The Joys and Fantasies of Library Marketing

Navigating the Road of Hope, Success, and Vague Ambitions

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ABSTRACT Value is at the heart of human existence—the value of one's job, of people, and of time spent. How this all translates into a successful model in libraries is a constant challenge; one which negotiates the existential questions of our institutions with how we portray ourselves and seek to connect with the public. This is where "library marketing" comes into play. While an old concept that dates back at least a century, marketing has come to serve a prominent role in modern libraries. Since the late 1990s, marketing publications have proliferated and theological libraries have sought to be part of that trend. The primary challenges, though, have come in the form of finding solid marketing objectives, overmarketing circumstances that may not interest patrons in meaningful ways, or identifying suitable financial support from parent institutions. This paper will explore the dynamics, struggles, and hopes of marketing specific to theological libraries.

ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENTS OF MODERN MARKETING

"We really need to find ways to get people through the door; to market our product, to get the word out, so that people know who we are and what we do." This line is so common now that it could refer to anything from NGOs and non-profit work to libraries. Certainly, most of us have heard some variation on this sentence at one time or another in recent years. It is something that I have heard for a long time, and something that has both intrigued and troubled me. I am very much for promoting our institutions, our libraries, our services and staff resources, for sure. But my concerns are about the underlying reasons, structures, and intentions of doing the promo-

tion, marketing, and outreach—the *why* question. We most likely and regularly assume that it is done for the good of our workplaces, our institutions, and the spaces we occupy, simply "it's what we do nowadays." But there is a more entrenched and underlying set of assumptions that deserve our attention and interrogation, because much of it is tied to not just our behaviors and attachments to the social, cultural, and intellectual spaces we inhabit, but also in the nuance of our own existences as librarians, individuals, and human communities of commerce and social contracts. We market and promote, because we want *someone* with whom to engage and utilize our products, even if we are not necessarily selling a viable commodity that yields a *sale* or *profit*.

Herein lies part of the dilemma too: the very language I have used in this last sentence is an extension of the language we all use in marketing and promotion. We are effectively inducted into the ceremonious language of *selling products*, we are salespeople with goals and metrics and quotas—even if we do not hold ourselves to the same standards as a team that is required to show products, assets, or profits. Within this wheelhouse of business language, which demonstrably has increased in usage since the early 1990s, when corporations consolidated industries like healthcare and consumer sales and even forms of education, we give it no second thought to speak in these terms, because it has now become natural and commonplace. Many debates in theological or church communities often echo statements like "churches aren't businesses," because that somehow conflicts with a theological perception of *pureness* that God somehow neither cares about nor has anything to do with money. Though, within our paradoxical American context, some might argue that religious institutions, including those in higher education, *are in fact businesses*, unabashedly (cf. Prosperity Gospel proponents). On the most practical level though, I would argue that God requires an accountant of the soul *and* the wallet.

Returning to the primary concern of marketing, one could write an extensive history of the matter, which might include everything from how Christianity spread through sociological and cultural means—arguably tied to how religious practices, social norms, and family ties were marketed to peer groups, hierarchies, and regional powers—to what we do in seminaries today to market online programs or library reference via e-chats. Of course, marketing must be accompanied by assessments of those who control commercial

and informational channels. This effectively means that those with (or in) power, coercively or not, have the upper hand at compelling society to think and act in a manner they wish.

For our sake, a cursory review of modern marketing back to the eighteenth century is sufficient and provides us with a consideration of what we now use in our own theological toolkits to draw patrons to our libraries. Josiah Wedgewood (1730-1795), the famed creator of the namesake china and dinnerware, is noted as one of the pioneers of modern advertising and marketing. His practices included such novel experiments as money-back guarantees, buy-one-get-one-free offers, catalogs, and free deliveries. The enticements of service, where clients and customers experienced an easing of access to material culture may be seen as the earliest examples of modern customer service to which we still adhere to today.

