

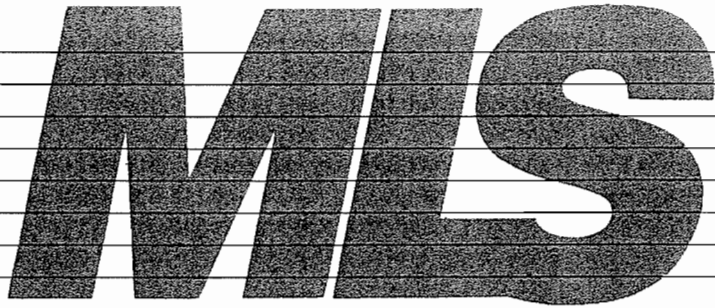
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# MARKETING LIBRARY SERVICES

## A Marketing Plan for Virtual Reference

by Peter Bromberg

Some people build a virtual reference service, then try to figure out how to market it. In New Jersey, we wanted to market libraries, so we built a virtual reference service. Q and A NJ, our state's live chat reference service, is available on the Web 24/7. Collaboratively staffed by more than 250 librarians from 36 participating libraries, it's funded by the New Jersey State Library with federal Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) funds and managed by the South Jersey Regional Library Cooperative (SJRLC), a 560-plus-member multi-type cooperative based in Gibbsboro. Q and A NJ has gone from serving 400 customers a month to serving over 4,000 a month. Much of that growth can be attributed to our marketing efforts and the four main principles that guided us:

1. Make it about the customer.
2. Think outside the bookmark.
3. Market synergistically.
4. The path of the middle way leads to marketing enlightenment.


One thing that makes Q and A NJ unique among virtual reference services is that it actually grew out of a desire to create a highly marketable library service. Instead of spending thousands of dollars on a marketing campaign to *tell* customers how great libraries are, we put our resources into building a useful service so we could *show* them how great we are. In essence, Q and A NJ is a marketing campaign.

The seeds of Q and A NJ were sown at a "Leap Forward" planning day that SJRLC held on Feb. 29, 2000, when a select group of library policy-makers, team members, and original thinkers came together from around the region. They told us that they wanted SJRLC to develop a highly marketable service, one that would wow customers and also help libraries to recruit and develop staff. Karen Hyman, executive director of SJRLC, had the foresight to see that a live, virtual reference service would go a long way toward meeting many of these goals. Hyman sent invitations to selected members asking them to come together to begin designing and implementing an online, real-time

reference service. At the first planning meeting we agreed that there would be a focus on marketability, and a coordinated approach to marketing and publicity.

### 1. Make It About the Customer

Since Q and A NJ was born in a spirit of marketing, one of our first tasks was to develop a plan to market it. The planning group, led by Hyman, felt strongly that all marketing efforts, from naming the service to creating promotional materials, should adhere to the principle, "Make it about the customer." In other words, customers respond to marketing when they are offered something—an image, a story, a metaphor—that they can personally connect to a need in their own lives. This principle runs through all of Q



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*"In essence,  
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and A NJ's marketing materials, from press releases chock full of real, engaging customer comments to the phrase that appears on our bookmarks and posters: "Got a question? About anything? Get a live answer." This works because it's short, to the point, and customer-focused. Our posters also listed sample question categories, such as job hunting, health info, business, child care, and term papers, to help prove to customers that Q and A NJ was available to answer *all* their questions.

In naming Q and A NJ, we made a conscious choice to not use the word "reference" because, unlike us, our customers don't have a strong sense of what "reference" means. We also avoided using the word "library" in the name and in promotional items because we wanted to minimize the effect of customers' preconceived notions concerning library service. We were out to change people's expectations of libraries by offering them a new, high-quality, fast-paced service in a place they would never expect to find it—right in the comfort of their own home or office, any time of the day or night. That's what it means to make it about them.

## **2. Think Outside the Bookmark**

Giving bookmarks out is the old warhorse of library PR, and we certainly made good use of it in marketing Q and A NJ. We printed an initial run of 20,000 to give to customers in every participating library. We also printed and distributed posters and stickers, and made sure that each library Web site displayed a standard Q and A NJ banner ad on the top-level home page. These methods served us well. We know, because we asked. Approximately 25 percent of our customers take the time to fill out a short customer feedback form that includes the question, "How did you hear about Q and A NJ?"

But as good as bookmarks, posters, and online banner ads are, they share one limitation: They only reach people who are already using the library. We wanted to also reach potential customers who didn't use the library; who may not even know that libraries answer questions. So we challenged ourselves to think outside the bookmark to find creative ways of reaching nonusers. Here are some of the things we did that worked:

Professional PR folk at two of our larger libraries wrote top-notch press releases, which we then sent out to targeted local newspapers across the state. We reached out to businesses and had our bookmarks distributed at Barnes & Noble, Borders, Waldenbooks, and independent bookstores across the state. That's right: Borders and Barnes & Noble agreed to hand out our bookmarks with every purchase—and they did it too. (We checked!) We paved the way for their cooperation by providing them with a short informational letter describing the benefits of Q and A NJ. In a section of the letter headed, "Supporting your community," we wrote, "We think you'll agree that we provide an innovative, valuable public service to the customers and clients in your community. We appreciate your willingness to help us by distributing bookmarks

in your establishment." Was the letter effective? Well, no one turned us down.

We also distributed bookmarks to YMCAs, schools, and libraries across the state. The Princeton Public Library even distributed bookmarks at a Princeton University football game! County and municipal libraries worked with their payroll offices to see that bookmarks were included with paychecks for all county and city employees. A few of our participants were able to get on local radio shows, and we've had television news coverage on the service four times.

