled, 21
 - dispositions
 - for promotion of school library brand, 42–43
 - of school librarians, 75–76
 - district leadership
 - in Checklist for School Libraries, 135–138
 - over school library program, 123
 - diversity audit, 99
 - “Diversity Audits” (New York City School Library System), 145
 - “Diving Lessons: Taking the Data Literacy Plunge through Action Research” (Ballard), 143
 - Domains in *National School Library Standards*, 16–17, 78
 - Dooley, Roger, 144
 - Doucett, Elisabeth, 146
 - Dowd, Nancy, 107
 - “Duck Amuck” cartoon (Merrie Melodies), 60
- E**
- E. Blanche Woolls Elementary School, 87–88
 - Ebisu, Cheri, 38
 - editorial process, 107
 - educators
 - communications plan for target audiences, 106
 - facility access, scheduling, 70
 - school librarian role and, 71
 - school library website and, 66, 67
 - school library’s resources and, 78
 - testimonials from, 110
 - Eichenlaub, Iris
 - on brand as student-centered library, 52
 - “Co(mmunty)-Constructed Library,” 32–33
 - on competencies/dispositions for promotion, 43
 - on leadership, 7
 - on school library brand, development of, 37
 - Eliot, T. S., 63
 - Ellis, Leanne, 97
 - e-mail, 113
 - empathy
 - personas, change process and, 14–15, 16
 - school library collection and, 80
 - signage to communicate, 68–69
 - User Experience Honeycomb, 13–14
 - empathy map, 18–21
 - “Empathy Map—Why and How to Use It” (Dam & Siang), 142
 - Empire State Information Fluency Continuum* (Stripling), 145
 - employees
 - See library staff
 - Empowering Learners: Guidelines for School Library Programs* (AASL), 5–6
 - equipment, 132–133
 - equitable service, 100
 - “Evaluating Library Signage: A Systematic Method for Conducting a Library Signage Inventory” (Mandel & Johnston), 144
 - evaluation
 - Checklist for School Libraries, 123–138
 - in communications plan, 115–116
 - for elevating school library brand, 120
 - Evangeliste, Mary, 107
 - evidence
 - in facility audit, 92–93
 - for PD/CE plan, 103
 - school library rebranding and, 60–61
 - “Evidence of Accomplishment” (AASL), 103
 - Ewbank, Ann, 43, 45
 - “exit ticket” testimonial, 110
 - expectations
 - See brand expectations
 - experiences, 5
 - See also brand experience
 - The Expert in the School Library: School Librarian–PSEL Competencies* (American Library Association), 103
 - extreme makeover
 - big-picture planning for resource equity, 99–100
 - brand barriers/assessments, 84–87
 - brand challenges summary, 103–104
 - budget request form, 101
 - circulation policy review, 87–88
 - data mapping, 95, 97–99
 - facility audits, 91–94
 - Gaver City School Library Department, 83–84
 - intellectual freedom, preparing advocates for, 88–89