With the rise of the Industrial Revolution and industrial society itself, consumerism as both an idea and practice were on the rise. But consumerism was not a singular idea that was tied to objects—it could also be applied to services and religion. The particularity of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century religious *awakenings* cultivated a populist appeal that was both egalitarian and consumeristic. The public preachers were selling religion, just as the missionaries sent across the new American nation and out across the globe were effectively marketing particular brands of Christianity.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, one could easily find religious and moralistic stories becoming more common, and in turn those stories were used to sell both religion *and* commercial goods. Most notably, the story of *Ben-Hur* was based on biblical tales, but later it turned into a marketing phenomenon that sold everything from coffee and flour to chocolate and cigars. The original story was selling religion, while two decades later the revival of the story in theater and film began to sell commercial products.

It was around this same time in the 1890s, notably a time of rampant wealth accumulation and disparities in the United States, when marketing began to take form in libraries as well. The most notable exponent of this was John Cotton Dana (1856-1929), who is often seen by scholars as being the great democratizer of the American library. His approaches include such tactics as opening stacks to public browsing, easing of library card access and associated restrictions, lengthening of library hours to accommodate working-class readers, and the welcoming of children into library reading rooms as the

heirs of future society. All of these measures, and more, were part of a new approach to marketing the library for the twentieth century.

In terms of marketing as a social science, its path took on a more sophisticated turn after the Second World War, when scholars like Ernest Dichter (1907-1991) applied Freudian psychology to marketing, by discerning desire and consumer wants in books like *The Strategy of Desire* (1960) and *The Handbook of Consumer Motivations* (1964). Such approaches afforded new ways to look at the public through the lens of human motivation, which in turn could be applied to both commerce and intangible assets, like museums, libraries, and churches. Yet, it was not until the 1990s, with vast and previously inconceivable changes in technology, information, and instantaneous communications, when marketing began to take off as a field of study related to libraries. The number of books specifically on *library marketing* went from nearly zero to scores in a matter of a few years. Such titles by Gayle Skaggs, Ned Potter, and Debra Lucas-Alfieri are but a few to mention. Today, we are overwhelmed with such titles and can find that *library marketing* has become commonplace at library conferences, in iSchool curricula, and among professional positions in academic and public libraries around North America.

Having outlined some historical considerations up to the present, we shall now turn to the complexities surrounding library marketing—the *joys and fantasies* as I have suggested, which may afford us an opportunity to dig deeply into why we market libraries (especially theological libraries) and what that means for our communities. Understanding *meaning* and *value* will be important to this consideration.

WHAT ARE THE JOYS?

For those who have chosen careers in theological libraries, they are generally something to be proud of, something to be joyful about. We work in them, manage them, explore them, share in them and their bounties because we have some innate desire to do so. If we did not, we would likely not be working in them. And because we have such feelings and commitments, by those very virtues we carry within us a certain sense of value, our axiology of place, career, and self. If we do not or cannot find value in our work, then we feel diminished and ultimately should not be doing that kind of work. Indeed, the best part of this career spectrum is what we have long called *voca-*

tion in theological education—something we are *called* to do. Yet, I would venture to say that most of us live along that spectrum in our commitments to both our own libraries and the field of theological librarianship itself.

When we enter the spaces of our libraries, we consciously and subconsciously engage with our surroundings, our daily and long-term needs, and all the details and extras of operations that are required of us. The joys of our work, admittedly, are entwined with the rigmarole of in-the-weeds politics of operations. Yet it is those very joys of the library that are what pull us up and remind us of our libraries' special offerings, and why we are there and want to share in their greatness.

WHAT ARE THE FANTASIES?

Why choose *fantasies* as the counterpoint to *joys?* And what exactly does *fantasy* mean in our context? In English, the word is derived from the root meaning "make visible" or "to imagine." But in its fullest form, it is usually defined as "the faculty or activity of imagining things, especially things that are impossible or improbable." My selection of this term to discuss *marketing* is in good part due to the question of *why* we market and *what* we hope to accomplish. Many of our hopes and aspirations around marketing, both realistically and theoretically, concern the cultural riches of our theological libraries. But on the other side of this are the unrealized desires for greater and more meaningful engagement of our institutions with patrons, alumni/ae, donors, and the public at large. Why is this *a fantasy* or even *fantastic*, in the sense of describing our discreet situations? Because it involves our most active imaginations that persuade us that each of our institutions is the most fabulous of places, and only if we try harder can we see the miraculous results of pushing marketing schemes, plans, gimmicks, or policies. What is lost in this is that while marketing *is good* and *is necessary,* there is a disconnect between the steady realities of marketing and the wishful fantasies of the phantom megadonor, the capacity attendance at events, or overflow patron use of collections.

