Library Innovations

by Kevin Hennah

In 2002, whilst working as a retail consultant, I was approached by The State Library of Victoria to design and deliver a workshop for a group of approximately 15 librarians. The brief was to share basic principles of retail store layout. I delivered concerned that it may be difficult to draw parallels between retail and libraries and was equally concerned the group would not find the day useful.

My fears were not realised – I couldn't have underestimated the opportunities more! A second workshop was booked, followed by a statewide training program for all 55 public library services, plus a book. Both sponsored by The State Library of Victoria.

I did not expect the interest to grow to a national and international level, nor the overwhelming response from schools, universities, colleges and privately owned libraries.

In 2007, I worked with The School Library Association of Victoria on a book called *Rethink*. This inspired me to write and tour a workshop I named *Rethink Reinvent Rejuvenate*. It showcased library design, layout and makeovers at all budget levels. The response has been incredible and I continue to tour the workshop nationally and internationally. This was followed by the *ID Workshop*, which explored library navigation, signage and branding.

I have carried out more consultations than I can recall, but estimate the number must exceed 1000, working at all budget levels. I have delivered my workshops in the USA, Belgium, Romania, New Zealand, Japan, Singapore, Malaysia, Laos, Hong Kong, Thailand, The Philippines, Doha and Dubai.

My latest workshop showcases forward thinking and innovative initiatives. It's a collection of ideas I think need to be embraced, or at least considered, in order to keep libraries relevant for many years to come. If nothing else, I hope to open cans of worms, perhaps empty the too-hard basket and generate lots of discussion!

Defining *library*

When designing or renovating, I find library staff rarely have sufficient input. This often results in libraries that are aesthetically pleasing, but lacking in flexibility and functionality. Start breaking down this culture by making relevant staff aware of your achievements, goals and future vision for the library.

Arrive at meetings with well-researched design objectives. Focus on initiatives that maximise flexibility and make good long-term financial sense. Avoid statements that start

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with "I think" and "I don't like" and replace these with "we can maximise flexibility and usage by…" and "it will make good long-term financial sense to…"

Arrive with what you consider to be your design essentials and a strong argument to support these – and keep reminding everybody why these are so important. Try not to dilute your credibility with statements such as "I really don't like that colour". Choose the battles worth fighting!

I've seen few libraries with architectural problems, but equally I've seen few with a truly innovative interior fit-out and visual merchandising strategy. There are many factors that contribute; those I note frequently include:

Funding: Raise awareness of the importance of fit-out and the approximate cost in the early planning stages.

Planning: I've sat in countless meetings where teams deliberate over subtle architectural variables, then rush through the shelving order and signage strategy later in order for the project to meet the deadline. It's never too soon to start planning the detail – you can polish as you move closer to the finish line.

Vision: Unfortunately I have encountered library staff who are keen to create a new, fresh version of what they already have. New library. New practices. New culture. Step outside your comfort zone!

Skill: I've noted some architects are responsible for areas outside their expertise (though they may not agree with this statement!). They may be brilliant designers; however, this does not make them experts in information management or learning pedagogy. The internal fit-out strategy should not be driven by the vision of one person, no matter how good his or her intentions.

The Solution? Ensure all three bases are covered:

Architecture: Involves building an impressive and functional building.

Interior Design: Focuses more on interior décor and the selection of materials, colours and finishes. Some architects can do this or have staff who carry out this task.

Visual Merchandising: This is the job of presenting a product in a manner that looks impressive, maximises productivity of space, is easy to navigate and, in turn, builds turnover. This usually incorporates supporting materials such as signage and display. Visual merchandising is the area in which most libraries under-deliver!

Library Design Essentials

Some of the areas you cannot afford to compromise on include:
1. Bold, contemporary external signage
2. A colour scheme that will not date fast or lock you in to a fixed layout
3. Flexible and movable furnishings and fit out
4. Adequate (and hopefully clever) lighting
5. Avoid Titanic service desks

Critical! 3D design renders should be considered a must! I've heard too many people say they can't afford these, then later spend 5 times the amount fixing avoidable design issues. I've also never encountered a retail designer that does not offer this service as standard. How can you possibly agree to or pay for something you haven't seen?