- extreme makeover (*cont'd*)
- monthly memo, Inez Gordon, 96
 - National School Library of the Year award rubric, 85–86
 - perceptions, changing for brand rehabilitation, 94–95
 - professional development/continuing education, 102–103
 - questions for reflective practitioner, 104
 - recommended reading, 145
 - staffing comparisons for equitable service, 100, 102
 - website review for visibility/consistency, 90–91
- F**
- Facebook (Meta), 114, 115
- facility
- audits, 91–94
 - barriers, 68–70
 - facilities in Checklist for School Libraries, 133–134
- facility barriers
- intellectual access, 69–70
 - library layout, 69
 - overcoming, 68
 - scheduling, 70
 - signage, 68–69
 - user experience, 68
- feedback, 115–116
- finances
- circulation policies for literacy, 63–64
 - circulation policy review, 87–88
 - waiving, 5
- flexible learning environments (FLEs), 133–134
- focus, 81
- focus groups, 116
- followers, 114
- FOMO (fear of missing out), 71, 72
- fonts, 107
- Foster, Nancy Fried, 49–50
- “Frontline Advocacy for School Libraries Toolkit” (American Library Association), 146
- funding
- budget data, 55–56
 - budget request form, 101
 - collection development plan for, 99
 - school library brand and, 73
 - for school library resources, 78
- brand barriers, identifying, 84–87
 - brand challenges summary, 103–104
 - Checklist for School Libraries, 123
 - communications plan of, 105
 - facility audits for brand appearance, 91–94
 - as fictitious example, 83
 - Gaver City background, 83–84
 - intellectual freedom, preparing advocates for, 88–89
 - perceptions, changing for brand rehabilitation, 94–95
 - professional development/continuing education, 102–103
 - school libraries, 84
 - staffing comparisons for equitable service, 100, 102
 - website review for visibility/consistency, 90–91
- Gelles-Watnick, Risa, 114
- Gibbons, Sarah, 18
- Gilcreast, Jessica
- on brand experience, 46
 - on observation, 50
 - on school library brand, development of, 36
- Giles, Shannon DeSantis, 36, 43
- Glick, Fran
- on brand development/management, 45
 - on helping school library brand grow, 40
 - on rebranding, 32
 - on school library brand, development of, 38
- goals
- dynamic school library brand and, 31
 - of school library communications plan, 106
 - of school library rebranding, 61
- Godin, Seth
- on brand, 1
 - discussion of work of, x
 - on image of librarians, 2
- Goltz, Schlomo “Mo,” 14–15
- “Good Marketers Are Good Observers” (Dooley), 144
- Good to Great and the Social Sectors* (Collins), 6, 108
- Good to Great* (Collins), x, 6
- Goodall, Jane, 49, 58
- graphic design, 67, 90
- Grigsby, Susan, 42, 59
- growth
- resource planning for, 78–79
 - weeding collection for, 79–80
- guiding questions
- See* questions for reflective practitioner
- G**
- Gaver City School Library Department
- big-picture planning for resource equity, 99–100
- H**
- Harada, Violet
- The Many Faces of School Library Leadership*, 141

- on UH Manoa's rebranding, 38
- Harland, Pam
 - on brand development/management, 44
 - on competencies/dispositions for promotion, 42
 - user kicked out of library story, 27–28
- Harvard Business Review*, 76
- Haycock, Ken, x
- hedgehog concept, 108
- High Impact School Library Spaces* (Sullivan), 69
- The High John Library (1967): Shaping the Future of Libraries as Community Resource Centers* (Moore), 50–51
- High John Library, University of Maryland, 50–51, 61
- High School District 214, 32
- Hilliker, Rob, 32
- How to Rebrand: 19 Questions to Ask Before You Start* (Brier), 59
- humility, 6, 7, 8
- Humphrey, Aaron, 15

I

- Ibrisevic, Ilma, 3, 9
- IDEO U, 142
- image, of school librarian, 76
- image building
 - brand look, 107–108
 - messaging, 108–109
 - tagline, 108
 - testimonials, 109–110
 - time for, 107
- Include Shared Foundation, 16–17
- infographics, 112–113
- Information Power: Checklist for School Library Media Programs* (Meyers), 138
- Instagram, 114, 115
- instructional data, 116
- Instructional Role of the School Librarian* (AASL), 71
- intellectual access, 69
- intellectual freedom
 - preparing advocates for, 88–89
 - selection policies and, 64
 - ways to support, 65
- Interaction Design Foundation, 142
- Internet filtering, 54
- interviews, 116
- IT department, 91

J

- Jacobowicz, Collette, 144
- Johns, Sara Kelly
 - information about, 155

- interview of Joyce Valenza, 11
 - personas for AASL Standards, 15–16
 - on solutions *vs.* problems approach, 76
- Johnson, Barbara
 - on brand development/management, 41, 45
 - on brand experience, 47
- Johnson, Doug, 4, 75
- Johnson, Mica, 143
- Johnston, Melissa P., 144

K

- Kaaland, Christie, 74
- Kachel, Deb
 - “Advocating for the School Library Budget,” 144
 - on brand experience, 46
 - on competencies/dispositions for promotion, 42
 - on staffing gap, 74
 - on staying grounded, 59
- Kaplan, Allison, 74–75
- Keer, Gretchen, 2
- Kerby, Mona, 97, 99
- Knowledge Quest*
 - blog post about school library website, 67
 - blog post by Iris Eichenlaub, 32
 - blog post by Leanne Ellis, 97
 - blog post on circulation policies, 64
 - “Personal Branding to Promote School Librarians” (Johnson), 143
 - PSLA blog post in, 16
- Kotter, John, 22
- Kowalski, Sue
 - on brand development/management, 36, 44
 - on brand experience, 46
 - on school library brand growth, 40
- Kylander, Nathalie, 2, 9

