

BOOK DISPLAY AS ADULT SERVICE

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Abstract

"Book display as an adult service" is defined as choosing and positioning adult books from the collection to increase their circulation. The author contrasts bookstore arrangement for sales versus library arrangement for access. The paper considers the library-as-a-whole as a display, examines the right size for an in-library display, and discusses mass displays, end-caps, on-shelf displays, and the "Tiffany" approach. The author proposes that an effective display depends on an imaginative, unifying theme, and that book displays are part of the joy of libraries.

Keywords :

Library ; Display ; Access ; Circulation ; Adult service ; Merchandising

Why are libraries arranged differently than bookstores—and bookstores arranged differently than libraries? To compare and contrast a library's arrangement with a retail arrangement suggests some ways that the library may enhance services. The contrast of the two, however, suggests that there is an internal conflict in the library's roles that inhibits its displaying books to their best advantage.

This paper explores displays as an adult service. Book display in a library as an adult service means choosing and positioning adult books from the collection to increase their circulation.¹ This definition limits the discussion to displays from which the customer can carry away the books displayed. Although programs, exhibi-

tions, and children's services overlap much of what is discussed, these topics are not specifically considered.² The paper first discusses the library-as-a-whole as a display, and then considers aspects of displays within the library. Many principles that apply to the library as a whole apply to displays themselves.

Contrasting Missions

Peter Drucker says, "The purpose of a business is to create a customer."³ This fundamental aim is clear to all successful bookstore owners. Implicit in the term customer is the idea of pleasing, even delighting, the person so that the customer will return and the money will flow in an endless loop. Most businesses and certainly bookstores depend upon repeat customers to survive and expand. Most people would probably say, baldly put, that a bookstore's job is to make a profit by selling books and as many as possible. Consequently, we may assume that the arrangement of a bookstore reflects the system that best enhances sales and profits—and pleases customers. For most, that arrangement is genre and subject grouping. The arrangements is an effort to merchandise or display the materials to its best advantage so that it will sell itself. The measurement of success is profit.

Compared to the basic bookstore, the mission of a library seems a muddle. There is no clearly defined unit of success in a library, even the public library output measures often seem ill-defined (like reference transactions) and probably are not uniformly measured. The most-used may be attendance, reference transactions, and circulation.

Circulation corresponds somewhat to number of books sold in a bookstore. The psychology of a person who chooses to come to the library for a free book compared to the psychology of a person who chooses to go to a bookstore contrasts the collection and display of both. The desire for the book in a bookstore, the expected pleasure or use, must outweigh the price of the book. There is seldom

competition for new books if one is willing or able to pay the price. In libraries, by contrast, the competition for new materials is high, but the penalty is the disappointment in finding the new books checked out or in finding that one needs to wait. Unexplored is the proposition that a no reserves policy on bestsellers is more rewarding than a reserve list: a no-reserves policy rewards random members of the public intermittently (operant conditioning) while a reserves-list causes new items almost never to be on the shelf, so that a small segment is constantly rewarded and a huge majority (95%) of the public is never rewarded, and so expectation is extinguished. The result may be that the public believes that you can always get a new book at a bookstore (success)—but believes that you can sometimes or never get a new book at a library (the place is a bummer for new books).

Attendance may be a rough estimate of success of a library program, but still the payoff in a bookstore from attendance is sales. In a library, there may be a role as community center so that attendance is a direct measure of success, whether or not that attendance translates into circulation or reference transactions. (Increased circulation because of programs, except in the smallest libraries, is probably unmeasurable.)⁴ Bookstores by contrast may wish to boost attendance through programming and other kinds of meetings. They do this as part of their merchandising and publicity effort, but it would be untenable in a bookstore to say that attendance had increased but profit did not increase.

