

Marketing strategies for libraries

Ann Ritchie has written this report on the successful study group organised by the ALIA WA T&D Committee

A group of nine librarians met every 3-4 weeks between June 1993 and January 1994 for the purpose of assisting each other to work through the ALIA self-education course: *Marketing strategies for libraries and information agencies* by Fay Nicholson. This was an initiative of the WA T&D Committee.

'If you do not operate in the marketplace you may as well operate in an iron lung'.

I can't remember where I came across this quotation, but I do remember the jolt it gave me when I first heard it and realised that I needed to overcome some of my resistance to and preconceived ideas and beliefs (which were mostly negative) about marketing. Whether we acknowledge it or not, we do operate in a marketplace (i.e., the place of exchange), so why not examine the elements of the marketplace so that we can formulate some strategies to improve the way we operate? In marketing terms this implies creating the most appropriate 'marketing mix' or more simply, the 'best fit' between what the client wants/needs and what the provider has to offer.

One of the first topics which the group discussed was in fact the issue of our negative thoughts about marketing, and some of the issues which emerged were the unsavoury connotations of 'selling', propaganda and the business/profit ethic, the idea that marketing would increase the demand for our services so that we would not be able to cope, and the idea that marketing was associated with consultancy and the principle of user pays. At this stage we did not have many answers, and had to be willing to suspend our points of view and at least explore the concept of marketing.

Each member of the group had their own particular point of departure and reason for wanting to

do the course and these generally related to current developments in their library or the stage reached in their own career. These included the establishment of new or branch libraries, the introduction of new services or assuming new functions, organisational restructuring or relocation, threats of closure, employment in a new job or area etc.

As librarians we often operate in isolation and the support offered within our organisations or personal networks is probably not the kind which is most useful to us in our professional role. The main function of the group was professional support through sharing information, knowledge, experience and resources.

On the whole this was achieved by means of large and small group discussions of ideas and issues and particular case studies, undertaking individual and joint projects, and giving honest feedback. At times the discussions were very free ranging, and at other times we focused on a particular problem. The flexibility of the structure meant that we could respond to the most pressing needs. The main benefits of the group support which would not occur if the package were undertaken individually were:

- the motivation to do something before the next meeting, even simply to try out an idea;
- the motivation to continue the hard work of reflecting and examining our changing situations according to the marketing principles that we were learning as we progressed through the modules, so that we could join in the discussions;
- contributing to the creative process which can occur in groups; and
- the opportunity to acknowledge and be part of each others' 'successes'.

The formal structure and sub-

ject matter were provided by the package itself and the suggested readings, and the marketing method provided the framework for analysis. Some of the advantages of the method are:

- marketing is the practical component of the strategic planning process and this links the library with the organisation's strategic plan making imperative that the library mission, goals, objectives and strategies are consistent with those of the organisation; and this in turn provides justification of the library as an essential service in terms of the organisation's corporate plan;
- the approach to planning is dynamic and client-focused, and as satisfaction of client needs/wants is the *raison d'être* of the library, this process has an in-built feedback mechanism which ensures that the library is on track i.e., continual assessment and readjustment ensure that the library is actually doing what it exists to do;
- the method of market segmentation, in conjunction with analysis of the organisation's key services/functions, allows prioritisation and a rationale for budgetary decision-making;
- the integrity of the system, linking as it does the ends with the means, has implications for quality assurance throughout the organisation.

Some of the changes which occurred in our libraries over the 6 months were planned, and some were unforeseen, although probably not unrelated to the implementation of our learning. One of the major benefits of the method was that it gave us the tools to understand, analyse and develop strategies for managing change.

A second marketing group will be commencing at the end of April. Please contact Ann Ritchie (09) 346 6184 for further information. ■