L

- LaGarde, Jennifer, 67, 145
- late fees, 87–88
- leadership
 - Checklist for School Libraries, 122
 - district leadership in Checklist for School Libraries, 135–138
 - hierarchy, 6–8
 - of school librarian, 5–6
- Leadership: Strategic Thinking, Decision Making, Communication, and Relationship Building* (Martin & Roberts), 141
- Leading for School Librarians: There Is No Other Option* (Weisberg), 143
- learner experience
 - brand messaging focus on, 108–109

- learner experience (*cont'd*)
 user-centered design and, 14
- learners
 brand perception and, 4–6
 circulation policy review, 87–88
 communications plan for target audiences, 106
 empathy map for personas, 18–21
 facility audit input from, 94
 facility barriers and, 68–70
 school library website interactions, 66–67
 selection policies and, 64
 service culture of school libraries and, 25
 testimonials from, 109–110
- learning community
 brand messaging for, 108–109
 communication plan for target audiences, 106–107
 school library brand aligned with needs of, 58–59
 school library rebranding, questions for, 59–61
- Lee, Chae Ho, 38, 39
- lessons
See business world, lessons from
- Level of Collaboration rubric, 55
- Lewis, Cecily
 on brand development/management, 45
 circulation policy barrier story, 64
 on managing school library brand/personal brand, 42
 on school library brand, development of, 39
 on school library brand growth, 41
- Lewis, Melanie, 12
- librarians
See school librarians
- libraries
See school libraries
- library advisory committees, 89, 116
- Library Farm, Cicero, New York, 31
- library layout
 library zones signage, 70
 zones/AEIOU process, 69
- library materials, 55–56
See also collection
- Library Spaces for 21st-Century Learners* (Sullivan), 69
- library staff
 barriers, 73–74
 brand barriers, identifying, 84–87
 at Gaver City school libraries, 84
 personnel section of Checklist for School Libraries, 131
 on school library website, 66
 staffing comparisons for equitable service, 100, 102
 staffing gaps, 73–74
- LinkedIn Learning, 3
- links, 90, 91
- listening, 50
- literacy
 circulation policies and, 63
 circulation policy review for strengthening, 87–88
- Liu, Ken, 105
- Loertscher, David, 26
- logo
 anatomy of logo/brand development, 39
 as element of brand image, 107
 school library brand and, ix, 1
 for UH Manoa, 38
 “A Logo Is Not a Brand” (Pallotta), 141–142
- Lombardi, Vince, 35
- Lopez Island Library, 31
- Lorenzo the Learner, 16
- Lucille Cole Thomas Middle School
 intellectual freedom, preparing advocates for, 88–89
 staffing comparisons for equitable service, 100, 102
- M**
- Mackley, Allison, 16
- management, Checklist for School Libraries, 122
- Mandel, Lauren H., 144
The Many Faces of School Library Leadership (Coatney & Harada), 141
- marginalization
 AASL position statements, 71–72
 previous negative experiences, residual effect of, 72
 school librarian role, lack of understanding of, 71
 of school librarians, 74
 of school library, 70–71
 two-way communication, lack of, 72
- marketing, 1
See also promotion/outreach
Marketing with Social Media (Thomsett-Scott), 146
- Martin, Ann M., 141
- Massarat, Navid, 114
- massive open online courses (MOOCs), 3
- Maximizing School Librarian Leadership* (Moreillon), 141
- McCarthy, Patrick, 26
- McCready, Ryan, 121
- McLuhan, Marshall, 112
- Mead, Margaret, 49, 58
 “Measuring School Librarian Growth” (AASL), 79
- media relations, 111
- merchandizing, 1

