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Books in Black:

Expanding the Library Brand

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When I became the communications manager for a large urban library system almost a decade ago, I was coached by my savvy library director to regularly use the word *books* where it would have been more accurate to say something more inclusive like *materials* or *resources*, as no other word resonated as well with library users or came even close to having the same rhetorical punch. This fundamental truth was underscored by OCLC's 2005 *Perceptions of Libraries and Information Studies*, which opened its analysis of the library brand by quoting a library user's description of what the word *library* meant:

Books, books, books, rows and rows of books, stacks of books, tables filled with books, people holding books, people checking out books. Libraries are all about books. That is what I think and that is what I will always think.

Yet, regardless of our profession's, and some of the public's, undying love for the book, digitization continues its steady ascent in myriad formats. Now that I'm a small town library director and look out from our circulation desk onto a veritable sea of DVDs, I see the question of how to reconcile these divergent realities from a new perspective. How do we reinforce the library brand when more and more of what we do and offer does not involve books?

In pondering this question, I found an interesting analogy from an item I plucked from the shelves of my own library—a CD audiobook of the biography *The Man Called Cash* by Steve Turner. Before listening to it (and the irony of experiencing this book in an audio/digital format was not lost on me), I had felt reasonably well informed about the life of Johnny Cash, but Turner's work taught me a great deal more about the evolution of his public persona. Initially rising to fame in the 1950s (along with Elvis Presley and Jerry Lee Lewis) as a Sun Records country star, Cash was ready for something new by the end of the decade. In 1961, he had the wisdom to hire a Canadian manager named Saul Holiff, who saw something different in Johnny Cash, and fundamentally changed the way he was presented to the public. Coining the phrase "America's foremost singing storyteller" to describe Cash, Holiff expanded the artist's appeal beyond the narrowness of the country genre, booking him in venues like Carnegie Hall and the Hollywood Bowl and exposing him to broader audiences in the United States and internationally.

As I listened to the description of Holiff's successful rebranding of Johnny Cash, I felt both shock and recognition. From my vantage point, the image of Cash that Holiff consciously created IS Johnny Cash; it seems very difficult for me to picture him any other way. As with any good brand, it has its origins in the genuine attributes of the product, and in Cash's case, reflects his love of a diverse range of musical styles, including not only country but also folk, blues, gospel and cowboy songs. Yet, it is interesting to ponder what might have become of Johnny Cash without the marketing acumen of his manager. Though he undoubtedly would have continued his musical career, it is much less likely that Cash would have become the category-transcending icon he remains today.

What does this have to do with libraries and librarians? Well, in a way, we are a lot like The Man in Black in the early 1960s. We already offer something that guarantees the allegiance of a core audience and that characterizes where we come from to the rest of the



world. Cash: boom-chicka-boom country; libraries: books. Beyond that, we have other capacities, talents and strengths that are less identified with us, but that are equally a part of what we have to offer. If this analogy holds true, then we should both embrace the book brand, as Cash did his country roots, and think creatively about how we can expand beyond it. Some days this makes perfect sense to me; on other days, I am a bit more puzzled. Since Johnny Cash has been instructive thus far, I return to him for additional guidance.

I keep a close watch on this heart of mine,
I keep my eyes wide open all the time,
I keep the ends out for the tie that binds,
Because you're mine, I walk the line (Cash, 1956).

“Keep(ing) the ends out for the tie that binds” seems a perfect way to describe our role as librarians in ensuring that our materials, services and programs successfully connect with patron needs. It seems to me that if we accomplish that, we will walk the line with respect to reinforcing the library brand, whether we are offering an online database, DVD, or traditional book. And, we will position ourselves to appropriately expand our brand to embrace the technologies of the 21st century. 🌿

Reference

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“We have learned that vision and imagination are priceless qualities for librarians to possess, vision to look at the future and picture the possibilities, imagination to determine the essentials ...” These words, written in 1920 by Mary Frances Isom, then head librarian of the Library Association of Portland, remind us that our profession has always striven to rise to the challenges of the time. Read Penny’s article about this remarkable woman, “Making the Library Be Alive,” at http://www.multcolib.org/about/mcl-his_isom.html

Jim Scheppke, Oregon State Librarian, wrote in the March 2010 Letter to Libraries Online: “I think Penny’s essay should be required reading for all public librarians in Oregon.” Here’s your chance!

