

McLibrary? Should we learn anything from the fast food industry?

Fiona Emberton

Are your hackles up already? Comparing libraries to McDonalds, indeed!

As librarians we often see our 'business' as high-end and superior to retail. And in most cases we are right. Libraries are much more exciting and valuable than say, bookshops in making a real difference to peoples' lives and creating life choices. I really mean that.

Without saying something that sounds more like a Superman comic excerpt - information can be use for good or evil and this article discusses the good things we can learn from such a negatively perceived industry as fast food. Read on!

Books such as *Fast Food Nation* (and the youth edition, *Chew on this*), *In Praise of Slow* and *Affluenza* have made it clear to me that we are approaching the tipping point when people will change their behaviour and turn to quality rather than quantity. Jamie Oliver faced immense abuse for his 'radical' thinking on healthy school lunches, but now he is widely admired. Yesterday, the *Guardian* newspaper had a give-away DVD of *Super Size Me*, a documentary about a chap who ate nothing but Maccas for a month with scary results. I must say, after doing all this reading I have radically changed my eating habits and lifestyle, resulting in a more 'Super slim me'. But even if I've changed, childhood obesity is rising, and fast food companies are commercially successful.

So what has this to do with libraries, if we are moving away from our love affair with 'instant' food, and are now more aware of the problems of marketing fast food to children? Well, I have been made to think. Should we learn from the fast food industry rather than throwing up our hands in horror and ignoring their success?

Establish the relationship early - and be consistent

The first golden rule of marketing to children, which fast food companies grasped early on, is this: get 'em while they're young. The South Australian State Library has grasped this idea well, offering packs for newborns, in the same way the baby food and nappy companies distribute sample bags in hospitals.

Look at ways to attract young children - and also their carers. Deliver services at a consistently high standard - you have competition! Audit this standard regularly through mystery shopping. Some South Australian public libraries have introduced the Baby Bounce and Rhyme program, in which a standard model of delivery has been devised using rhymes, rattles and of course, books. Fabulous! This program is exactly the sort of model we applaud at JSA.

Like the fast food industry, we promote the idea of consistency of delivery. It is critical, as library service providers, that we don't leave the standard of our service delivery to the whims of each team member. As JSA employees tell library staff in the library innovation sessions we run, you can't afford to have Sheila presenting a superb storytime one week and in the next have Joan stomping out of the workroom, reading out a book in a sulky manner and stomping back to get on with her 'proper work'!

Consistency isn't about knocking the passion and individuality out of team members - standardised scripts are irritating and people can sniff your insincerity miles away. No, it is more about delivering consistent quality in your own style. In fast food operations 'Smile with a positive greeting and make a positive impression' is a non-negotiable rule imposed in a very impersonal and robotic way. We can do better than that, but the positive greeting does have to be given, no matter how you feel that day.

How children tick

The second lesson from the fast food industry is to get into the heads of the little darlings and their carers. These companies spend a great deal of effort hosting sleepovers and interviewing the children, conducting focus groups and competitions. They identify children's fantasies and from this devise their products.

I remember hearing Roger McGough, the fabulous poet, speaking at a children's library conference in the 1980s when I was a school librarian. He talked about the need for libraries to embrace the 'tomato sauce' model of marketing. The use of bold primary colours, child-size furnishings, cute mascots and club

membership (code words, badges, membership wallets) is perhaps not to your taste but it's an important strategy in growing a love of reading and libraries in our younger members.

And the trappings don't need to be cheap and nasty: this would not complement the high-end brand image we need to create for our library. Many libraries we visit are woeful at promoting a quality image and you will no doubt have heard us banging on about the importance of window and door bannerings and a 'wow' moment as your customer first enters the library. We need to get rid of the 1950s Post Office image.

So, start involving the littlies in service design. When I was working in collection development, my team invited school children to meet our suppliers and look at lending materials. It was a great learning experience for us and for our suppliers. Go out and look at successful children's services in your area and take the best bits from them. Don't only visit other libraries to find ideas, visit other successful providers. It may be IKEA, your local garden centre or even pub!

Cheap labour? Not at all!

Another lesson we can learn from the fast food industry is to employ young people at service points. At JSA we encourage active recruitment of young males especially as libraries tend to have teams that are skewed to older females (I am one!). Manukau in New Zealand designed their recruitment advertising with photos of young Maori and Islander men (their target workforce) and emphasised the ICT component of the work. So don't think you are limited by your internal recruitment policy - there are ways around it, legally. Staffordshire in the UK did a similar thing with their marketing campaign - a photo of 'Edna' - your classic bun and pearls librarian saying that this is what they didn't want. It caused a furore in the professional press but did result in the recruitment of a very sparky young lass with great business sense.

Our 'point of difference' to the fast food industry is the career progression towards skilled work in libraries and the fair pay and conditions we offer. A casual role in a library is the first rung of a ladder and work experience in a library will be highly regarded by future employers.

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We do not market this value enough to young people. As we move towards RFID and other technologies that will remove low-value and factory-like processes, our workforce will be more skilled than ever. Team members will really know their stuff in terms of book knowledge and ICT and will have excellent interpersonal skills. I am saddened to see library services buying in internet trainers instead of having their own team members deliver these sessions. Information management is our core business and helping people navigate new ICT should be one of our prime concerns.

So, things to think about:

1. Rebalancing your work force. Do not feel limited by the perceived boundaries in recruitment. Look for innovative ways to advertise for new team members.
2. Highlight to young people the quality of experience they can get from a post in libraries.

In conclusion

Fast food – yes, we can learn from their clever marketers, but we do have to maintain a clear vision of our quality and importance as a point of difference. Did you know that later in their lives, people who were library users as children are more likely to have a good job, have higher wage-earning potential and are better informed voters? Proven fact. Solid evidence such as this can be used to seek funding for your children's services and promotions from your parent organisations. You are the key to giving children more life choices and the imagination to do better and contribute to society.

Chew on this!

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Recommended reading

Affluenza - When too much is never enough, Clive Hamilton and Richard Dennis, Allen and Unwin, ISBN 1 741 14671 2

Fast Food Nation: The dark side of the all-American meal, Eric Schlosser, 2002, Perennial (HarperCollins) 0 0609 3845 5; *Chew on this*, 2006, Penguin Australia, co-authored with Charles Wilson, ISBN 0 141 31844 9.

In Praise of Slow: How a worldwide movement is changing the cult of speed, Carl Honore, 2004, Orion, ISBN 0 752 85625 1

Library as place: rethinking roles, rethinking space, February, 2005. 181 ISBN 1 932326 13 8, CLIR

Super Size Me (Movie - starring Morgan Spurlock – available on DVD)

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