- messaging, 108–109
See also communication
- Meyers, J. K., 138
- minority community, 50–51
- mission
 dynamic school library brand and, 31
 of school library, 9
- moderator managed online feedback, 115–116
- monthly memo
 barriers, 77
 copy of, 77
 of Inez Gordon, 96
 for library issues, 76, 78
 perceptions, changing for brand
 rehabilitation, 95
- MOOCs (massive open online courses), 3
- Moore, Hayleigh, 50
- Moorefield-Lang, Heather, 44, 46
- Moreillon, Judi, 141
- Morville, Peter, 13–14
- Moses, Richard, 51
- N**
- name brand, xi
- National School Library of the Year award rubric
 data for budget, 100
 sample of, 85–86
- National School Library of the Year (NSLY) Award Program, 31–32
- National School Library Standards for Learners, School Librarians, and School Libraries* (AASL)
 AASL brand, x
 as compass for professional development, 80
 Domains, 16–17, 78
 dynamic school library brands and, 31–33
 grounding practice in, 35
 personas for, 11–12, 15–17
 personas in development/implementation
 of, 9
 professional development/continuing
 education and, 103
 on school librarians, 6
 school library brand and, 119–120
 school library brand in alignment with, ix
 school library collection plan and, 78–79
 School Library Evaluation Checklist, 84, 123
 Shared Foundations, 78
 user experience and, 28
- Nawaz, Sabina, 76
- needs
 assessment, for school library rebranding, 85
 empathy map for personas, 18–19
 PD/CE aligned with strategic needs, 102
 school library brand aligned with needs of
 community, 58–59
- negative experiences, 72
- New York City School Library System, 145
- New York State Education Department,
 Department of Curriculum Instruction, 145
- New York Times*, 31
- newsletters, 112
- Nordstrom, 25–27
 “Nordstrom Opens a NYC Flagship Store” (*CBS Sunday Morning*), 142
The Nordstrom Way to Customer Service Excellence: Creating a Values-Driven Service Culture (Spector & Reeves), 143
The Nordstrom Way to Customer Service Excellence: The Handbook for Becoming the “Nordstrom” of Your Industry (Spector & McCarthy), 26
- Northern Onondaga Public Library, 31
- “NYSED School Library Program Rubric” (New York State Education Department), 145
- O**
- objectives, 61
- observation
 for elevating school library brand, 120
 of engagement with school library brand, 58
 in facility audit, 92–93
 importance of, 49
 questions for reflective practitioner, 61
 recommended reading, 143–144
 translating observations/data into action,
 58–59
 University of Maryland’s High John Library,
 50–51
 University of Rochester study, 49–50
- O’Connor, Mary Lou, 41
- one-pagers, 112
- online public access catalogs (OPACs), 90
- online tools, 54
- Our Iceberg Is Melting* (Kotter & Rathgeber), x, 22
- outreach
See promotion/outreach
- P**
- Pallotta, Dan, 141–142
- parents
 communication plan for establishing brand
 with, 106
 intellectual freedom and, 88–89
 school library website and, 66, 67
 testimonials from, 110
- partnerships
 community partnerships, 111–112
 with educators, 71
 flexible, 5

- partnerships (*cont'd*)
with media outlets, 111
- Pennsylvania School Librarians Association (PSLA)
personas developed by, 16, 17
salute of, 22
- perception
brand perception, 4–6
changing for brand rehabilitation, 94–95
leadership and, 6–8
monthly memo by Inez Gordon, 96
perceptions data, 57–58
of school libraries, 119
- “Persona Core Poster” (Creative Companion), 121
- “Persona Development Discussion Guide” (Usability.gov), 121
- persona vision, 22
- personal brand
concern with, 59
recommended reading, 143
school library brand and, 41–42
- “Personal Branding to Promote School Librarians” (Johnson), 143
- personal growth plan, 79
- personal humility, 8
- personality barriers
administrators’ perceptions, 74–75
communication of status, 76–78
dispositions, 75–76
image, 76
problem solving *vs.* complaining, 76
territorial school librarian, 75
- personas
for AASL Standards, 11–12
change process and, 14–17
community data, thinking about, 56
empathy map for, 18–21
persona profile: Dani Differently Abled, 21
persona vision, 22
questions for reflective practitioner, 23
School Library Branding Persona Template, 121–122
school library website and, 65
student data for, 57
user engagement and, 9
- personnel
See library staff
- Pew Research Center, 114
- physical space
data, 52
facilities in Checklist for School Libraries, 133–134
library layout, 69
signage, 68–69
user experience of, 68
See also facility
- Pink, Daniel, 68–69
- planning
big-picture planning for resource equity, 99–100
Checklist for School Libraries, 122
social media planning, 113–115
See also communications plan
- policies
circulation policy review for strengthening literacy, 87–88
examining, 72
- political capital, 44
- Position Statement on School Library Scheduling* (AASL), 70
- positive attitude, 5
- positive memory, 72
- posters, 112–113
The Power of Data: An Introduction to Using National Data to Support School Library Programs (Andrews), 143
- press releases, 111
- principals
communications plan for target audiences, 106
role of school librarian and, 71
staffing comparisons for equitable service, 100, 102
testimonials from, 110
- problem solving, 76
- problems, 76–78
- professional development
for brand growth, 102–103
focus of, 59
lack of/too much of, 80–81
- professional will, 8
- program leaflets/brochures, 112
- promotion/outreach
community outreach/partnerships, 111–112
media relations, 111
recommended reading, 146
social media planning, 113–115
traditional communication vehicles, 112–113
- PSLA
See Pennsylvania School Librarians Association
- public libraries
evolved public library brands, 29–31
user kicked out of library story, 27–28
- public service announcements (PSAs), 111
- Q**
- questions
for school library rebranding, 59–61
for social media plan, 113–114
- questions for the reflective practitioner
about barriers, 82

