The Best of Both Worlds

How Public Libraries Can Learn from Bookstores

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It would be difficult for any book lover to find anything really wrong with either a book store or a library. However, what she might find are departures from her ideal environments. It is with the hope for the ideal library that I began my research.

**Background**

The Long Beach City is home to a population of roughly half a million people, of various races, backgrounds and economic classes. The city itself is relatively young with an average age of 30 and 32% of the population comprised of people under 20 ("Demographic Profile", 2001). Over half of Long Beach’s is designated as belonging to a minority group, with 44% of the total population speaking a language other than English at home. And given that Long Beach is one of the largest cities in Los Angeles County it is not surprising that Long Beach has a significant portion of the population living below the poverty line, about 20% ("Demographic Profile", 2001). Combining these facts with a large number of disabled persons living in Long Beach (over 87,000), one can see how vital a public library is to the city. The Library itself is comprised of a Main library and eleven branch libraries, together boasting over a million items circulated annually.  

**The Library Environment**

Built in 1970, the El Dorado branch sits on the edge of the large El Dorado city park. Surrounded by trees, rolling lawns, and general greenery, the library looks to be an ideal environment. It is upon entering the building that one becomes disappointed. Immediately upon entering, the patron has three options: left to the bathrooms, straight to the auditorium, and right to the main library room. Despite being one of the larger branches with 8000 square feet, the
main library room is distinctly unappealing. Natural light enters from only three windows situated in the back of the building, while the rest of the main room is badly lit with overhead fluorescent lighting. The occasional literacy promotional poster and two large lettered signs for “New” and “Children’s” fiction accent the drab cream-colored wall paint. The look is completed by the green and brown mottled carpet pattern and mismatched bookshelves. Some shelves are metal, others are wood, and still others are a combination of wooden endings and metal shelves.

Patrons have the choice of sitting at three wooden tables, each with four wood chairs, or in the oversized leather armchairs, which has its own side table. There are a few straight backed armchairs clustered around the comfortable leather chair. The comfortable armchair has the added advantage of being situated near the three large windows. Patrons may also choose to sit in the children’s section, which has several children-sized chairs and tables, but getting there from the armchairs is a difficult task. Blocking the way are two librarian desks, a display case, and a large children’s book caddy, shaped like an alligator. Though not any more crowded than the typical library, the layout does not allow for a straight path. The aisles themselves are no less perilous with just enough room for one person to stand the width between the shelves. I wonder how individuals in wheelchairs gain access to the stacks.

**The Bookstore Environment**

Though there are several bookstores in the area, I choose to visit the Borders bookstore at the Los Altos Market Center, located in an upscale neighborhood not too distant from the El Dorado branch library. The strip-mall location of the store did nothing to add to the ambiance, but the store is clearly marked in its familiar letters and signage. Once inside the store, the customer is greeted by the familiar red tones used in all Borders stores. Red tones are known to
be warming and are often used in retail stores to create a sense of comfort, according to Sannwald’s article *Espresso and Ambiance* (1998). Eye-catching displays are placed in the large aisles, while books and other items are lined on attractive wooden bookshelves. Large bookcases in the fiction section are accessible with a smart wooden book ladder. These traditional wooden library touches are added so as to please the book lovers and entice them to return to the bookstore, as opposed to the library (Sannwald, 1998). And though the shelves vary in height, it is purposefully done so that shelves roughly shoulder level comprise the majority of the floor, while taller cases line the perimeter, allowing for easy viewing of the other sections, which is yet another strategic design plan (Sannwald, 1998). The well-lit areas of the bookstore are all clearly marked and those categories on the outer rim of the store are distinguished by large lettered signs on the walls above them.

Ample room within the store allows for the shelves to be laid out on a grid pattern, permitting customers to cross from one side of the store to the other without encumbrance. The aisles are also widely spaced enough for several customers to peruse the same items simultaneously. However, if customers do not feel like standing, a black armchair rests at the end of nearly every section, with a group of armchairs clustered near the periodicals section. If a customer does not feel like sitting in any of these chairs, she may choose to sit in the café area, which consists of seven small round tables, each with three chairs. All of these fixtures are specifically designed to encourage the customer to browse, stay, and enjoy the store’s products, which often leads to purchases (Magnet, 1994).

