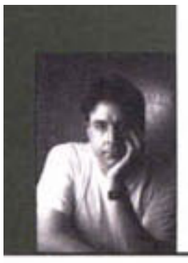

BRENDAN HOWLEY

THE RAZOR'S EDGE

Collective Intelligence and Libraries as Social Businesses

A library is a focal point, a sacred place to a community; and its sacredness is its accessibility, its publicness. It's everybody's place.

—Ursula K. Le Guin, from her 1997 speech celebrating the renovation of Multnomah County Library in Portland, Ore.

Social media is alive and thriving and is truly recognized as a service channel for libraries. Library cardholders can hear of current happenings via their library's Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook feeds, whether it is by viewing recommendations, programming announcements, or shared video clips. When media-savvy libraries deploy even more demographically sensitive platforms, such as reddit, Snapchat, and Periscope, they can look deep into the networks of the people they serve.

As libraries expand their competence in social media, they're becoming social businesses—nonprofit enterprises that exist for community betterment, leveraging community trust and investment for community good. Similar to values-driven, high-trust brands, libraries have a clear, competitive advantage in cultivating loyalty from their end users. But librarians are often modest and dedicated to quiet service—even if they are running (under the radar) one of the most important social businesses around. (Here's a statistic that'll start you thinking: According to the Federation of Ontario Public Libraries, on average, libraries pull in more foot traffic on the street where they stand than all the other destinations around them combined. Who knew?)

That's not all. Such interactivity is a data intelligence bonanza for libraries. But how can we use the analytics data from across all the platforms through which library cardholders live their digital lives?

No public library has even a fraction of the marketing budgets of the big brands, the resources of these mega-companies to data-mine its social networks for insights for service and product development, the big brands' well-funded research departments, or teams of data scientists to parse out the data. On top of that, the solution has to be in-house and demonstrably a great value for the money.

Libraries as Social Businesses (Of a Very Special Kind)

With the increased deployment of self-service options (ebooks, auto-checkouts, and offsite bibliographic search and database usage) and more emphasis on peer-to-peer learning in do-it-yourself areas and makerspaces, libraries face a dilemma: All that interactivity stands to make decisions more complex than ever. Simply put: How do libraries stay in touch with the needs and wants of their cardholders and community, strategic, and government partners, especially in an environment in which everyone seems to be on his or her phone? How can libraries manage their staffers in an environment in which their core services are increasingly nontraditional and the future of librarianship is under the microscope?

What if the future of libraries in this brave new world is actually an echo of what they have been doing for more than 700 years: bringing unspoken and unrecognized community value? Yes, I'm flat out advocating for recognizing that libraries have been true social businesses for centuries. They have been the unsung heroes of community value for far too long. It's time to demonstrate value where value lives.

Libraries are morphing into media, culture, and learning hubs, with spokes in their communities and branch systems. They are key nodes on community networks, which co-create measurable value: brainpower, the real growth engine for the cities, towns, and villages libraries serve. It's high time this contribution was made manifest.

Measurement: The Social Media Paradox

But here's the catch: The paradox is that the significant measurement is all about the community—not libraries themselves. Social media has created a revolution of rising expectations from library cardholders. The way they choose to see libraries is part and parcel of their perception of all media. They want their information, entertainment, culture, and answers to life's problems delivered with speed, relevancy, and personalization. The explosion of library cardholder media touchpoints—such as Netflix and CNN, e-banking on your smartphone, and the vast media databases available remotely—means one thing for sure: It's not rocket science.

The ability to measure how the communities libraries serve interact with a library experience is increasingly going to determine how programming and community outreach are designed, presented, funded, and cultivated as sustainable community resources. What's the best use of increasingly scarce programming funding? Who are the most impactful community partners? What about a culinary event that reaches a new ethnic community and brings in dozens of new families as cardholders? Or how about community actors from a Shakespeare in the Park production speaking about learning a classic play, thus taking their audience "backstage"?

The trust capital is, again, highly sought after by big commercial brands—and precious few of them enjoy the high-trust status with their userbase that ***libraries share with their cardholders.***

Both ideas have merit—so how do you choose? And what best integrates with library and archival holdings and staff competences to share and produce the whole package? Value and impact aren't just buzzwords; they'll increasingly inform how libraries evolve.

Library Cardholders: Untapped Resources

There's one sure metric we can all agree on: Increasing the raw number of cardholders is social proof that our library is doing its job. In an extraordinary piece of journalism, *YES! Magazine* recently profiled a group of small Mississippi banks, that, concerned the rural customer base they had was slowly vanishing into the black hole

of check-cashing services and predatory "payday" lenders, did a remarkable thing. Drawing on seed money from tiny federal capital programs, the banks started opening bank accounts for people who'd never had one before. The results were explosive: For every dollar awarded to the program, the ROI was $8–$9.

What's the takeaway for libraries from the Mississippi initiative? Simply, starting people on the road to a learning opportunity that clearly will benefit them—a small land grant or a library card—is a massive leg up in combating poverty, problems of gender and ethnic diversity, and even healthcare costs. Because while nothing succeeds like success, nothing sparks success like the prospect of sustainable possibility—real hope that there's something better you can rely on.