- about communications plan, 117
- on brand development/management, 48
- on extreme makeover, 104
- introduction to, ix
- on observation/data, 61
- on personas, 23
- on school library brand, 10
- on service culture, 33

R

- Rackham, Scott, 22
- Rathgeber, Holger, x, 22
- reading, recommended, 141–146
- rebranding
 - brand barriers, identifying, 84–87
 - circulation policy review, 87–88
 - facility audits for brand appearance, 91–94
 - negative experiences, residual effects of, 72
 - perceptions, changing, 94–95
 - questions for, ix, 59–61
 - of school librarian role, 32
 - school library website and, 67
 - of UH Manoa marketing materials, 38
 - website review for visibility/consistency, 90–91
- See also* extreme makeover
- “(Re)Building a School Library, Part 1: The Website” (Tetreault), 67
- Reeves, breAnne O., 143
- relevance, 4
- Rendina, Diana
 - on brand development/management, 45
 - on managing school library brand/personal brand, 41
 - on school library brand, development of, 38
 - on school library brand growth, 40
- resource equity, 99–100
- resources
 - big-picture planning for resource equity, 99–100
 - Budget Summary Framework, 139–140
 - Checklist for School Libraries, 123–138
 - data, 53
 - inadequate resources barrier, 78–80
 - recommended reading, 141–146
 - School Library Branding Persona Template, 121–122
- return on investment, 116
- review
 - circulation policy review for strengthening literacy, 87–88
 - website review for visibility/consistency, 90–91
- reviews, 109–110
- Riemann, Robert, 15

- Rivera, Juan, 40, 41
- Roberts, Kathleen Riopelle, 141
- Role of the School Library* (AASL), 71
- Roys, Nadine K., 75

S

- Sacco, Christina, 29, 31
- Sannwald, Suzanne, 14
- Sasaki, Jana, 38
- schedule
 - brand perception and, 5
 - thoughtful library scheduling, 31
- Schlipp, Ali
 - on brand experience, 47
 - on competencies/dispositions for promotion, 43
 - on school library brand growth, 40
- school board, 106
- school data, 57
- school district data, 57
- school librarians
 - barriers as opportunities for brand growth, 63
 - brand barriers, identifying, 84–87
 - brand perception, 4–6
 - Checklist for School Libraries, 123–138
 - circulation policies, 63
 - dynamic school library brands, 31–33
 - facility audits for brand appearance, 91–94
 - facility barriers and, 68–70
 - funding/budgets, 73
 - at Gaver City school libraries, 84
 - intellectual freedom, preparing advocates for, 88–89
 - leadership hierarchy and, 6–8
 - as lifelong learners/researchers, 12
 - marginalization of, 70–72
 - perceptions, changing for brand rehabilitation, 94–95
 - persona vision, 22
 - personality barriers, 74–78
 - professional development, 80–81
 - professional development/continuing education, 102–103
 - promotion/outreach by, 111–115
 - school library branding, ix–xi
 - school library data, 51–58
 - selection policies and, 64
 - social media planning by, 113–115
 - staffing comparisons for equitable service, 100, 102
 - staffing data, 53
 - stereotypes about, 2
 - survey about school library brand, 36–47
 - user-centered design and, 12–14
 - website review for visibility/consistency, 90–91

