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Why Stories Matter

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Why Stories Matter

James LaRue

“Winning elections is good. But real advocacy is a much longer game, requiring a much savvier and informed approach.”

In 2008, we learned that library support, as measured by libraries getting to the ballot and winning if they did, had been falling for a generation.¹ At the time, use, at least, was rising. This year, based on the 10-year follow-up study, support for tax-supported libraries is even worse.² Now, use is falling, too. Clearly, we have a problem. While we still have some “supersupporters,” as the reports call them, there are not enough of them to win an election. I believe that most libraries do a good job of fulfilling their mission. However, even library excellence, by itself, does not guarantee support. In this essay, I will argue that turning this sorry state of affairs around will take action in four areas: library brand management, professional campaign management, donor development, and culture change.

Brand management

Why did library use rise, and library support fall? There are several causes, but one of them was our marketing efforts. For the past 30 years, libraries have been pushing what we *do*, mainly provide materials and services. However, we also believed that use would result in support. That was the 2008 wake-up call: use and support are very different things. To build support, we need to push not just what we do, but what we *mean*.

The first step is to get serious about brand management. At a minimum, that means every library should conduct a *communications audit*. A trained graphic designer should review all library collateral, and make recommendation for sharpening the images, and ensuring graphic consistency. Don't think that is important? Here is an exercise: pull out your library card, look at the sign outside the building, look at your letterhead, and look at your website. Would your patron know that all of these things come from the same place? Alternatively, as is usually the case, you have just discovered a mishmash of fonts, colors, lo-

1. “From Awareness to Funding: a study of library support in America,” OCLC, 2008. Available from <https://www.oclc.org/en/reports/funding.html>

2. “From Awareness to Funding: Voting Perceptions and support of public libraries in 2018,” OCLC, ALA, PLA, 2018.

gos, and logo placement. It is the work of well-meaning and even passionate *amateurs*.

Advertisers and marketers will tell you it's all about reach (how many people see your message) and frequency (how *often* they see it). The psychological truth is that there are so many things vying for our attention, that we have to see something some 7-15 times before we see it for the first time. If you stick with different looks for every piece (the library program sign-up, the flyer announcing a speaker or book club, an overdue notice, etc.), you have to start from scratch every time. Using a thoughtful, professional, and unvarying template establishes an immediately recognizable “look” for the library, making it far easier to get other messages across, particularly the succinct brand of the institution.

The second piece of brand management is the creation of that tagline, the phrase that captures the deep mission of the organization. You cannot sell a product until you both know it and believe in it. Brand management should be undertaken at least two years before an election.

Campaign management

I have worked with some of the most successful campaign managers in the business, and here's some of what I've learned:

- Election planning should start about a year ahead of time.
- Get lots of input months before you announce the campaign, so that the recommendation to increase funding comes from outside the library, for reasons that a core group of influencers can understand and advocate for.
- Get professional help. Campaign management is not something ALA can do; we're a 501 (c) (3). But depending on the type of campaign, other assistance may be available for free. For instance, tax levies for construction may attract bond brokers who pay the campaign manager themselves.
- Build a campaign committee that has people who can fulfill the following functions: administrative (call meetings and keep momentum), a treasurer (both to raise money, and do reporting), a subject expert (usually the library director, but could be a knowledgeable trustee), and an organizer (well-connected scheduler).

I've known people who could do two of those things. I've never known someone who can do three, or do them well.

- Build a campaign bible: what are your messages? Keep it brief and tie it to the community's needs, not just the library. What are the numbers (budget, mill levy, construction costs, etc.)?
- When you build a campaign talk, stick to it. If you get asked about things not in the bible, tell people you'll get back to them. Successful campaigns have discipline. They don't get derailed by loose talk.
- Be systematic: know which groups in your community are influential, then recruit good speakers to address them. Note that ordinary citizens are way more persuasive than library staff, who might be seen as self-serving.
- Don't spend a lot of time trying to turn people who are opposed to you; focus on your friends or people who are about to be.
- Social media is cheap, and as our last presidential election taught us, can be influential. Use it.
- But it also doesn't reach everybody. Get hold of active voter rolls, and if possible send 2 to 3 on-message mailings to them (postcards that look good, but not so expensive that they turn off the voters). Recruit volunteers and walk precincts. Make phone calls. Have a campaign calendar that gets letters to the editor submitted. Get yard signs.
- Time it all, so everything peaks right before the vote. Remember early voting and mail-in ballots.

Here's the other thing I've learned about elections: you still might lose. Even the best campaigners win only about 75% of the time. There are just so many factors. You find yourself up against the police department or schools, or there's a big lay off in your community. Campaigns are an art, not a science, and you cannot take a loss personally. However, even if you lose, you can, and you should, try again. Persistence pays off.