Space Planning

Customer Focus: Layout, use of space and overall image should be driven by customers. How would you set up your library if you were to receive $1 in your personal bank account for every resource borrowed?

Manage Your Real Estate: Think of your library floor as a Monopoly board and yourself as the landlord of this real estate. Then question whether everything on the library floor pays the rent of the space it occupies?

Keeping Print Relevant

The Internet moved the goals posts, yet I think many libraries are still kicking in the same direction!

Pre-Internet – Interesting seating and access to technology was an added bonus to a print collection.

Post-Internet – Print often relies on the above to generate usage stats.

Bigger is not necessarily better! There is a distinct difference between how much a library can physically hold and how much it can effectively showcase. For print to compete with online resources, it needs to be presented in a user-friendly, visually interesting format. You cannot do what you have always done and expect to achieve the results you always have.

Consider how many books your floor space can effectively showcase. Once you exceed this, visual merchandising standards will drop and in turn, usage potential.

Once you have arrived at your optimum book count, aim to apply a one in, one out policy.

I believe book sales are better implemented off-site. Libraries need to invest as much effort as possible into projecting an image that is fresh, vibrant and contemporary. A table of old books does not enhance this.

Think about first impressions. The entrance of your library should showcase high-appeal themes such as:

New!	What's Hot	In the Media
Returned Today	Staff Picks	Quick Pick

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Shelving is a marketing tool for libraries

Many libraries replaced old computer screens in favour of the newer slim-line version years ago, which is of course a great aesthetic improvement and helps project a contemporary image. The same principles were not, however, applied to books. Many libraries still use old, unattractive shelving, that is too tall, configured in aisles and is so dated they cannot purchase new components…at least the ugly computer screens still worked – the shelves don't!

We cannot make an informed judgment about the relevance of print until we create a level paying ground between print and new technologies.

- Language such as stacks and volumes needs to be replaced with conversation about merchandising strategies
- There's no such thing as an interesting aisle
- Front facing books are a must
- Aisle ends must showcase front facing quick picks - Slatwall is the ideal product for this function
- Dust covers generally create shadows. If you have a problem with dust collecting on books, you have a much greater problem with your visual merchandising!

Directional signage

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Supplement the online catalogue with clear signs over each bay that highlight the key or most popular theme in that bay.

Seating

Create a lounge: Seating has the potential to bring enormous personality to a library. Avoid conservative seating in large clusters. Instead create smaller seating pods and in turn, a layout that feels like the community's shared lounge. Use different designs in each location and mix and match interesting fabrics and textures.

Large ottomans are a functional alternative to coffee tables, while smaller ottomans can be randomly placed throughout non fiction and used as quick pick chairs. These are especially useful when browsing bottom shelves.

Meeting & Collaborative Spaces: Whether it be a small break out room in which a group of 4-6 people can meet and plug into a shared screen, a 1950s inspired booth or just a space with cleverly selected seating that creates a sense of privacy, collaborative workspaces in libraries are always well used. Libraries may not be able to keep abreast of developments in technology, print stats may drop, the Internet may no longer be a point of difference for libraries, but the need for people to work together will not decrease, in fact it's probably increasing.

Private Study & Laptops: Most libraries have a shortage of space to plug in laptops for independent study. I frequently see people

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hunting for power points in all types of libraries. Many schools ask students to maintain their laptop charged at all times. It seems this is extremely difficult to achieve and that access to power may be a powerful draw card for many libraries.

Wireless Internet Access: Free wifi access should be considered a given (in 2014).

Desk Top Computers: I'm concerned that public libraries who rely on internet access for stats may not be able to sustain this as the Internet becomes easier and cheaper to access. Be sure to nurture all parts of 'the business'. If space permits, I still see value in one-to-one laptop schools maintaining a small number of desktop computers (perhaps 2-4) for accessing small amounts of information fast.