- school libraries
 - branding of, 1–2
 - as businesses, 2
 - Checklist for School Libraries, 123–138
 - dynamic school library brands, 31–33
 - facility audits for brand appearance, 91–94
 - facility barriers, 68–70
 - of Gaver City, 84
 - marginalization of, 70–72
 - service culture of, 25
 - social media planning, 113–115
 - user experience, consistency of, 28–29
 - user-centered design, 12–14
 - website of, 65–67, 90–91
- School Libraries Transform Learning Message Box* (AASL), 108
- school library advisory groups, 5
- school library brand
 - barriers and, 63
 - brand barriers, identifying, 84–87
 - brand identity/brand behavior, 1
 - brand perception, 4–6
 - circulation policy review for strengthening literacy, 87–88
 - communications plan for, 105
 - conclusion about, 119–120
 - creating brand that sticks, 2–4
 - feedback, evaluation, sustainability strategies, 115–116
 - funding/budgets and, 73
 - image building, 107–111
 - introduction to, ix–xi
 - leadership hierarchy and, 6–8
 - needs of community and, 58–59
 - personal brand *vs.*, 35
 - promotion/outreach, 111–115
 - questions for reflective practitioner, 10
 - recommended reading, 141–142, 143
 - School Library Branding Persona Template, 121–122
 - school library collection communicates, 78
 - school library rebranding, questions for, 59–61
 - staffing gaps and, 74
 - stereotypes about librarians and, 2
 - survey of school library professionals, 36–47
 - user engagement/personas, 9
- School Library Branding Persona Template, 20, 121–122
- school library data
 - access data, 52
 - additional data sources, 57–58
 - budget data, 55–56
 - collaboration, social networking, communication data, 54
 - community data, 56
 - demand-driven services, 51–52
 - demographic data, 56
 - perceptions data, 57–58
 - physical space data, 52
 - resources data, 53
 - school data, 57
 - school district data, 57
 - staffing data, 53
 - student data, 57
 - usage data, 54–55
- School Library Evaluation Checklist (AASL)
 - data for budget, 100
 - for Gaver City school scenario, 123
 - for identifying brand barriers, 84, 85
- School Library Journal*, 87
- School Library Month, 114
- School Library Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (SLPSEL), 79
- school library program, 124
- SchoolLibraryNJ* LibGuide, 90
- Seelye, Katharine Q., 31
- selection policies, 64
- service culture
 - business world example, 25–27
 - consistency of user experience, 28–29
 - description of, 25
 - dynamic school library brands, 31–33
 - evolved public library brands, 29–31
 - kicked out of the library story, 27–28
 - for positive relationships, 119–120
 - questions for reflective practitioner, 33
 - recommended reading, 142–143
- Shannon, Donna M., 75
- Shared Foundations in *National School Library Standards*, 17, 78
- Siang, Teo Yu, 142
- signage
 - about library zones, 70
 - in school library facility, 68–69
- Silberman, Jonathan, 107
- “6 Essentials Every School Library Website Needs” (Jacobowicz), 144
- SLPSEL (School Library Professional Standards for Educational Leaders), 79
- Snapchat, 115
- social media
 - brand experience and, 1
 - for feedback, 116
 - planning, 113–115
 - platforms, 114
 - social networking data, 54
- Social Media Fact Sheet* (Pew Research Center), 114
- Social Responsibilities Round Table (SRRT), 51
- Sofferman, Rebecca, 39, 40
- solutions, 76
- space
 - See* audience; facility; physical space

Spector, Robert, 26, 143
 spellings, 108
 SRRT (Social Responsibilities Round Table),
 51
 staffing data, 53
 stakeholders
 brand perception, 4–6
 communication plan for establishing brand
 with target audiences, 106–107
 communication with, x
 empathy map for personas, 18–21
 personas, change process and, 14–17
 school library brand and, 4
 school library rebranding and, 60–61
 two-way communication, lack of, 72
 user engagement/personas, 9
 stereotypes
 about librarians, 2
 of school librarians, 76
 stickiness
 of librarian stereotypes, 2
 of school library brand, 3–4, 120
 Stone, Christopher, 2, 9
 Stripling, Barbara K., 145
 student achievement, 3
 student data
 overview of, 57
 school library website and, 66
 students
 See learners
 style guide
 elements of, 107–108
 for promotional materials, 112
 subscription databases, 90
 Sullivan, Margaret L., 69
 survey
 for community feedback, 58
 of school library professionals about school
 library brand, 36–47
 sustainability, 115–116

T

tagline
 development of, 108
 image building, 108
 school library brand and, ix, 1
 target audience
 brand behavior and, 1
 communication vehicles for promotion,
 112–113
 communications plan for, 106–107
 two-way conversation with, 120
 teachers
 See educators
 technology data, 53