Strict Order versus Genre Grouping

Reference-transactions, although not a service of the bookstore, are a major service of the library. Reference services are based on access, on strict order of materials, to ensure quick availability of titles and information within those titles. The demand for information services for some customers places that service somewhat against the policies that increase circulation: strict order

versus the need for genre and subject grouping. The result is a library constantly opposing itself. It is pulled one way by reference librarians and the part of the public that demands strict order and uninterrupted runs of numbers. It is pulled the other way by the part of the public—usually the majority—who are browsers and want things grouped into genres and general subjects. Dewey numbers and LC numbers probably mean little or nothing to the browsing public.⁵

The reference function of a library—that requires all items arranged ideally in one long sequence so that each item is assigned a relative place—is not the arrangement adopted by bookstores to enhance sales. Bookstores divide subjects into small popular headings or departments within which are small popular subject headings—and everything is then ordered by author. Moreover, bookstores may place the same book in five places. A biography may go in biographies, history, humor, etc., wherever a user might look for it—an idea almost unthinkable in a library.⁶

The division of roles in a library goes far to explain the difference between a library's display and that of a bookstore. In a bookstore, all the functions—programming, answering questions, and display—unite to create customers and sales. In a library, circulation, attendance at programs, and reference transactions are three different roles—and in an exaggerated way, three competing roles. Particularly in academic libraries, the emphasis on order takes precedent over other functions, and that carries over to public libraries at the expense of circulation. Displays may be seen as the library attempt to resolve this tension.

The Library as Display

Think of the library itself as a display. The original intent of the Dewey system was to group like books under the same subject heading to make them easier to brows—in essence, genre grouping. It was a major step forward, and small libraries and small bookstores

probably look more alike than large bookstores and large libraries. Is there, however, a limit to the size of an effective library? Can the addition of a book instead of enhancing the display cause confusion, or allow it to be simply lost? Some studies suggest that is so.

The Detweiler and Naylor studies suggest that the library as an efficient display works up to about a collection size of 100,000 items.⁷ Beyond that, there are diminishing returns. It may be because of the increased size of modern libraries and because of collection development policies that require balance and retention of older books, most groupings tend to cause sensory overload and visual static compared to a bookstore: the more significant items and the newer titles are lost among the duds, the disinformation, and the dead. The lesson is that library grouping cease to function well as the library becomes large.

Weeding as a Display Function

The Baltimore County Library System under Charlie Robinson adopted the "give'em what they want," policy. Their experience showed that libraries could greatly increase circulation by adopting the bookstore technique of buying very many high-demand items and ruthlessly weeding any items that did not circulate.⁸ The practice essentially shifted the emphasis from the reference function to the browsing function. What resulted were libraries that carried high numbers of newer, high demand items and no non-circulating titles, and circulation boomed. The policy titled the libraries toward circulation as a measure of success and away from reference, they were dependent on ILL and the Enoch Pratt Library in Baltimore to cover in-depth information.⁹ Most bookstores do not tolerate unsold items, public libraries, however, that have roles as a reference library, a research center, or a formal education support center cannot weed infrequently used materials. This points to weeding as an essential part of a library whose mission is popular materials library. Weeding keeps the library as display at a human

size, and increases the likelihood of a browser finding some newer items. In essence, the library acts as much like a bookstore or a display as possible.

Library Design as Display

There are a few other topics concerning the library itself as a display that can be of interest to the librarian. Librarians might want to know what amount of floor space to give books versus open space, or what proportion of space to give to higher circulating items. Retail merchandisers also have formulas that purport to give the best proportions of merchandise.

Obviously in a grocery store or in a bookstore the manager wants to display the best-selling items in bulk, and to offer the best mix of items that create the most sales and profit.¹⁰ In a library, it might be possible to use computer circulation studies to find and group the highest circulating items together in a display. It may be possible in the nonfiction section to leave some or all eye-level shelves empty for display. Older items would wrap above and below the display shelves.