Donor development

One of the more encouraging findings of the 2018 OCLC study was that although there is deteriorating support for raising taxes for libraries, there was increased support for private philanthropy. People are often and surprisingly willing to donate, year after year, more than their annual tax bill. (Given what libraries cost, it is not that hard.)

Nurturing that pattern of giving, trying to make it a habit, is one way to nudge people toward the supersupporter category. The more they give, the greater their *emotional* investment.

Donor cultivation and development needs to be systematic. It requires an annual giving campaign, and at least two other touches a year (newsletters, invitations to events, etc.). Thoughtful donor management moves people up: "you gave \$35 last year. Would you consider moving up to the \$100 a year level? Monthly payments are possible!" Most fundraisers will tell you that you just don't know who is sitting on big bank accounts, but when you build a relationship with donors, and maintain their trust, you just might find yourself with a big gift.

Culture change

Part of the reason libraries lose elections is because they don't do the things I briefly discuss above. But there is a larger reason. It is not just libraries that are losing support. Support for the entire public sector is eroding. Why? As my colleague Marci Merola and I argue in the American Library Association's Advocacy Bootcamps, the chief reason is a 54 year campaign to reframe taxation as a terrible affliction. That "frame" is just two words: "tax burden." Once you accept it, there is only "tax burden" and "tax relief." This campaign, now coming into fruition, has resulted in the significant weakening of public institutions. Public education is one of them, as witnessed by the recent drop of teachers from the middle class.³ Transportation infrastructure is another example. There are too many stories about collapsing bridges, decrepit subway systems, and derailed trains to be laughed away. A smattering of light rail stops does not make up for it. Libraries are part of a much bigger picture.

Taxation is, in fact, a brilliant strategy to accomplish big things by fairly distributing the costs among the many people who benefit from them. But people of both dominant political parties in America now accept tax cuts as an unquestioned good in itself.

The deep question of successful advocacy is not just

3. "Public Servants Are Losing Their Foothold in the Middle Class," by Patric Cohen and Robert Gebeloff, New York Times, April 22, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/22/business/economy/public-employees.html>

how to win an election. It is about building a climate of library support, a fundamental reclamation of the idea once called “the common good.” How do we change culture? The short answer is, the same way it got changed the last time. Build a new frame. Repeat it for 54 years. This is another area where librarians have not been professional. We launch new campaigns, new initiatives, new slogans, new services far too frequently. Our failure to build a script and stick to it has not, will not, *cannot* succeed against one of the most disciplined and long-lasting trends in American history, the libertarian attempt to reframe all taxation as theft.

Modern neuroscience has demonstrated several things. First, we are emotional creatures; then rational creatures. Second, nobody’s mind is changed by the facts. In fact, a barrage of facts tends to make people dig in their heels. Third, effective advocacy involves the definition and cultivation of ever deeper and wider circles of engagement. ALA has proposed several models for doing this, under the heading of “turning outward.” Fourth, the best strategy to break through a destructive frame is to appeal to some of the oldest parts of the brain. As just a few minutes in a lapsit storytime demonstrates, we are wired for stories. Stories open the door to learning, define identity, and build community. They are also more than feel good anecdotes. As we present in our Advocacy Bootcamp, “telling the library story” has a consistent and powerful structure, easily learned. But that’s not the whole package. It also has to be tied to a strategic and

persistent communication of library value. ALA has a suggested framework for that, too. (See sidebar.)

So it’s not just about telling stories, it’s telling the right stories, telling them well, and telling them to the right people, over and over, with a consistent framework of messages that undoes the willful destruction of the public sector. Winning elections is good. But real advocacy is a much longer game, requiring a much savvier and informed approach.

If you’re interested in this big work, in joining a movement to reclaim a moral sanction for the public sector in general, and libraries in particular, consider checking out our Bootcamp. More information is available at <http://www.ala.org/advocacy/advocacy-bootcamp>.

About the Author

James LaRue is the director of the ALA’s Office for Intellectual Freedom, and the Freedom to Read Foundation. Author of “The New Inquisition: Understanding and Managing Intellectual Freedom Challenges.” LaRue was a public library director for many years. He has written, spoken, and consulted on leadership and organizational development, community engagement, and the future of libraries. Contact him at: jlalrue@jlarue.com or follow him on Twitter: @jaslar

Sidebar: the American Library Association’s 4 Key Messages (based on the same OCLC studies)

- Libraries transform lives.
- Libraries transform communities.
- Librarians are passionate advocates for lifelong learning.
- Libraries are a smart investment.