Cardholder User Experience

So what drives possibility for library cardholders? Well, sometimes it's not being a cardholder at all. Sometimes, it's discovering that libraries aren't what they once were. In November 2014, I helped the Hamilton Public Library in Ontario launch a concert series in what's now the central branch's makerspace. The first concert attracted more than 400 people (some from as far as 2 or 3 hours away)—almost none of whom were library cardholders.

These folks had one of the great musical nights of their life—in a library. A simple data capture survey demonstrated that they were converted that evening to the idea of sharing their own media and memorabilia from their past concerts through library media platforms. Asking a happy audience member to promote the experience he or she just enjoyed isn't a difficult idea to reproduce.

But what makes this such an important event isn't the sentiment that inspires the shareability—it's that peer-to-peer recommendations are extraordinarily powerful means of promoting the library brand. But how do you do this repeatedly and sustainably so that library media metrics can be deployed to inspire community storytelling about libraries? In a sentence: Ensure that cardholders have the best library experience possible, across the board. Then you can ask them to share that positive personal experience—and they'll respond. They're a story engine just waiting to be started.

It's the Authenticity, Stupid

In the marketing world, all these considerations are captured in the generic term "social customer relations management" (CRM). Social CRM does the following:

- Measures the interests of the community that the social business serves
- Demonstrates how social businesses grow by identifying community needs and wants
- Conveys why social businesses must break "old media" rules to reach their community
- Gathers the community's collective intelligence (peer-to-peer recommendations, reviews, and shared stories and images) to bring context to measurements

The CRM "understanding" that Fortune 500 brands want isn't across huge swaths of data; it's understanding the deeply personal, the local, the way people live their daily lives. It's the ability to create media that's highly relevant to your audience. Every big brand is chasing this data. For much of the past decade, that media was "cause marketing," which has misspent serious money on inauthentic marketing that was pegged to causes "people care about." Social media is one savvy b.s. detector; much of this effort has (rightly) fallen on deaf ears. There's been a backlash against all this inauthentic bilge masquerading as cause marketing. Happily, libraries have been exempt.

Viral movements such as the Ice Bucket Challenge remind us that the internet is a powerful driver of activism. Many studies have highlighted that customers—especially from the much maligned cohort of those age 18 to 34 that marketers like to lump together as an undifferentiated, annoying blob—prefer brands to be aligned with some sort of progressive cause. And brands, being brands, have been happy to oblige.

Almost too happy, it turns out. When every brand starts fighting for a piece of the social-good pie—allying with causes that have nothing to do with their core business—there remains no semblance of authenticity. Moreover, who wants to give up personal data to be "marketed to"? It's a mammoth invasion of privacy and personal space and, in the main, a failure. Advertising itself is on the ropes, as anyone with an ad blocker in his or her browser knows.

On the contrary, libraries are repositories and trusted guardians of community data, thus allowing them to be viewed as social businesses. They meet a community's collective intelligence in a "virtuous circle"—data deepens brand storytelling and brand storytelling deepens the data insights.

Closing the Circle by Measuring It

Here's a simple example: Remember our successful concert series and all those potential new cardholders? Getting them in the door is one thing; using the library's trust capital to ask those same people to share their stories, media, and memorabilia highlighting Hamilton's music history means that it can grow its marketing reach by leaps and bounds by offering the audience the opportunity to "close the circle." That's the beauty of being a high-trust brand.

In his landmark book, *The Speed of Trust*, Stephen M.R. Covey notes that brands live or die on the basis of their reputations, "which reflects the trust customers, investors and others in the marketplace have in you. Everyone knows that brands powerfully affect customer behaviour and loyalty. When customers (love) a high-trust brand, they buy more, refer more, give the brand the benefit of the doubt, and stay with you longer. This (trust) will not only improve your brand and reputation (in and of itself), it will also help improve your ... reputation in the marketplace."

The trust capital is, again, highly sought after by big commercial brands—and precious few of them enjoy the high-trust status with their userbase that libraries share with their cardholders. Here's a big-time cause marketing specialist, Jim Moriarty, director of brand citizenship at 72andSunny, telling it like it is: "With every passing day, it's getting harder and harder to pull the wool over people's eyes by trying to create meaningful brand love with disconnected causes—as it should. We all crave authenticity. Brands can and should change the world. And the best way to do that is to initiate, support and amplify causes that are connected to the brand's business and mission." How can libraries draw on their cardholders' immense goodwill for them, sustainably and authentically? Measure that goodwill and act on what you learn.

Further Resources

Social Business Model Canvas (a strategy development tool)
socialbusinessmodelcanvas.com

Beth Kanter's blog on social media strategy for nonprofits
bethkanter.org

BALLE, a nonprofit dedicated to building local economies
bealocalist.org

Lydia Zvyagintseva, a community data proponent and librarian
lydiazv.com

Measure the Future Project
measurethefuture.net

Brendan Howley is a veteran Canadian Broadcasting Corp.-trained investigative data journalist with roots in media design, content strategy, and digital technologies. He has created successful, award-winning multiplatform storytelling offerings for clients from Fortune 100 giants to tiny culinary microproducers. He has been involved in data-driven digital media collaborations with public and university library networks in Canada and the U.S. and with Kew Gardens in the U.K. For more, visit analytux.com or contact brendan@analytux.com.