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Marketing Management as an Alternative Career for Librarians

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"I want to be a librarian," said the little girl with blonde hair and blue eyes. This in response to the age-old question, "What do you want to be when you grow up?"

The year was 1959. I was in third grade, and I had decided that I wanted to be a librarian. Twenty-two years later, after achieving my goal--and after working as a professional librarian in a variety of special library settings--I sought an alternative career.

Winding up in my current "career" resulted from a combination of luck, being in the right place at the right time, and recognizing and taking advantage of opportunities. I am forty-something years old. I love what I do, the people I work with, and the challenges I face every day.

Marketing agrees with my personality and complements my creative abilities. Coupled with my knowledge of information management and my fundamental philosophy of the importance of information, my current professional career as a marketing consultant to librarians and information service providers is, for me, the best of all worlds. The graphics work that my firm produces for promotion materials draws upon my undergraduate degree in art history. I am able to utilize my M.L.S. and professional library experience to understand my clients' unique marketing requirements, and my graduate degree in business provides a solid foundation for my ever-growing marketing management skills. And while my background and experience just happen to all work together (I certainly didn't plan on working with graphic designers when I was studying art history--I thought I wanted to work in an art museum library!), I believe librarians seeking alternative careers will find the marketing profession worthy of investigation.

What Would You Be Getting Into?

Like librarianship, the marketing profession is multi-faceted, able to accommodate a wide range of personalities, capabilities, and interests. Most people have a limited understanding of the responsibilities of marketing professionals. Although marketing has many aspects, the

nature of marketing makes sales and promotion the most visible elements, causing many to draw the erroneous conclusion that if you are in marketing, you must be salesperson-this is not unlike the belief that if you're a librarian, you must answer questions all day. Like a library, a marketing office has a whole cast of supporting players behind the scenes.

Marketing entails research, planning, product and service management, understanding the wants and needs of target markets, pricing strategies, getting the product or service out where the customer can purchase it, selling the product through advertising and promotion strategies, communicating to the media and being socially responsible, and managing all these activities into a coordinated and timely approach that is better than the competition's. Depending on the size of the organization, a marketing office or department can be composed of one person or hundreds of people. While responsibilities vary according to the organization's product or service offering, certain basic marketing functions are common to marketing departments in a wide range of organizations.

Research

A well-executed marketing program includes a research function. Research can support new product introductions, identify product line extensions and positioning strategies, reveal the best promotion theme messages, and uncover information about competing products and market shares. Research can take the form of statistically based research, interactive research, or secondary research using existing data sources.

By answering questions from your marketing department on demographic trends and competitor information, you've already been involved in the secondary research function of marketing. This is probably the easiest point at which to make the transition from librarianship to marketing. However, you'll probably find you need other research skills, such as statistical analysis or interactive interviewing techniques, before you can be considered a full-fledged member of a marketing research team.

Planning

Drafting a complete marketing program plan can be challenging. Unless an organization is small, its marketing plans will most likely be put together by a team of individuals, each with his or her own marketing responsibility. Planning is not a once-a-year activity, and many organizations maintain a staff to constantly generate, monitor, and amend marketing plans (and business plans) in response to external and internal conditions.

Planning can be a visionary's dream job. But those who create the plans and those who implement them have to be in agreement. Throw in budget constraints and the reality of the unexpected, and it becomes clear that planning is not for the faint of heart.

Product Management

Being involved in product management implies being concerned for every characteristic of

your organization's product or service. Particular attention must be paid to the product's position both in the marketplace and relative to competing products. A product manager is always on the lookout for opportunities to spin-off new products to meet demand and to extend the product's life cycle as a profit generator.

You'll find working on a product line team offers a variety of assignments, with the product being the common denominator among team members. Some of the best product managers are almost evangelistic about their particular product. Being a true believer in the product or service you either manage or support makes the work easier--and less like a job.

Distribution and Production

Getting the product or service into the marketplace is the ultimate challenge. Having a product that is the best thing since sliced bread or having a multi-million dollar advertising budget won't matter if the product cannot be located by the customer. Working on a distribution channel can involve coordinating activities among external suppliers, distributors, and retailers. Sophisticated logistical and negotiation skills, sprinkled with legal savvy, will carry you far in this aspect of marketing management. You will also find that as more organizations open overseas production facilities, distribution responsibilities may get you an overseas assignment. Individuals inclined towards numbers and control might find a home in inventory management.

Promotion

The objective for all promotion activities is to sell the product or service. Those with a quick wit, a sharp eye, and no fear of superlatives will have the edge when it comes to pursuing a career in marketing promotion. A variety of areas under the promotion umbrella may be of interest. Personal sales is one option. If you are looking for larger paychecks, this can be the best place to start. A good sales representative can usually negotiate commissions and perks--many times reaching six figures in any given year. If you don't like to hustle and want a stable, albeit smaller paycheck, then don't get into sales promotion.