Part of why customers seem to linger so long in the bookstore as well, aside from the comfortable ambiance, is the inclusion of food and drink into the bookstore atmosphere. The café included in the Borders is located at the rear of the store, but can easily be spotted from the
entrance. Once in the café portion, there is the distinct aroma of coffee and appetizing treats are highlighted in glass cases on the tasteful countertops. There are no signs anywhere in the store limiting enjoyment of food to just the café area. Instead, customers are invited to sip while they browse or to sit in one of the larger armchairs on the floor. This encouragement to treat the store like one’s own living room helps support the atmosphere the bookstore is trying to create (Sannwald, 1998).

**Comparison**

Even from the brief descriptions above, the chasm between the bookstore and library décor can easily be seen. Borders has taken special steps to create a warm, welcoming environment where the customer is encouraged to stay, browse, and enjoy. This approach specifically supports their mission: to sell more products (Coffman, 1998). It also works to support some of the points made by Woodward in his article “What’s all this About Ambiance?” (2005). Specifically, Borders does an excellent job in entertaining the customer with a vibrant and lively environment and providing a safe, comfortable atmosphere in which to enjoy the materials.

The El Dorado library’s environment is in stark contrast to the inviting atmosphere of Borders. Many of Woodward’s points have come true when examining the chosen décor (2005). The carpet appears to have been selected to disguise stains, as well as wear and tear, rather than to help support an environment encouraging lingering and reading. Sannwald specifically suggests varying the flooring by section to help capture the mood the librarian wants to create for each space (1998). In contrast to this, the El Dorado’s wall to wall carpeting of the same ugly, mottled carpet seems only to capture the mood of dilapidation, so common in the Long Beach
Library system. Woodward encourages libraries to especially be conscious of appearing in good condition. The good condition of a library can encourage patrons to return as they may view the library as a comfortable, safe place, rather than a place which may present hazards to their well-being (2005).

Similarly, the lack of display cases also speaks to the library’s dismal atmosphere. There are no displays for adults, whatsoever, and only two for children. The one in the center of the floor currently happens to be of dead bugs. I imagine has limited appeal. Though this supports the summer reading theme of “Catch the Reading Bug”, it does not, however, appear attractive or interesting to anyone other than the few young boys I witnessed looking into it. The only other display is of children’s books located behind the checkout desk, on top of a bookcase. In the time I spent observing, only two patrons even asked about the books behind the clerks’ heads, and these were adults; whereas the displays in Borders were plentiful and attractive. I witnessed customer after customer walk up to a display only to walk to another one or spend a good amount of time lingering at a certain display (a practice I, myself, have indulged in). Me too. These instances would appear to me to be proof that Borders is engaging in positive, successful display techniques, while the library is failing to do so. Good point. The importance of this may not be immediately noticeable, but the purpose of the display is to highlight collections and services being offered (Sannwald, 1998). The library is thus failing to draw attention to its many assets, especially those it can hold over the bookstore, and failing to entertain valuable patrons (Woodward, 2005).

Lastly the absence of coffee and snacks is something that patrons have lamented for years and something is finally being done about it. Allowing food is vital to creating the feeling that the library is more than just a place to check out books. When patrons are allowed to enjoy their
coffee and their book simultaneously, they may begin to feel that the library is a place of enjoyment, similar to the bookstore (Coffman, 2000). In an effort to make patrons more comfortable several Canadian libraries have recently opened their doors to food…and coffee. The Fairview Public Library in Toronto has opened a coffee and snack shop within the library and allows patrons “to drink and eat while browsing” (Rushowy, 2000, np). Though no data is currently available for how these new cafes have effected public library use, the University of Western Ontario in London have noted that “use of the library is ‘up tremendously’” (Rushowy, 2000, np). This new food movement is credited to the influence of big bookstores on the libraries of Canada. Raymond in “Librarians Have Little to Fear from Bookstores”, states that the inclusion of the café is to “provide patrons with a third environment, an atmosphere that doesn’t bear the bustle of the circulation desk or the monastic solemnity of the stacks” (1998, p. 37). The Chapters (Canadian equivalent to Borders) director of public relations pointed out “providing a place where people are comfortable reading and browsing and welcome to linger as long as they like is something that used to be the domain of libraries” (Rushowy, 2000, np).

The creation of a comfortable environment in which the patron lingers directly supports the ideal behind the library’s mission: to be a cultural and a community center, taking pride in service to the population (“Mission Statement”, 2005). Both Sannwald and Woodward have many suggestions as to how to make the library a more inhabitable place, several of which can easily be applied to the El Dorado library. As Sannwald pointed out, color plays an important role in creating a welcoming environment (1998). This would be a relatively easy and inexpensive fix. Other changes would prove to be a little more costly. The continuity of shelving, updated lighting, attractive carpeting, and a revised layout would all serve to improve the atmosphere, while still not requiring a major remodel or costing the city too dearly. As
Raymond asserts, the addition of just a few donated or cheaply purchased couches and chairs could make a huge difference in emulating the comfortable environment of bookstores (1998).

