



What's a Library Worth?

Piecing together the structure of value

by Eleanor Jo Rodger

Librarians plan and strategize about how to tell funders and customers about the value of the libraries we serve. We tell heartwarming stories about what happens in the library. We do cost-benefit analyses. We do cost-effectiveness analyses. We study how to craft the library's message and how to get out the numbers of people needed to persuade somebody to give us the resources we need. We create marketing plans. We do research about what our customers think of us. We borrow models from other sectors of the worlds we are a part of: the for-profit world of bookstores, the nonprofit world of organizations, and, occasionally, the world of publicly funded institutions.

Sometimes some of these things work, sometimes others, and sometimes none of them seem to be very effective. Sometimes something works in one situation but, even if faithfully reproduced, doesn't work at all in another. A bird's-eye view of our communication practices leads to confusion and a kind of random hopefulness. We can do better.

Most of these strategies have come to us floating free of any structure that would explain why some work and some don't. This article offers a framework for understanding the basic structures beneath our assertions of value so that we can communicate more effectively with those on whom we depend for resources and those who depend on us for services.

Four Truths and Their Consequences

1. Libraries exist as parts of larger systems. Public libraries are part of cities, towns, and counties; school media centers are part of a school system; academic libraries are part of colleges and universities; special libraries are part of organizations, institutions, or corporations. Almost no library stands alone.

These larger host systems created the libraries, and they sustain them. Libraries rise and fall as their host systems rise and fall. We can be very good within the host systems, but we can almost never rise above their levels of success and excellence, regardless of our sense of our own value.

Those who care about thriving libraries must understand the library's host system. Why does it exist? What is its mission? Its history? What does it mean to be good or effective within that system? What does the system value? Is it currently stable or in flux? If things are changing, are the changes welcome or threatening? Who controls resource allocation in the library's host system? What influences them? Understanding our host systems is essential if we are to be vital components of their whole.

Every library employee should know three crucial things about the library's host system: its missions, its structure, and its history. This may mean digging into documents, but

it also means listening to their leaders to discern how they believe the system works and why. It's important to understand the priorities of the city, the university, the institution, or the school. Is the city grappling with an aging population? Is the elementary school struggling to work with immigrant parents? Is a business losing its market share? Again, listening to the leaders builds understanding; so does reading key sources of information such as minutes of the governing board's meetings, websites, local papers, and crucial reports.

Finally, it's important to understand the host system's power structures, formal and informal, as fully as possible. The formal power structure is usually described in documents, but the informal structure requires a different kind of attention. Exploring informal power can begin with asking lots of questions about why things happen the way they do, how decisions get or got made—not so as to protest or approve of the decisions, but to understand how the system works. This is about asking and listening, not about telling the library story.

2. Libraries need host systems more than host systems need libraries. Our shared passion and sense of purpose and importance often lead us to ignore this fundamental fact. Our host systems determine the rationale for libraries being a part of them, the legitimacy of our claims of belonging to them, and the constituencies we serve on their behalf. Perhaps most critically, they bestow (and therefore can recall) the resources we need to stay in business.

The legitimacy of libraries as parts of their host systems is often understood more in general terms than as nuanced lists of services or statistics. Public libraries are generally seen as good for children, school media centers as places that underpin and extend classroom teaching, university libraries as resources for scholarship, and corporate libraries as sources of information that contribute to productivity. The overall legitimacy of the library is rarely challenged as long as the common generalization holds.

When changes in practice or context put the understanding in question, libraries can have a problem. For example, policies establishing unfiltered access to internet resources for children brought into question the common notion of public libraries being good for children; and weeding seldom-used historic materials from academic libraries may undermine the assertion that the library supports original scholarship.

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If we are to thrive, it is crucial that we understand the generalization that creates our claim to being a legitimate part of our host system. Many librarians argue with these legitimizing generalizations, feeling misunderstood or not completely appreciated. Such righteousness is silly, unhelpful, and disrespectful. What matters is that we are accepted as a part of the host system and that our public face always respects the whole as well as our place in it.

It also matters that we not stray too far from our understood importance to the host system. We can do more things, but we are in trouble if we stop doing those things that are understood to be part of our legitimizing story. A public library can have a literacy program, but it better not be at the expense of a professional librarian in the children's department.

3. Libraries receive resources and continuing legitimacy from host systems in return for creating value for them.

"Value" does not exist abstractly in the host systems. It exists in the desires and perceptions of individuals in the systems, be they suppliers of resources or consumers of services. A college president whose doctoral research was abundantly and cheerfully supported by a university library years ago is more likely to support the college library now. A city councilman whose constituents are vocal about how much the public library contributes to the pre-reading skills of their children is likely to look favorably on the library's request for an early-childhood specialist.

All perceptions of value are not equal. An article of faith for librarians is that all customers are equal, but this isn't true. Every host system has a power structure; in each host system there are people with positional power, with personal power, and with circumstantial power, whether we like it or not.

While all library users should receive the same open, friendly, excellent service, some, because of their place in the host system's power structure, need to be kept fully satisfied all the time because they greatly influence the perceived value of the library to the host system as a whole. This may

mean delivering new DVDs to the mayor's office for her children to use over the weekend, or putting a Nobel Prize-winning professor's ILL request at the top instead of the bottom of the pile. It never means doing something fundamentally unethical or illegal; but it does mean bending rules occasionally and thoughtfully.

Strategically managing delight and disappointment is a skill all good leaders develop. It's a growth area for librarians, and an important one, given our need to deliver value to our host systems if we are to be perceived as valuable.

4. Value is not about the library but about its host system.

At conferences and meetings, we gather about the campfire of librarianship and sing our songs and tell our stories about how wonderful we are and how unappreciated, but that's not the world we live in. The world we live in is the world of the host system we serve, and our value is manifest in terms of our contribution to it. The Chicago Public Library is about the success of Chicago, the Fairbanks Elementary School Media Center is about the success of the Fairbanks Elementary School, the University of California at Los Angeles Library is about the success of UCLA students and faculty, and so on. It's always about them, not about us. We are honored to contribute to their success.

Library leaders and advocates have developed a number of effective strategies rooted in this truth. Some have presented the library's story in terms and categories reflecting the host systems' priorities. Is the city losing jobs? This is what the library has done and proposes to do for job seekers. Is the university adding a new doctoral program? This is how the library supports it.

Requests for resources should be presented in ways that emphasize librarians' understanding of the host system's priorities, not the needs of the library. Every agency or group that comes before a funding authority has unmet needs, and a recitation of these is neither inspiring nor persuasive. Tell the funders how their priorities will be served by giving the library the requested resources. If possible, have the people who have benefited from such services in the past tell their stories themselves. When legislation is being shaped, bus library users to the state capital, not librarians. It's more persuasive to hear children talk about the paper they wrote using information they found through the library's computers than it is to hear librarians talk about how circulation is up despite the internet. Librarians could come along in small numbers, but they should be armed with listening points, not talking points. Their role is to understand better the legislators' priorities, not to plead the library's case. Let the citizens do that; it's their money that funds the public library and their votes that elect the representatives.

Creating value for our host systems always involves three things: Librarians must understand their host systems; they must understand the source of their claim to being a legitimate part of that system; and they must do their work well so the system is better because they are there. It's usually far more a matter of asking and listening than it is of telling and pleading. ■

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