Advertising is a highly charged and stress-filled arena. Competitive advertising agencies are constantly looking for quick-witted and astute copywriters and account representatives. Agencies with international and national accounts can be found in almost city; New York's Madison Avenue is no longer the only "game in town." The pay can be generous but at the personal cost of long hours--media deadlines don't wait for anyone.

Promotion also offers opportunities in exhibit management, proposal development, direct mail, advertising sales, promotion speciality items, and sports marketing.

Public Relations

In many organizations the public relations function is assigned to the communications department; sometimes it is positioned within the organization so that the public relations director reports to the director of promotion and advertising. Regardless of its title, the

individuals in a public relations department are concerned with the organization's image-in its community, among its employees, and within the marketplace.

Being responsible for an organization's perceived image may include communicating with the press and planning media programs, working with members of the community in sponsoring and organizing events, monitoring the organization's visual image and any trademark infringements, training, and writing and producing communications materials for both internal and external distribution. If you have strong verbal skills (written and oral), and can write in different styles, then the communications department may be for you. Unfortunately, the salary may not be as high as what you are getting now, so look before you leap into public relations.

A glance at the employment opportunities section of any newspaper will reveal a wide range of marketing-related positions. Depending on the size of the organization, its industry, marketplace position, management policies, and other attributes, you will find a variety of jobs of various titles with different combinations of marketing responsibilities. You will also find that you can work for firms specializing in aspects of marketing--marketing research firms, advertising agencies, or public relations firms--or you can work for an organization that has its own marketing group. One-person marketing departments can be compared to one-person libraries--you do everything. Large marketing departments mean more compartmentalizing of work and less autonomy. Look at your current library situation and determine what makes you happy--large or small bureaucracies. Whatever the answer, a similar environment can be found in the marketing profession.

Actually, as a librarian switching careers, you have two paths to an alternative career in marketing management. You can join the marketing team of a company or organization that produces or manages information services or products, or you can move to a completely different field--perhaps one that builds on a personal interest or your educational background.

Moving to an information-based organization is usually the more attractive option and promises the smoothest transition--unless, of course, you don't want to see another library in your life! As more and more information products and services come to market in this blossoming "information society," more opportunities exist for marketing staff personnel and managers who have a background in information management and who can "speak the language." Publishers, online database vendors, database producers, CD-ROM producers, software developers, book dealers, furniture companies, serials vendors--they all have products based on information management strategies or they direct their products towards the library market. Your M.L.S. combined with your marketing management skills, will be particularly attractive to these organizations

Education Considerations

Moving into the marketing profession can mean a whole new educational experience. In many large organizations, management positions are given to those who work their way up the ranks. A graduate degree in marketing certainly won't hurt. If you aspire to upper management, you can groom yourself in any one of the top business school graduate programs. While there is no

one "approved" program of study for a business marketing degree, if you go into public relations, being certified by the Public Relations Society of America is important. In any marketing area, you may find a degree will get you in the door, but experience and a proven track record will be important points in your favor when it comes to salary and perk negotiations.

Like any other academic course of study, most marketing management education programs are not "real world." Your coursework is not going to review how artwork is prepared, how printing is accomplished, how statistical programs construct tables, or how to instruct a direct mail house on stuffing your mailers. You must also learn these and other aspects of everyday marketing activities-many of which involve working with outside contractors-to plan and implement a successful marketing program.

The strategy that worked for me has been augmenting my graduate course learning with one- to two-day seminars devoted to specific topics. Here you get the nuts and bolts of how you're really going to do the job. Other education sources are the suppliers themselves-the printers, the service bureaus, the advertising specialty houses, the people who run the statistical programs and build the demographic databases. Most suppliers are eager to educate their potential customers. Sure, you get subjective information because you are a potential customer, but you can glean a lot of working knowledge from these people as you build a resource list.

Researching An Alternative Career in Marketing

Before taking the plunge, try taking a few one-day seminars and workshops in the areas of marketing that interest you. You might consider attending night school or adult education classes to get a better grasp of what you might be getting into. Attending seminars and classes will bring you in contact with people who may be able to give you reality-check insights into the marketing profession. If you think you might want to work in marketing for an information-based organization, talk with the folks who staff the exhibit booths at library conferences.

The American Marketing Association (AMA) is a good place to start your research. Attend professional marketing conferences as well as the meetings of local marketing professionals. The AMA has local chapters all over the country. Not only will you meet people at these meetings, you'll also find out where the jobs are and what salary levels you can expect.