**Library Staff and Patrons**

The El Dorado Branch, despite serving a community of only 20,000, sees over 150,000 items circulated annually (“Facts and Figures”, 2005). This makes it the busiest of the branch libraries, with a large portion of its circulation being done through reserve items. The busy reserve area is located near the entrance and patrons simply help themselves to their own reserve items, which they then bring to the circulation desk. In fact, if patrons did not help themselves a clerk would need to be employed just to pull reserves. Circulation had a nearly constant line of people ready to check out, pay fines, or reserve books. Two clerks manned the desk while two pages circulated the floor, shelving books and pointing out directions. Sounds really well used.

Two full time librarians currently run the library, one dedicated to children’s services and the other working with adult services. Both full time librarians are extremely busy running summer reading programs for their patron groups as well as maintaining year round programs such as Scrabble Nights, *(I love Scrabble, I wish my library would do that)* various Story Times, and book clubs (N. Paradise, personal communication, 7/18/08). They also spend a good amount of their time answering reference questions. The library clerks are permitted to assist in simple reference, such as looking up a book or walking a patron over to an item. However, that leaves only two librarians for real reference and research questions, of which they answer roughly 14,000 annually. A part time librarian fills in on main librarian’s days off. The library is looking to hire an additional full time librarian to replace a recently retired adult services librarian. However, according to Mrs. Paradise, the library would like to hire a teen/youth
services librarian since there are currently no teen programs or activities at this library (personal communication, 7/18/08). Great use of statistics to support the need for more staff. 4 librarians seems like a good fit to me.

Thus it is logical that the majority of the patrons observed using the El Dorado branch library fell into three categories: 1) young children, 2) parents with young children, and 3) senior citizens. Noticeably missing are teens and young adults. I hope a young adult librarian is hired soon.

**Bookstore Staff and Patrons**

Book stores consider friendly and informed staff to be essential to the business (Magnet, 1994, np). However, I had a difficult time finding one! Though the check out desk seemed to be well staffed, I only spotted three employees working the floor in an area roughly three times the size of the library’s floor. The employee I did find was working at the “Information” kiosk and was faced with a line of three customers looking for assistance. Though I did not join the line, I surreptitiously observed the information assistance offered by the Borders staff member. Initially, she was asked to find a book on a summer reading list for a teenager. This was easily done, as the student had the list with her and most likely could have found it himself. The staff member merely pointed to the section in which the book was located, highlighting the author and title on the student’s flyer. The second customer was looking for an autobiography of a specific football team’s coach (Tony Dungy’s *Quiet Strength*). The staff member was not familiar with the coach or the team. She looked up the coach, asking the customer to spell it for her. She then instructed the customer that the autobiography would be in the “Team Sports” section of the store, pointing to where that area was located. The final customer wanted assistance finding a
new novel from her favorite author, not having found it on the shelves in the fiction area. The staff member was apparently familiar with this question or this author (or possibly both) because she barely needed the customer to finish the question before informing her that the book was located in the “New Fiction” section near the front of the store.

Comparison:

The majority of the questions answered by the Borders staff member were similar to those witnessed being answered by the library clerks at El Dorado. However, I am afraid to imagine what the staff member would do if faced with tougher reference questions such as what is the best treatment for sandy soil in gardens or assistance in finding instructional African maps for children. I witnessed the librarians at El Dorado answer to such questions. The fact that the staff member was unfamiliar with a popular sports team and needed assistance from the customer looking up the information leads me to believe that reference service available in libraries is truly irreplaceable.

Though Coffman suggested the elimination of reference in his 1998 articles, he revised that view in his 2000 article “And Now a Word from Our Sponsors”, saying that he is not suggesting the elimination of reference services, but merely drawing attention to how much they are used (or not used, as he contends). Funds spent on hiring pricey reference librarians might better be spent on expanding the catalog or refurbishing the library or extending its hours, modeling this plan after the hiring and salary practices of bookstores (1998). However, Raymond contends that in bookstores you “get what you pay for” (1998, p. 37). Many of the employees make less than wages touted in Coffman’s “What if Your Ran Your Library Like a Bookstore?” article. However, the low wages have a more meaningful implication outside of the
low running cost of the bookstore. Those clerks attracted to jobs in the bookstore, for which they are paid so little, are constantly turning over. The constant turnover also means that the bookstores “sometimes hire people who don’t especially like to read, like books, or even know more than a half-dozen authors” (Raymond, 1998, p. 37). These types of employees may not be interested in assisting their customers with even the easiest of reference questions (1998).

