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Marketing reading: a touching experience

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Abstract

This paper examines the ways that sighted people choose fiction and other imaginative reading, and summarises the growth of the reader development movement in the UK. A comparison is drawn with the ways that visually impaired people are able to choose their reading, and the strategies adopted by the National Library for the Blind (NLB) in the UK to address the consequent issues. A summary is given of NLB's two recent and highly innovative reader development projects, A Touch Of... and A Touch More, along with some conclusions about future directions.

How do you choose what to read next?

- One of the main and highly valued functions of public libraries in the UK is as a source of fiction and other imaginative literature
- Reading supports wellbeing and lifelong learning
- Public libraries are used by 60% of the population, especially young people and people over 55
- But 50% of people don't know what they want when they go into the library and half of the rest don't find what they want
- So 75% choose by browsing
- Result is that readers tend to play safe - choose authors they know

Reader development in public libraries in the UK

- Approach pioneered by Rachel van Riel, *Opening the Book* (1996-)
- *Opening the Book's* definition of reader development: active intervention to increase confidence and enjoyment of reading; open up choices; enable readers to share reading experiences
- "The best book in the world is quite simply the one you like best..."
- Developed approach through working with 33 public libraries on the Branching Out project
- Reader development in UK strengthened in 2002 by the creation of The Reading Agency, a development agency funded by the Arts Council of England, CILIP and government to "inspire and support libraries to create the best access to reading for adults, children and young people"

How do visually impaired people choose what to read next?

- 2 million VIP in UK, 90% of them over 60
- Read in large print, audio, Braille or Moon (depending on reference/circumstances)
- Served by a combination of public libraries and charities
- Reading is a popular pastime for visually impaired people even for those who have not read much previously
- Tend to drift away from public libraries (only 6% had never used a public library but only 31% had used one in the last six months) because services are perceived to be inappropriate/staff attitudes

Historical problems in choosing

- More difficult than for sighted people
- Very few books available (less than 5% of print publications)
- Accessible formats rarely available at the same time as print books
- Limited range
- Books are physically all the same (give no clues about the kind of read)
- Catalogues in Braille and on tape are difficult to use and don't provide much information (plot synopses)
- Braille books are big, heavy, multi-volume
- Libraries are remote (and readers may be housebound) therefore can't browse

Consequences

- Visually impaired readers don't take risks
- Rely on intermediaries to choose
- Intermediaries are responsible for readers' enjoyment - tend to play safe

NLB's strategy

Working with *Opening the Book*; strategy evolved over 5-6 years

Objectives

- Extend choice

- Enable visually impaired readers to get more out of their reading
- Independence
- Add value to mainstream public libraries
- Develop partnership with other specialist providers

Initial steps

- widening choices in book selection
- website features to help choosing
- accessible Forager choosing software (now Whichbook)
- accessible OPAC
- Reveal: national database of accessible resources
- Staff training to support readers

Two key projects: A Touch Of... and A Touch More

A Touch Of

Funded by Department of Culture Media and Sport

What we did:

Sampler books

- Worked with other specialist producers (Calibre, RNIB)
- Produced 10 sampler books in Braille, cassette tape, CD, large print introducing books available in accessible formats
- Themes: A touch ticklish, velvet, etc (not obvious genres or subjects)
- Each containing introduction and 10 extracts on theme
- Set given free to all 150 library authorities in England
- Used at NLB and other specialist libraries

Training

- 10 regional training days (part of Branching Out)
- Covered reading needs of visually impaired people, sources of help

Activities/events

- Grants enabled 48 library authorities to organise reading-related events for visually impaired people in w/c 14 May 2001
- Partnership with local visual impairment organisations
- Examples: reading groups, writers, reading chains
- 61 events, 2400 attendees

Outcomes

- Improved awareness of needs amongst public library staff
- Gave them confidence, information and tools
- Catalyst to partnerships
- Public libraries planned to improve services e.g. VI readers groups planned to increase from 8% to 46%; book reviews on talking newspapers set to quadruple

Issues arising

- Not funded enough to work with every library authority
- Still modest reach to VIP
- Specialist libraries could have used samplers more proactively and sooner (including NLB)
- Impact on service at NLB (paved way for Personal Bookshelf)
- Fragmentation of provision remains

A touch more

Follow on project funded by Department of Culture Media and Sport

Aim: build on success, embed reader development for VIP in public libraries and put tools in place at NLB to sustain support to public libraries

Selected activities:

Readers' magazine

- Relunched magazine with more appealing features and attractive style sent to all readers and public libraries - reader's comment "I like it very much: it has a lively modern style that really motivates me to want to try some of the recommended books. It also strongly urges the reader to share their views and talk to others about books."

Personal Bookshelf

- Developed functionality of Geac LMS to hold details of readers' wants (reduces staff intervention)

A Choice Of...

- Supplemented sampler books with short booklists (fiction and non-fiction)

Training for librarians

Conclusions

- Practical projects turned into something very strategic
- Need to continue to find sustainable ways of providing specialist services, especially tools and support for readers to help themselves
- Need to encourage VIP to use public libraries
- Need to ensure needs of VIP are included in public libraries' reader development activities (local and national planning/funding)

References

A Touch Of website: <http://touchof.nlb-online.org>

NLB website: <http://www.nlb-online.org>

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