Beyond bookmarks, we also sought out chambers of commerce and community groups such as the New Jersey Association of Women Business Owners and gave short informative presentations on the usefulness of a 24/7 question-answering service. Some libraries targeted retail stores such as Wal-Mart, and even local restaurants agreed to display promotional materials. Most communities have a tremendous amount of goodwill toward their libraries, and if you ask, they'll help. We also make it easy for our customers to share the news by offering a "send this site to a friend" link, an effective and inexpensive service offered by [referralblast.com](http://referralblast.com).

## **3. Market Synergistically**

Marketing synergistically means that for every dollar you spend, you get two dollars' value; for every hour put into the campaign, you get two hours' worth of result. It means planning your strategy so that whenever possible, your actions serve more than one purpose. It means timing your activities to ensure you get a maximum of coverage or attention.

Although Q and A NJ went live to the public with limited hours on Oct. 1, 2001, we were initially cautious in our marketing, sticking to small press releases and bookmark distribution in participating libraries. We held off on a full-scale marketing blitz because we were planning to expand the service to 24/7 in January 2002. It made more sense to hold off on the big marketing push until January, when we could synergistically announce two compelling messages: "We're available 24/7!" and "Live help on the Web!" Our first coordinated marketing campaign showed immediate results. Usage shot up from 100 questions per week to 100 questions per day almost overnight, and we haven't stopped to catch our breath since.

Another way we've marketed synergistically is by doing what librarians do best, sharing resources. All of our marketing efforts, from fliers and graphics to press releases and ideas for promotions, are shared online through a marketing resources Web page. The page, created by Q and A NJ's project coordinator Marianne Sweet, ensures that all money and time spent developing materials and ideas continue to pay off long after the initial investment. These resources are accessible to all project participants: copies of professionally written press releases; a marketing ideas checklist; suggestions for use and distribution of PR materials; ideas for in-library promotions; and a selection of graphic images and banner ads in a va-

riety of sizes, styles, and formats. One of the most useful items on the marketing page is our Press Tip-Sheet. Complete with fast facts, statistics, quotable quotes, customer feedback, project accomplishments, and the correct wording of our funding source, the tip sheet is the perfect resource for Q and A NJ librarians when *The New York Times* calls at 4:55 p.m. on Friday and wants information for the article that will appear in Sunday's paper.

#### ***4. The Path of the Middle Way Leads to Marketing Enlightenment***

Following the path of the middle way means avoiding the extremes. One extreme is the path of the best-kept secret, which is characterized by this way of thinking: "Hey, we've got a really great service. But if we tell people about it they may actually use it. And if they like it, they'll tell everyone about it. And if they tell everyone, then we'll be really overwhelmed. Um, maybe we shouldn't tell anybody." If you find yourself on the path of the best-kept secret, do 30 minutes of deep breathing and send out five press releases to center yourself.

The other extreme is the path of screaming news from the rooftops. This path is characterized by those who tell everybody they know about their great new service and shoot for half-time coverage at the Super Bowl. The danger with this strategy is that you really might find yourself with too much demand and not enough capacity. Service quality can suffer, and that huge initial rush of customers will be disappointed because they couldn't get connected. When customers have a negative first impression, it's likely they will not return. They might also hurt your marketing efforts with negative word-of-mouth, which can be powerful.

The path to marketing enlightenment is the middle way. The middle way honors restraint and suggests marketing to manage a scaled growth. Thus, marketing is used to increase demand, but only with due consideration of your capacity to meet it. Instead of shouting from the rooftops, try targeting specific groups of potential users. The middle way honors patience. It also honors risk, and suggests that your service should not be treated as the best-kept secret in town.

In the end, it is useful to remember that the best marketing campaign will ultimately be driven by positive word-of-mouth, spread by happy customers. At Q and A NJ we've designed a welcoming Web site with no "thou shalt not" messages or other roadblocks to its use. We work hard every day to ensure that once our customers show up, they will have positive experiences, tell their friends about it, and keep coming back. \*

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## **SPECIAL REPORT**

# **The 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual IFLA/3M International Marketing Award Winners Named**

by *Christie Koontz*

To recognize libraries around the world that develop and implement effective marketing programs, the Management & Marketing (M&M) Section of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) joined with 3M Library Systems last year to create the IFLA/3M International Marketing Award. So in August 2003, for the second year in a row, first, second, and third prizes were presented at IFLA's Annual Conference in Berlin. As a member of the M&M committee, I'm very familiar with the awards. In this article I'll profile the top three winners and give brief summaries of other applicants' projects. The top three had been notified early this summer so that the first-place winner could claim the big prize—airfare, lodging, and registration for the 2003 IFLA Annual Conference—and, at the show, a cash award of \$1,000 (U.S.) to further the library's marketing efforts.

Altogether there were 15 applicants from seven countries—four from Spain; four from the U.S.; three from the U.K.; and one each from India, Tanzania, Serbia, and Thailand.

### ***This Year's Winners: Examples of Their Ingenuity***

This year's winners are varied, robust, and colorful.

**First Place:** "The Marketing Campaign: Literary Pathways" Consorci de Biblioteques de Barcelona (CBB), Spain

Submitted by Mireia Sala, director, msalaf@mail.bcn.es

The public library system of the beautiful bustling seaport town of Barcelona, Spain, is putting nonusers on paths that lead straight to the libraries! Literary Pathways is a program featuring actors or guides who lead tour participants into neighborhoods that famous authors lived in or wrote about, all while reading selections of their works. The literary travelers are required to register for library cards. (The nearest library is often a stop on the tour as well.) Librarians encourage families and children to participate together, thereby creating a basis for a whole new generation of customers.

Colorful examples of the tour subjects include George Orwell, author of *1984* and *Animal Farm*, as

*CBB is creating a basis for a whole new generation of customers.*