Libraries that crowd out seating space with book stacks—and display space—may be in a self-defeating mode. Related to space is the drone syndrome—that nonpaying customers crowd out paying customers, a situation intolerable in a bookstore. Libraries may be in a self-defeating situation here: programs that bring many people to the library for non-library related services such as IRS help may choke the parking lot and the seating inside the library and result in lowered circulation. Even very successful library programs—part of the library's mission—may have the same effect. There is also some debate on whether libraries should have a nook-and-cranny arrangement or a free-flow arrangement. A small bookstore owner likes nooks and crannies, asserting “people tend to stay longer in stores where there are nooks and crannies that provide an escape from the hustle and bustle of store traffic. If the store gets too

crowded, they leave."¹¹ Professor of Psychology Albert Mehrabian suggests "making some of the stacks part of the reading room environment, thus providing subject area alcoves. This is somewhat inefficient in terms of space, but far more efficient in terms of getting people to explore a pleasant and moderately loaded book-filled environment."¹² Many retail designers suggest the opposite, open, loop, or free flow plans that take the customers easily to all parts of the building, considerations of surveillance and security, the "sad facts of reality," weigh in. Israel notes that "The paradox is intense. It is a miracle if store operations can resolve the opposing purposes of attracting buyers and of thwarting the illegal removal of merchandise."¹³

Problems with Displays within the Library

It is time now to consider displays within the library. From our discussion we see that displays within the library interrupt the complete run of numbers, and so displays may be a problem for reference librarians and customers looking for particular titles. It is library wisdom that the more times a collection is divided, the harder it is to find a particular items because there are more places to look—and to forget. There may be a vocal part of the staff and the public who are annoyed rather than delighted by displays.

A second thing to consider is that the efficacy of increasing total circulation through displays alone is probably unproven. It is almost self-evident that displays work, that the librarian and bookstore owner can see the items move from the displays. In a library above 50,000 circulating items, however, whether that circulation is an increase over regular circulation or is a substitute for other circulation so that the total increases, is unproven.¹⁴ (It would take an experiment using two nearly identical libraries with similar circulation. One would use displays, the other not, then compare any changes in circulation to see if they are significant. Even here, the number of variables is probably too hard to control.)

Hostility to library displays may be understood to arise from frustrated staff who cannot find books in their "proper" place and from lack of evidence that the display-maker is doing anything significant. Instead, libraries rely on the experience of booksellers, moreover, book displays need to be part of an overall merchandising effort. The effort should include publicity, programs, television shows, and so on, all of which blur the single effect of displays.

Dimensions of a Display

The working definition of a display—choosing and positioning adult books from the collection to increase their circulation—limits our discussion to shelf and table displays, and similar means. Displays under discussion are those from which the adult can take the book—the definition specifically excludes window displays and other closed displays. The displays under discussion are those expected to increase the circulation of the displayed items and not increase the frustration of the patron.

Sharon L. Baker in *The Responsive Public Library Collection* (Englewood, Col., 1993) gives an excellent and comprehensive review of ideas and literature about displays, particularly in chapter 10, "Marketing-Based Promotion Practices". This paper will touch on a few points that are not completely covered or not discussed.

The public librarian might want to know what is the right size for a book display, the same as a retail merchant might want to know what is the right size for a shirt display. The size of the display surface, according to retail marketing experience, should be proportionate to the size of the objects displayed.¹⁵ In a tiered table, for instance, the height and depth would allow the books to be fully displayed without overlapping—nor leave extra space. Librarians can create such displays or buy them from catalogs.

Right size also suggests the question of how many books to display and how long to display them. The definition of display that asks the display to increase circulation suggests some number

play : If a librarian can circulate ten books a day from a table display expected to remain for a month, then the librarian needs a base of 10 books times 25 days open equals 250 books to maintain the display. If the librarian expected to circulate 10 books a day, then the librarian might want to display 20–50 books. That size display offers continual choices to the public without the need for refilling several times a day. Displays of 20–50 books require a table with tiers or a large surface. Displays consuming 250 books require broad themes, rather than individual authors, or subjects with few books.

