

Campaign for Real Libraries

By **Catherine Baird**

What would I say is the biggest trend in marketing these days? You might think I'd point to something like Twitter, mobile technologies, or the next big social media phenomenon that is on the verge of discovery as I'm writing these words.

But when it comes right down to it, I'm putting my money on authenticity.

That's right, being yourself, being authentic, is arguably more important these days than tweeting or hooting or pinging or ponging (I think I made a lot of those words up, so don't leave me to Google any of them).

Whether we attribute it to reality TV, blogging, YouTube, or Ellen, people enjoy engaging with reality, or at least with something that appears to be reality.

Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty is a prime example of authenticity in advertising. Their time-lapsed Evolution YouTube video shows a pretty but average-looking woman being transformed into a flawless billboard model with the help of a team of hairstylists, makeup artists and, of course, a Photoshop expert who even goes so far as to stretch the model's neck in post-production.

Authenticity is the name of the game and it's so big people are already trying to fake it. Companies are paying high-profile bloggers to name-drop products and engineering how to make YouTube videos go "viral." Though

risky, these guerrilla tactics are flourishing now that there's a whole new online playground to work with.

Authenticity in Libraries

So what does this mean for libraries? It means that polishing a newsletter until you've showcased your library in the absolute best possible light, while not a bad thing, may not be your best strategy.

And not that there's anything wrong with creating a Facebook page, starting a podcast, or becoming a tweeting library, but if you're not really into it and just pursuing these tactics superficially, anyone listening or reading is going to figure it out pretty quickly.

So whatever activities you decide are the best for your library, approach them with authenticity. Offer a behind-the-scenes tour of your library, respond to negative suggestions in your suggestion box with frank responses, address problems both big and small that are pointed out in library surveys or even in (gasp!) local news stories.

But remember: it's not just being honest about flaws that promotes a sense of authenticity. Authenticity is also about empathy. And it's difficult to be empathetic with a bunch of bricks and mortar. So personalize your library. If you are using social media such as Twitter or Facebook, personalize your accounts by putting a real person behind them, ideally a real library staff member (e.g., here's Mario tweeting for Your Public Library).

If you are a teaching library, be sure to use real examples when showing a search in a database (even if it is a bit messy). No one is ever going to encounter the perfection you portray in a canned search strategy you've practiced before the class. If you have them, make sure your library's mission, vision, and value statements are real reflections of what your library is all about and make sure these inform library policies.

Authentic Brand

Authenticity can also be a different way of thinking about branding. The library's brand is not necessarily a manufactured entity that is under the sole control of the library. Library users contribute to your brand, interpret it, tell others about it, complain about it, and sometimes tell you what your brand is. Your brand becomes a conversation and an interaction, even more so when people feel they are involved in your library via public consultations, surveys, or even contests.

And don't think libraries have to play second fiddle to the for-profit world just because we don't have huge marketing budgets to spend on developing an authentic brand. Big companies may use authenticity in advertising to associate themselves with a certain set of values, hoping these will be attractive to their target consuming audience. But when it comes down to it, products and services need to be sold and money needs to be made.

Libraries, on the other hand, already have a head start when it comes to authenticity. We don't often have an ulterior motive to sell the public anything. We just honestly want everyone to be able to take advantage of all of the great things we think we have to offer.

The Last Word

Authenticity is about being genuine and truthful. Never exaggerate. Be honest. And remember that it doesn't make sense to pretend that your library is perfect. Who wants a perfect library? I want a flawed, interesting library with a few wrinkles, a healthy dose of credibility, and above all, authenticity.

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