Review college marketing textbooks to learn the jargon and get a sense of what marketing management is about. Start reading the professional marketing literature. You'll find a special interest journal for almost every aspect of marketing.

Pros and Cons

The marketing profession is not without its drawbacks. For the most part you will find the average paycheck is larger than those earned by librarians, but performing your job while constantly keeping an eye on bottom line profits may not agree with you. Also, remember you will be starting a whole new career, and you may have to take a cut in pay to get in the door.

There's probably no more job security in the marketing profession than in librarianship. If your company merges with another or your product line is phased out, or if your sales don't match quota, you could be on the street.

If you can't stand deadline pressures, don't go into advertising. And if you don't want to be on the road six out of every eight weeks, don't sign-up for exhibits. You'll find yourself fighting for budgets just as much in a small marketing office as you did in your library. Although it may be a little easier to show how your efforts contributed to the bottom line, just like in your prior "library life," there will never be enough money to do the job you think should be done.

If you don't thrive in a competitive environment, the marketing profession may not be for you. Most aspects of marketing involve competition on some level-among companies, product lines, or colleagues, or with last year's bottom line. In fact, marketing has been likened to war games and chess with its strategic moves, defensive positions, and competitor intelligence. Don't be surprised if during interviews, you're asked why would you leave the "safety of the library" for a job like this.

So what's the good news? First of all, if you switch to a marketing job, you won't be concerned about library operations anymore. Be careful, however, that in whatever alternative career you choose, you don't lapse into acting like a librarian. It's easy to slip into the familiar habits of collecting information. First you start gathering it for yourself (because you know how valuable it is!), then the word gets out that you have all these great resources, and before you know it, you're right back where you started--your organization's librarian.

Second, if you've been in a library that hasn't gotten enough respect from upper management, you'll find the marketing function to be much more visible. And if your career objectives includes assuming a CEO position, you're in luck, because most marketing departments are the grooming stations for future organization leaders.

This writer has found that while marketing can be studied and pursued along a straight and narrow path, it helps if a person has a "knack" for marketing. Some people can "see" opportunities and create solutions; others have to follow the book. The more you are inclined towards reasonable risk-taking, have an underlying confidence in your ideas, and can recognize opportunities, the more you will thrive in the marketing profession.

Marketing management may be an especially good alternative career if you are accustomed to managing your library as a business. In fact, if you have successfully switched your library to a fee-based information service, your operations are making money, and the only reason your services haven't grown more is because your organization won't let them, then you might very well be ready to leap into a marketing position where the "global village" is your oyster.

A Few Words on Being A Consultant

The year was 1984 when I hung out the shingle for Chris Olson & Associates. From the

moment I opened the doors of my consulting practice, I positioned my firm as the marketing resource for librarians and information service producers. But I didn't arrive at the decision to be a consultant or my business strategy overnight. Before taking the leap into consulting, I investigated a variety of library and marketing career-related opportunities, from becoming an account representative for one of the top computer companies to joining an information management team of a big eight accounting firm. In the end I decided to give my entrepreneurial instincts a chance. Building my consulting practice into a business has brought an added dimension to my alternative career. Managing your own business--now there's an alternative career.

There are plenty of books and articles on the topic of starting and running your own business. There are also library seminars and groups of library consultants that you can query to learn what it's like to fire up the computer while still wearing your bedroom slippers or be up at 2:00 am working on a client project that just won't end. But just in case you were wondering what my perspective and advice is, here it is in a nutshell.

- If at all possible, hit the ground running--begin your business while you still have your regular job. Unless you have a sizeable nest egg to rely upon, doing without regular paychecks can be devastating.
- Don't impose unrealistic goals on yourself or your business. Make sure you do your marketing research homework before you begin the business.
- Give yourself two years before you decide whether your business is successful or not.
- Be thoroughly in love with what your business offers. You will be eating and sleeping it for the rest of your life. If you think the goal of your business is to make money, don't bother. The money will come if you offer a good product or service, but money should never be the sole reason for going into business for yourself.
- Be prepared to work 12 and 14 hour days, seven days a week if necessary. Remember, you not only have to do client work, you have to collect the money, pay your bills, balance the budget, manage your own marketing program, make proposals to bring in more work, answer the phone, and take out the trash.
- Make sure you have a strong network of friends and colleagues to call upon when the going gets tough. This is especially important in the beginning. Sitting alone in your office when you are accustomed to an environment with friends and colleagues can be demoralizing.

Working at a job that you do not enjoy or look forward to is no way to spend eight hours a day, five days a week. If you are burned out, have come to realize that library work is not for you, or are looking for new opportunities, I hope this book and this chapter will help you chart a new, more satisfying course. Whatever you decide, I wish you all the best. Chris Olson

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