Such mass displays—face out or face up—of many different titles are ideal for related items, such as new books or “Past Best Sellers.” Genre paperbacks also lend themselves to such display. Mass display works as long as there is a unifying theme that the customer can easily grasp. New titles at bookstores are invariably marketed face out, libraries can purchase shelving that allows face-out shelving or partially face-out. Face-out display of individual books can be extended to open spaces on the shelves in the stacks to encourage browsing. Such display also helps patrons understand what nonfiction area they are in because titles act as signs. The book dump also is a kind of mass display, probably not well suited to libraries because they are designed for multiple copies of the same item. Bookstores are using fewer of them because of lack of space and their unattractive, cluttered, and inappropriate look.¹⁶

Tiffany Approach to Display

A Tiffany approach is also possible. Items massed together suggest lower value, a single item displayed against a contrasting background (a diamond on a lap of black velvet suggests high quality—the Tiffany method. Such displays involve one or two books, highlighted to enhance their unique quality. An excellent way to do this is the use of an endcap—the book displayed by itself like a diamond arouses considerable interest. The librarian

probably needs to be careful to select quality books for this, rather than anything. End cap display can be enhanced with hand outs or with small objects or signs to pique interest. Books listed on a bibliography—displayed one at a time—might be candidates.

The Tiffany approach also can be used to place items face out on the ends of shelves. A single book with a colorful cover will attract interest. Another perhaps unusual approach might be to place a book holder on a wall along with an art display or poster display, the art works might arouse interest in a book on a topic related to the art.

A further question related to size of displays is what is too much. The Tiffany approach succeeds because the single book does not have competition. When does a mass display become a morass? What is the difference between a pile of books and a display? The limit of course is variable—but it is when there is a perception of clutter, that things are a hodgepodge, when the group causes the mind confusion rather than a perception of unity, then there is a breakdown in the display.

Making Displays Attractive

This brings us to the question of how to make a book display attractive. The retail definition of display is that it is “dramatically” arranged. What makes a retail display effective can be transferred to libraries—the display needs imagination in its theme and in its presentation. The displays should **make books part of something larger**. The librarian can create—like the retail display designer—an idea or mood or feeling with objects, colors, and signs. Displays need labels or signs to focus understanding, and the labeling can be nonverbal because a display is visual. Books surrounded by objects or pictures can convey meaning as effectively as words, for instance, on a table covered with National Geographic maps and topped with a globe are travel books, a bicycle is the center piece for a display highlighting the Pinellas Trail and sports and exercise books, books

piled around a wheelbarrow with tools is gardening.

Just as the retail designer knows no limits, the librarian can appeal nouns to reason, feelings, senses, or intuition. Retail designers create breathtaking displays to sell merchandise on topics such as "Summer", "Into the Jungle", "Invitation to Paradise", "Ancient City of the Future", and "All Your Wishes May Be Realized".¹⁷ The designers are professionals with a budget, but the challenge to librarians is to imagine beyond the ordinary displays suggested in books on library displays.

Area to explore might include the challenge to create a display based on an abstraction: "What is Thought?" "Freedom", "Passion". Other displays might reach for novelty, humor, use of plants or even live animals such as an aquarium, or objects that move. Librarians could probably arrange demonstration displays from retail stores—clothing, flowers, tools—about which books could be displayed. (Or persuade retailers to use library cards in the hands of mannequins for "Back to School" displays.) Some malls have automobiles displayed in them, perhaps a library could have a sports car with books displayed on it. An overturned boat for "Lost at Sea"?

The Joy of Libraries

Displays set the tone of the library just as they do for retail stores. Bookstores try to balance the ideas that the book stock is wonderful and while inexpensive (30% discounts every day). Libraries, where everything is free, need not suggest that there are realistic limits. Libraries can suggest that they offer the best—and in the best way.

Is it worthwhile to merchandise the library, to create displays? Displays are part of the joy of libraries. They are what change the library from a warehouse into a place of interest. They tell people who enter that other people are interested or excited about the ideas the library offers. Displays offer a distinct tool to the librarian different from advertising, programming, and exhibits. Displays

are the tools by which the librarian merchandises the product of the library and teaches the users of its wealth. Displays create in the mind of the user that the book is part of something larger, something interesting and exciting that the reader must share in.