Also important to point out is that those patrons whom I witnessed visiting the bookstore appeared to be able to afford to purchase something, and indeed I witnessed many of them do that very thing. However, the patrons in the library varied extremely in their socio-economic backgrounds, leading me to believe that many of the patrons would not have been able to afford the same services elsewhere. In fact, many of the library’s patrons came in for government assistance forms, such as Renter’s Rebate, which they would not have been able to find (or purchase) at a bookstore. Good Point!

Library Organization

As most libraries are, the El Dorado library is organized according to the Dewey decimal system. However, there are some slight alterations. There is a separate section for those items considered to be pre-teen, labeled “Betwitx and Between.” These are located just on the other side of the stack from the Teen section. I would consider the Teen section to be the most confusing. Non-fiction, fiction, graphic novel, and classics area are all subsections within the Teen area, which used to be contained within three stacks, but has now spread into the “New Adult” section. Also within the teen section are several roundabouts containing fiction paperbacks.
The most widely used adult section of the library is the fiction areas. For some reason, though, the original planners of the library organized the fiction to be against the back wall, farthest from the door. To add insult to injury, the fiction area is almost completely obscured by the adult non-fiction stacks. Only the Mystery and Suspense sections are easily visible from the main area. Directions to the various fiction sections appeared to be a frequent question asked of the clerks and librarians.

Most of the non-fiction stacks had very small signs posted on them listing the Dewey Decimal numbers and the corresponding headings. However, these headings were not all encompassing, as they sometimes read things like Art-Travel. This was not extremely helpful for those patrons looking to browse the shelves of interesting subjects, rather than using the catalog to find a specific item. In fact, much of the library’s layout made browsing a difficulty. There were a few areas that did allow for browsing, such as the children’s picture books and “New Adult” sections. Yet these are just two sections of the many, many topics housed in the library.

However, if looking for a particular item, there are a multitude of books, magazines, children’s books, DVDs, CDs, and books on tape. And if I did not find what I was looking for within the library, they would happily order it for me from another branch or the Main library (which itself has nearly half a million items) (“Facts and Figures”, 2005). The library also offers an Inter-Library Loan system for any items not in the Long Beach Public Library system. Items ordered through this system cost two dollars each, which seems a small price to pay for having any item delivered to your neighborhood library (N. Paradise, personal communication, 7/18/08).

**Bookstore Organization**
Also in keeping with bookstores everywhere, Borders is organized by large categories, such as Fiction, Travel, History, etc. Within the larger categories, such as Fiction, there may be subcategories to make searching easier. So within Fiction, you may find African American literature, short stories, plays, etc. The large categories are typically well labeled and easily accessible, while the subcategories may be a bit more challenging with labels typically pasted directly on to the shelving for the particular topic. The organization of the items is also attractive and eye catching by facing items out to make the most out of cover art. As discussed earlier, the bookstore encourages browsing with both display techniques, shelving, and large identifiable category labels.

And while the bookstore does have a plethora of items to offer, particularly those items recently published and in demand (two areas the library often struggles with), they do not offer the same depth as the library. For example, the poetry section offered almost one book on every poet I could think of. However, an older poet, such as Edna St. Vincent Millay, had only one book and that was an anthology of her work. It also happened to be wrapped in plastic, prohibiting me from browsing through the pages to see if my favorite poems were included in this volume. Next to Millay were nearly a dozen different copies of Milton’s Paradise Lost, each appear to have different cover art and publishing dates. I wondered at the disparity between the two, while recognizing that Milton is much better known and Paradise Lost is one of the most famous epic poems written in the English language. However, I also recognized that a library would most likely be able to offer me at least a browse-able copy of Millay’s poems. Good Point.

Comparison
The disparity between the collections of these two institutions is something not often discussed when the debate between organization rages. Yet one Canadian reporter noted how the book industry had let her down. Sharlene Azam, in her article “Long Live our Public Libraries” cited the difference between the collections of libraries and bookstores as one reason she decided to switch over, saying “libraries tend to have a much wider and more complete range collection of titles on most subjects” (2001, np). While this idea directly contradicts Renee Feinberg’s findings in “B&N: The New College Library” in which she found that the majority of students she interviewed at Barnes and Nobles cited the bookstore with having a fuller collection. Many of the students claimed that the bookstores also had the newest materials and multiple copies of items they were looking for. This is a recognizable problem for many libraries nationwide. Many libraries cannot afford to purchase the newest materials when they come out or to buy enough copies to satisfy every patron. If the library does manage to purchase a copy near the publication date, the cataloging system is often tedious and long, further delaying the item’s appearance on library shelves (N. Paradise, personal communication, and 7/18/08).

