

Library Layout and Display Essentials

With a retail background, I am naturally inclined to see all visitors to a library as 'customers'. In turn, the process of creating the best layout involves making it easy to 'shop'; to locate what you are looking for with ease and importantly, to discover more. I often ask library staff 'what would you change about the layout of this library if you were to receive a dollar for every item that passed the circulation desk?'

Creating the best possible floor plan can be a difficult task, especially when each team member may have a different opinion on what constitutes a logical layout; perhaps based on their area or responsibility, anecdotal information or at times reluctance to change.



Wallsend Library circulation desk

The solution is to create a relationship between usage and layout — translate usage statistics to library layout in the same way a successful retail store will translate sales data to placement of goods on the shop floor. Maintaining excellence in presentation is essential to maximising productivity. Of parallel importance is the need to ensure the overall library layout is first geared to maximising usage. The anecdote I often use is that investing enormous effort into making your library look great without first challenging the layout, is almost like carefully placing beautiful icing on a burnt cake — at least it looks good!

In order, merchandising strategy involves placing the right category, in the right location and then focusing on making it look great. A clever layout should direct traffic flow and expose people to as much of the collection as possible with a view to helping them find what they want and importantly, creating opportunities for additional impulse loans.

Within any library, there will be high-traffic-flow areas — many visitors follow a similar path of traffic when browsing. In retail, this is often referred to as a 'race-track' or 'customer walk-pattern'. Take time to observe the traffic flow patterns in your library. Every bookshelf, display stand or piece of furniture on your library floor is steering traffic. Placed strategically, the placement of shelving and book displays can have a significant impact on loans.

There are distinct differences between retail stores and libraries, but it is interesting to reflect on the principles used throughout the world for laying out supermarkets and explore how libraries might be equally strategic when positioning each category.

What can libraries learn from supermarkets? Quite simply, creating a clever layout requires observing customer traffic flow, identifying hot spots and deciding what stock offers good 'impulse loan potential' in your hot spots.

Generally, the first department a customer walks into is the fruit and vegetable section; some stores also display fresh flowers. Behind this, you may find a bakery. It appears to make little practical sense since these soft goods stand a good chance

of being crushed by the rest of the grocery purchases, so why do supermarkets do this? One of the key reasons is that first impressions count! The vibrant colours and fresh aromas invite us into the environment and the customer subconsciously associates this with the concept of a fresh and clean environment — an invitation to shop! This idea may provide inspiration for libraries; how are your visitors greeted? Are you maximising

productivity of the first few metres of usable (and highly valuable) promotional space?

Supermarkets deliberately position core product departments, such as the delicatessen counter at the mid-rear of the store and the dairy at the opposite end of the store in order to ensure customers have to 'shop' the entire space. Of particular relevance to libraries are the promotions that supermarkets position at the end of each aisle to encourage impulse buys and add-on purchases. Are you maximising productivity of the aisle ends, many of which are probably in prime lines of sight?

Helpful hints

- Stand at the entrance and note what you see first or walk through your library and observe the space through the eyes of a visitor. Are high-visual areas being used to their full potential?
- Positioned strategically, could popular collections be used as effective drawcards to steer traffic?
- Is every collection contributing to usage statistics sufficiently given the value of the space it occupies?
- Could turnover of some collections increase if they were given additional exposure?
- Are any low-usage collections currently located in high-exposure space that might be better used for other collections?
- Are you maximising impulse loan potential at the entrance?
- Could you locate a particular collection or display near the circulation desk that might create last-minute add-on loans? This might include staff picks, new books, selected magazines, or for schools, titles relevant to curriculum activities.

Library buildings

So what can libraries learn from supermarkets? Quite simply, creating a clever layout requires observing customer traffic flow, identifying hot spots and deciding what stock offers good 'impulse loan potential' in your hot spots.

True, some categories turn over well no matter where they are placed; however, it is unlikely that they will perform to their peak potential unless they are given sufficient exposure. In simple terms, these products have the capacity to 'pay the rent' of your high-value real estate. The idea is quite simple — give your visitors what they want. The alternative might be to promote unpopular collections by locating them in high-value real estate. It is possible that these may incur a modest increase in usage, but most likely not to the extent of popular categories. This is not to say that unpopular categories should not be promoted. Simply remember to look at the bigger picture and don't discount the idea of promoting what is already performing well if your goal is to maximise usage.

Schools might strike a balance between the 'staples' that you know students want and the titles that you would like them to pick up. Again, it's similar to the supermarket using staples to present us with impulse.

Creating a visually stimulating library requires much more than row after row of 'spine out' books. I explore every opportunity to introduce front-facing displays. Spine out allows you to hold the volume of stock necessary to meet customer's needs. Front-facing displays are used to draw attention to parts of the collection and create the visual interest necessary to engage our customers with product.

The principles of merchandising a library are not far removed from the retail principles of merchandising clothing and books or showcasing movies at a video library. Take the time to observe how visitors to a video library shop the shelves: the majority will gravitate to front-facing displays and, unless they are looking for a particular title, they will bypass the overwhelming mass of spine out movies.



Photo courtesy Lifestyle Profiles Photography

Taree City Library

Themed, constantly changing front-facing features are a low-maintenance and inexpensive way to build powerful and contemporary displays. Would the displays in your library enhance your favourite bookstore? If the answer is 'no', perhaps you need to rethink your strategy. Try to avoid putting books behind glass and avoid precariously balanced book displays which look like they can't be touched; invite visitors to enjoy all that the library has to offer.

Seasonal, major, or community events might be a good source of free professional posters and props to back up your front-facing displays. You can also access free promotional materials from retailers, publishers, galleries and museums. You don't need to spend a lot of money or time to make them look great.

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Kevin's recent books include
The Victorian Public Libraries' Image Handbook
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Australia's smallest library?



Quambone is a small village in rural NSW. Although it has a population of only 50, it boasts a library — possibly Australia's smallest library!

Photo: Courtesy of David Kilby, ABC Radio 666 Canberra.

Web resource for planning library buildings

Designing Libraries is a great UK web resource on library building planning and design. The website incorporates an extensive resources section, with a gallery, news and events. It also has an inspirational database of information and images on over 230 library building projects. For more information, visit <<http://www.designinglibraries.org.uk/>>.