Notes

1. One of the few authors who defined display is Lawrence J. Israel, *Store Planning/Design* (New York, 1994), p. 12: "Display: The art of dramatically presenting merchandise in order to excite and to encourage consumer interest."

2. Certainly, educational exhibits, especially those such as are described in Sandra A. Beehler and Martha Childers, "One Step Beyond: Creating a Current Awareness Exhibit," *RQ*, 26: 2 (Winter 1986): 231-236, can increase circulation, so can bulletin boards, enclosed displays such a window displays, and free-standing enclosed glass cases. Their primary purpose, however, is to provide information, so for purposes of focus, they are outside the limits of this discussion.

3. Peter F. Drucker, *Managing for Results* (New York, 1964), p.91.

4. Matthew S. Moore, "Measuring and Managing Circulation Activity Using Circulation Rates," p. 215 in Gregg Sapp, ed., *Access Services in Libraries: New solutions for collection Management* (New York, 1992).

5. Studies at Clearwater Public Library suggest that two-thirds of circulation can easily be classified as fiction, while possibly up to 80% is casual reading. Even in supermarkets, research has found that only 31% have a list and only one-third of purchases are planned, according to Jack Hitt, "The Theory of Supermarkets," *New York Times Magazine*, (March 10, 1996), p. 57. Nolan Lushington and Willis N. Mills, *Libraries Designed for Users: A planning handbook* (Hamden, Conn, 1980), p. 33, say that "About 30% of the people entering library buildings are there to see new materials."

A possible research topic would be to ask patrons "How did you find materials in the library today?" as they are leaving. Questions could include a brief quiz on knowledge of the Dewey system: If you wanted a cookbook, where would you look? An educated guess is that most experienced library users know the general location—the actual place not the number—of their pet subject areas.

6. Margaret Jones, "Facing up to Fewer Faceouts: Merchandising more with less," *Publishers Weekly*, (September 7, 1992): 22. "(Borders) has..... 20 copies of a book that it will display in five places."

7. Mary Jo Detweiler, "The 'Best Size' Public Library," *Library Journal*, 111: 9 (May 15, 1986): 34-35, and Richard J. Naylor, "The Efficient Mid-Size Library," *Library Journal*, 112: 3 (February 15, 1987): 119-120.

8. Nora Rawlinson, "Give'em What They Want," *Library Journal*, 106: 20 (November 15,

1981): 2188-2190.

9. Kenneth G. Sivulich, "How We Run the Queens Library Good (and Doubled Circulation) in Seven Years," *Library Journal*, 113 : 3(February 15, 1988) : 123-127. Sharon Baker (1993) also cites the Logan Square Branch of the Chicago Public Library [Thomas H. Ballard, "Logan Square Experimental Book Branch," *Illinois Libraries*, 63 : 8(October 1981) : 583-586] and the Dallas Public Library [Sylvie Green, "Merchandising Techniques and Libraries," *School Library Journal*, 28 : 1(September 1981) : 35-39].

10. For instance, Marcel Corstjens and Peter Doyle, "A Model for Optimizing Retail Space Allocations," pp. 57-69 in William R. Darden and Robert F. Lusch, eds., *Patronage Behavior and Retail Management* (New York, 1983). Hitt (1996) notes that in a supermarket, "each inch is calibrated to hold only what you will buy at the highest possible margin," p.59.

11. Bookstore owner Palmer Cook (6,200 square foot store), quoted in Jones (1992).

12. Albert Mehrabian, *Public Places and Private Spaces : The psychology of work, play, and living environments* (New York, 1975), p.167.

13. Israel, p.105.

14. Small libraries, say of circulating collections of under 20,000 often have such low circulation that one can prove anything in them ; that is, the effect of displaying items that increases the circulation by a few items may be significant in a small library but insignificant in a larger one.

15. See Israel's discussion of wall fixtures, floor fixtures, islands, and loose fixture, pp.174-180.

16. Richard H. Brown, "Floor Displays : Not just dumps anymore," *Publishers Weekly*, 237 : 24(June 15, 1990) : 39-40.

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