Teens, Social Media and Technology 2022 (Vogels,
 Gelles-Watnick, & Massarat), 114

templates

 in brand style guide, 108
 Checklist for School Libraries, 123–138
 School Library Branding Persona Template,
 20, 121–122

“10 Traits of Successful School Librarians”
 (Johnson), 75

terms

 in brand style guide, 108
 related to branding, ix
 territorial librarian, 75
 testimonials, 109–110
 Tetreault, Steve, 64, 67
 themes
 of brand development, 37
 of brand development/management, 45
 of brand experience, 47
 of brand management, 42
 of competencies/dispositions for school
 library brand promotion, 43
 growing your brand, 41

Thomsett-Scott, Beth C., 146

3Rs (Return, Renew, or Replace) policy, 88

TikTok, 114

time, 107

Toister, Jeff, 25

Toolkit for Promoting School Library Programs
 (AASL), 146

“Top Attractions in Boston” (TripAdvisor), 29

Top Ten Reasons to Love Your School Library list,
 110

TripAdvisor, 29

trust, 64

Tumblr, 115

“20+ User Persona Examples, Templates and Tips
 for Targeted Decision-Making” (McCready), 121

Twitch, 115

Twitter, 115

two-way communication, 72, 120

U

Unite Against Book Bans (UABB) Toolkit, 89

University of Hawai‘i Manoa (UH Manoa), 38, 39

University of Maryland (UMD), 50–51, 61

University of Rochester, 49–50

U.S. Department of Education, 87–88

U.S. General Services Administration, 13

Usability.gov, 15, 121

usage data

 overview of, 54–55

 review of, 116

user engagement

 for communication, 72

- user engagement (*cont'd*)
 personas and, 9
- User Experience Honeycomb
 questions about, 23
 for school library brand, 13–14
- user experience (UX)
 at Boston Public Library, 29
 consistency of, 28–29
 description of, 13
 questions about, 33
 of school library facilities, 68
 standards-based consistency of experience, 35
- user surveys, 115
- user-centered design
 benefit of, 119
 overview of, 12–14
 personas, change process and, 14–17
 personas for AASL Standards, 12
 recommended reading, 142
- users
 brand perception and, 4–6
 communication plan for establishing brand
 with target audiences, 106–107
 empathy map for personas, 18–21
 feedback from, 115–116
 library layout and, 69
 listening to, 119
 personas, change process and, 14–17
 personas for AASL Standards, 11–12
 school library website interactions, 66–67
 testimonials from, 109–110
 user experience, consistency of, 28–29
 user kicked out of library story, 27–28
 user-centered design, 12–14
- UX
See user experience
- V**
- Valenza, Joyce
 personas for AASL Standards, 11–12, 15–16
 on school library website, 66
 “Your Library Website: It’s a Destination, Not a Brochure!” 90
- Violet Harada High School, 94–95
- visibility, 90–91
- vision, 9, 37
- Vogels, Emily A., 114
- volunteers, 53, 74
- W**
- Wagner, Tony, 83
- Wallace, Linda K., 9
- Ward, Jennifer L., 15
- Warhol, Andy, 6
- watching, 50
- website, school library
 accessibility of, 65–66
 as communication vehicle for promotion,
 113
 graphic design of, 67
 user interactions, 66–67
 website review for visibility/consistency,
 90–91
- weeding, 98
- “Weeding” (New York City School Library System),
 145
- Weisberg, Hilda
 on brand experience, 46
*Leading for School Librarians: There Is No
 Other Option*, 143
 on school library brand growth, 40
- Welbourne, James, 51
- WhatsApp, 115
- A Whole New Mind* (Pink), 68
- will, 6, 7, 8
- Wong, Tracey
 on brand development/management, 44
 on brand experience, 46
 on competencies/dispositions for promotion,
 42
 on school library brand, development of, 36
- Woolfs Elementary School, 95, 97–99
- Wynkoop, Rebecca
 on brand development/management, 45
 on competencies/dispositions, 43
 on school library brand, development of, 37
- Y**
- Yamamoto, Sandy
 on brand development/management, 45
 on brand experience, 46
 on competencies/dispositions, 43
 on school library brand, development of, 37
- Yamauchi, Haruko, 51
- “Your Library Website: It’s a Destination, Not a
 Brochure!” (Valenza), 90
- YouTube, 114, 115
- Z**
- Zaugg, Holt, 22
- Zipursky, Michael, 109
- zones, library, 69, 70