Since the 1990s, the corporate designs on outcomes mean that we are forced to think about our libraries in those very business-oriented terms: What is our return on investment (ROI)? Are we quantifying (vs. qualifying) our patron base? Is our *mailing* list large enough?

In many ways, this vision reflects the very foundational need of survival: we market because we seek a clientele, who will demonstrate our necessity. This last line has been very common in theological libraries and their parent institutions for the last 25 years: "prove you matter" is how I have heard it, or "are you still viable?"

Writer Kathy Dempsey has noted in her works that such points as economic factors, metrics, and best practices emerged as market forces demanding that libraries evolve in this way, giving rise to the trend in marketing libraries and a flurry of books on the subject. At the same time, the *quantity vs. quality* notion began to rise with a particularly noticeable trend leaning toward *quantity* of library use being emphasized in library marketing. A question that we have not demonstrably answered is whether or not this shift in corporate tactics in theological libraries, namely marketing as a tool to target both intangible and tangible assets (including patrons as assets), is fully derived from trends in the business world, or a more diffuse set of sources tied to everything from politics and technology to environments and theological education itself. I would lean toward the latter.

Within this framework of quality, quantity, value, and desire for engagement, there are a few points to consider when working through what may be achievable realities and those that may simply be fantasies in this sense. For example, we all have great ideas and dreams for what we wish we could accomplish, but many times these are dampened due to real circumstances and politics. We often seek a broad constituency in both our stakeholders and our public, but the paradox is that the desire for more voices often limits the functional implementation of ideas due to resistance or contrasting views. Additionally, many of the hopes for our libraries are tied to distinct groups (donors, alumni/ae, and community members), whom we wish will either use our resources or donate to our libraries, but we can be certain that the politics of donor relations in theological institutions is almost never driven through the library, but through the parent institution.

Furthermore, while we seek more sophisticated ways to engage, market, and entice people into our libraries, our creativity must increase exponentially, because the fact is that it will become even harder to run libraries in the future within a world that fosters and supports competition in all aspects of life. For example, we cannot ignore the impact that search engines have had on library staffing (many reference positions have been *demoted* or reclassed to part-

time or non-professional, even student positions). Beyond this, a major point is that in order to have marketing work, and for our libraries to succeed, we will need to know patrons better. There will always be unknowns about patron use, and as marketing agents of the library we will need to work with the data we have to polish and refine our tactics and goals. This will allow us to serve the public and our communities much better.

Our fantasies are usually the unfulfilled wishes and longshots that we do not want to give up on. And maybe that is what drives many of us—the "only ifs." We live in the constant tension of *joys and fantasies*, perhaps because the hopeful nature of our work demands that we look toward a better future, rather than a gloomy one. While we want to please everyone, the truth is we cannot. While we wish to make decisions based on finite information, we are more likely going to have to deal with incomplete data. While we all want to be recognized for what we do, we are more likely going to suffer apathy and ignorance from those from whom we seek validation. We are often distracted, tired, and overwhelmed, and our hopes are snuffed out by circumstances and politics, many times far beyond our control.

While this may sound defeatist or fatalistic, it should not be. The marketing of theological libraries is distinctly important, more now than ever. We are living through very tenuous times, times which are full of uncertainty in our religious affiliations, as well as in our financial situations. Marketing may have a complicated relationship with itself as much as with the institutions it serves, but it possesses the power of narrative and participation that makes the value of its community all the more significant, effective, and uplifting. The joys may actually be much more part of the fantasies, in the end, especially if something truly fantastic becomes a reality. And living in that tension is what makes us the theological librarians we are, but perhaps more importantly, the dynamic human beings who comprise the profession and give it the hope it needs.