Book distributors such as Baker and Taylor offer services that have solved this problem from many libraries. Through the use of networked technology, B&T can have access to a libraries catalog and have the books processed and ready to shelve upon receipt at a branch library. It costs a little extra as it is outsourcing work done traditionally by the library. But when I worked at NYPL, where the book volume is high, it was a huge benefit to the patrons.

However, the library does offer services that the bookstore cannot. Once purchased, an item can potentially stay in the library system forever, meaning older items, now out of print, are available for patrons to borrow (Azam, 2001). As Raymond points out “need old issues of a magazine? Forget it. We have only current issues of each publication and naturally nothing
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scholarly” (1998, p. 37). Which brings me to my next point: libraries now have extensive digital collections, either in the form of digital archives or electronic databases, many of which are now accessible remotely for library patrons (Azam, 2001). Bookstores cannot compete in this field, as they do not offer these services to their customers.

What they do offer their customers is easy access to new materials. It is this easy access that has battles raging within the library community and the big question remains: Do Dewey or Don’t? Many librarians still feel strongly that the Dewey Decimal system is integral to the library’s organization. One librarian even went so far as to state that the Dewey Decimal makes libraries “systematically superior” to bookstores (Brisco, 2004, p. 37). In her article, Brisco points out that bookstore shelving and categorizing can often lead to misunderstandings and misplacements (2004). This is echoed by Raymond, who knows from behind the scenes experience just how many mistakes can happen, “misshelving occurs all the time” (1998, p. 42).

Yet while there are bound to be a few errors, it is important that mistakes can be made within the Dewey system as well. Marshall Shore, coordinator of adult services for the Maricopa County Library District, points out that “Dewey isn’t ‘fail safe’ and that the classification system has often confused and frustrated patrons” (Whelan, 2007, np). Shore oversees the now infamous Perry Branch Library, which was one of the first libraries in the country to debut a Dewey-less category organization. This step was taken because a survey of the library’s patrons returned results indicating that a majority of patrons visited the library to browse. So to accentuate the browsing experience, the library decided to turn to bookstore type categories and subcategories. The library is also incorporating many other bookstore qualities by adding movable bookshelves to help create flexible displays (Oder, 2007, np). When news of this Dewey-less library hit the public, many librarians were outraged, but it’s important to not as one
academic librarian did, that the public library’s mission is to cater to the patron and “the goal of a public librarian is to…give [the customer] what they want” (Whelan, 2007, np).

**Conclusion**

In the end, the public library’s mission is to give the patrons what they want. While some of the bookstore’s qualities do not belong in a library, neither do some of the library’s qualities belong in the bookstore. The ideal solution is to take the best of the bookstore and apply it to the library, as the bookstore has already done with the library. Michael Sullivan noted in “One Happy Library User” many bookstores have “adopted much of what was as librarians hold dear without losing the best of what the traditional bookstore had to offer” (2001, p. 264). Why, then, can’t libraries do the same?

Bookstores have looked to our methods to improve their service, and for this every librarian should be proud. More and more we should be swallowing our pride and looking, really looking, to the bookstores for ways to improve our own service. (Sullivan, 2001, p. 264).
References


Rushowy, K. (2000, March 6). Libraries allow eating between the lines up front. The Toronto Star, 1A.


**OBSERVATION PAPER -- EXPLANATION OF GRADE**

*Library/bookstore descriptions (physical environment, staff activities, patron activities), 15%: very detailed: 15*

*Community profile, 10%: covered social and economic data as well as population count: 10*

*Depth/quality comparison/contrast, 10%: detailed descriptions of the two agencies highlighted how different they are: 10*

*Clarity of prose, 10%: clearly written: 10*

*Quality of supporting research, 10%: good mixture of professional and academic resources: 10*

*Depth of supporting research, 10%: 10*

*Depth of analytical input, 15%: Great discussion throughout: 15*
Quality of recommendations, 15%: A few good recommendations throughout the paper but in general not enough recommendations specific to the branch library you observed: 12

Citation accuracy, 5%: nearly perfect, remember to italicize the volume of the journal along with the name: 5

Great job! The articles and research you present well support your observations. Also, you provided excellent background information on the community and the library. Very well written, a pleasure to read.

GRADE: 97