Learning Spaces: For school libraries to remain relevant, we need to create intimate study and learning spaces that are unique, not simply replicate classrooms.

News Space: Have you considered linking magazines and newspapers with a wall-mounted screen playing world news (subtitles)? Then set this up with comfortable lounge seating.

Café Space: Providing it is financially viable, I see great value in linking cafés and libraries. Perhaps located adjacent to a news space, this can only enhance enjoyment of the library and gives people one less reason to leave! Popular with public libraries, the concept is also being trialled in some secondary schools.

Transition vs Collection

Most libraries tell me they need or would like more space. The easiest and cheapest way to create this is to challenge everything on the library floor, in the back room, at the desk. Just as buying new books requires weeding, so too new systems and services should replace the old. The classic example of this is RFID (radio frequency identification or self check out facilities). RFID can only work to its full potential if staff direct all customers to use it as an alternative, as opposed to a second, option for checking out resources.

To achieve this, smaller service/information desks should replace the large, traditional circulation desk. Many libraries are now opting for movable modular customer service points to maximise flexibility.

As long as the traditional circulation desk exists, it becomes a magnet for staff and customers alike. I do not agree that a traditional desk is required for library staff to connect with their customers – in fact I think more interaction on the library floor is an excellent way to build stats and relationships. This requires a change in culture and work systems. It does not equate to a loss of jobs, but opens up opportunities for staff to engage with customers away from the desk.

If you were to implement RFID and remove a large desk, what would you do with the newfound space? What would you do with the time you also created?

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VHS. Some libraries are contemplating the end of DVD, whilst others are still carrying VHS. I believe that any public libraries carrying VHS are actively damaging their image.

Map Drawers vs Google Earth!

Teacher Reference: In secondary schools, many teachers tell me they have made the transition to access much of their information online.

Compact Discs: Do an audit of how many CD stores exist in your local shopping centre, and then ask teenagers how many compact discs they buy in a year. Also ask your wider customer base. Look at usage stats and what you spend in a year on this collection. Then ask, is the collection a smart long-term decision and does it pay its rent? I suggest most libraries should be considering the exit strategy for music CDs, and at least reviewing alternative formats for the visually impaired.

The Library as a Brand

Your own unique icon or logo can sit alongside that of a larger organisation without diminishing their professionalism or exposure. In fact, I think it can enhance it.

You may need to choose your language; "our own unique brand" may be rejected by senior staff while "a unique and uniform signage template or logo" may be seen as an excellent initiative – though it is essentially the same thing.

Branding Libraries:
- Create a graphic or just text and be consistent in the use of this..
- Try to avoid predictable concepts, especially those that involve pictures of books.
- The fewer colours you use, the easier and cheaper it will be to reproduce – especially if you want to have items professionally printed.
- Your branding efforts need to work equally as well on a large wall as they do on a business card; keep this in mind when reviewing designs.
- Branding should be consistent across print material such as logo, letterhead & print collateral.
- Explore opportunities to pick up your brand on external & internal signage.
- Ideally, try to pick up the colours or at least the flavour of your branding in décor & furnishings as well as staff uniform, dress or simply name badges.
- Whether on print or screens, promotional signage should carry your brand as well as uniform font.
- Brand translates to culture – does a list of rules at the entrance or a messy foyer suit your brand?
- Everything that people see and experience in your library contributes to their perception of the library – this is steering their perception.

Display & Promotion

Many libraries are now using large, wall-mounted screens (TV) to display text and imagery rather than paper, pin boards and the like. These can be loaded with rotating messages or in-house book trailers. This will save time, present a professional and contemporary impression and, importantly, it is more likely to be effective than static messages printed on paper. For digital messages to be effective, the number of words on each screen should be kept to a minimum. 15 words or less per screen is good. 5 or less is better. Pictures might communicate more?

I've always maintained that a 'can do' attitude is just as powerful as a generous budget – good luck!

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