

# PERSPECTIVES

Expanding Minnesota's Conversation



## It's time for a robust dialog on the value of our public libraries

Demand is greater than ever before, yet library funding is flat or in decline

by Anita S. Duckor

Public libraries make a transformative impact on society and yet they are commonly considered a second-tier political priority. Our libraries are more relevant and in greater demand than ever before, but they aren't allowed to compete for funding on the same playing field as schools, parks, and emergency services. The library must reclaim its status as a political and financial priority through a new public understanding of the library's value, fueled by a market-driven business plan. It's time for a robust dialogue on public libraries.

The public library system is in a budget tailspin: less funding, less service, less value.

Commonly-held myths about the value of libraries impede this discussion. One myth is that libraries provide non-essential services that have been replaced by the Internet. But since 1994—four years before Google—library use has grown by about 63 percent nationally. In Minnesota in 2007 (the most recent statistics available), users checked out almost 54 million items and librarians responded to 4.9 million reference questions and hosted programs with attendance surpassing one million.

The library's time-honored mission of empowerment through learning hasn't changed, but strategies for achieving that mission have evolved. Innovations in Minnesota include a books-by-mail system on the Iron Range, foreclosure-prevention workshops in the Twin Cities, story time in world languages, and workforce training classes.

A second myth is that public libraries are a financial burden. To the contrary, they are an excellent steward of tax dollars. A 2005 Florida study found libraries returned \$6.54 for every dollar of investment by

helping to create jobs, increase wages, spur economic development, foster school readiness, and increase nearby property values.

Others can learn from the ways that libraries stretch dollars. In Minnesota, regional library cooperatives and statewide partnerships between public and academic libraries share costs, expertise, and resources daily. The merger of the Minneapolis and Hennepin County library systems in 2008 created long-term savings through cost-efficiencies and stability for library customers.

Little is spent on libraries to begin with. In 2007, Minnesota spent a woefully inadequate

\$36 per person on libraries. Minnesota libraries per-capita operating income ranks 22nd in the nation, a long fall from their 12th place standing a decade earlier.

When it comes to the treasure that is this state's public libraries, we are on shaky ground.

### HOW TO DEBUNK THE MYTHS

Public libraries must develop a business model that transforms them from stand-alone civic institutions and become part of a larger political system that the community believes is an essential service. Because the library's value, purpose, and benefits constitute one of the community's best kept secrets, libraries need to sell and market themselves. They need to be on par with police departments and parks, institutions whose relevance is never questioned.

A 21st century library should reflect solid business practices, including:

- Aligning mission and vision with the community's perception

- Investing in library staff development
- Customer-driven services and programs (product/service development)
- Creating "wow" experiences for customers (customer service)
- A public service delivery model (operations)
- Outreach that develops robust long-term relations with the community (selling)
- Ongoing, effective communication about the purpose, value, and benefits (brand management)
- Budget transparency that reflects the true needs of a 21st century library (financial planning and budgeting)
- Effective partnerships with schools, parks, businesses, and others to ensure maximum return on investment (strategic partnerships)
- A balanced scorecard that reflects customer-driven, financial, and operations metrics (performance measurement)

Across Minnesota, many libraries have had to cope with funding that is flat or in decline, a situation in which no organization can flourish. Addressing budget challenges by cutting hours, services, and collections, delaying maintenance or capital improvements, and utilizing volunteers to provide core library functions places libraries at risk. The public library system is in a budget tailspin: less funding, less service, less value. No organization can cut costs on a long-term basis and remain relevant.

This is not the time for meekness or silence. As millions turn to libraries during these hard economic times, we need to ensure strong funding for our libraries. We will be able to accomplish this only if all stakeholders, elected officials, library boards and staff, library support organizations, and the community are engaged in this important policy investment decision. ●

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