

"Should old acquaintance be forgot?" – Technology Trends in 2010

At about this time every New Year, as I scrape the remains of the Christmas ham into the neighbour's wheelie bin and contemplate a slew of earnest resolutions, the keen amateur futurist in me tries to imagine what kind of world next year's festive pork product will leave behind.

I would particularly urge everyone to dip into AnnaLaura Brown's *socialnetworkinglibrarian.com* blog. Her *Top 10 Social Networking in Libraries Trends for 2010* are worth summarising here:

1. Increased use of mobile applications for library services
2. More ebook readers and increased demand for those already on the market
3. Greater usage of niche social networking sites with spill over impacts on libraries
4. More Google applications and increased usage by the great unwashed
5. An end to the Google Books saga and thus greater usage by library customers
6. Library websites becoming more 'socialised' and customised
7. Libraries making more use of open source software and social networking sites to save money
8. More libraries using podcasts and variants to communicate with customers
9. More libraries offering training in social networking to customers
10. In short, social networking in libraries will be viewed as both a 'given' and a way to save money rather than simply something fun to explore for library marketing.

AnnaLaura's predictions for the year brought to mind Steve Abram's observations about technology adoption curves and the challenges libraries face trying to remain relevant. We all serve diverse markets – from tech savvy teens through to tech phobic seniors. Or worse, tech phobic teens and tech savvy seniors!

A new technology normally starts with a few creative innovators who inspire a small following of early adopters; giving rise in time to the Early Majority and eventually the Late Majority. Laggards are last in the cycle and typically adopt a technology just in time to get a really good deal at their local computer super store.

Libraries are urged to try to be 'one category ahead' of their customers. This worthy goal poses a fundamentally important question though – do we know where our customers typically sit on the curve? In my experience, the answer is usually no.

Now consider for a moment: without that knowledge, should we expend precious time and dollars to be innovators and early adopters? I think not.

In most libraries and their parent organisations, resources are limited – we fight for every dollar. I argue that it's more efficient, more economical, and ultimately more useful to position ourselves conservatively somewhere between the early majority and the late majority – doing what libraries have always done best: interpreting technologies for customers and providing free or subsidised access to new services as they become relevant to the communities we serve.

If you're still not convinced, ask yourself this question: do our communities really care if their libraries are not among the early adopters of Google Wave, Chrome OS, or Augmented Reality? If you're unemployed and need help with a podcast to prepare for a job interview, Google Wave is at best irrelevant. Thus the critical questions for libraries are do we understand what our customers do care about in terms of technology, and how do these preferences fit within the context of our wider communities and services?

In addition to being one of the prettiest towns in the New England region of NSW, Glen Innes has found its tourist niche chasing tartan-wearing, Enya-listening types with an annual Celtic festival and the Australian Standing Stones.

Visiting the stones for the first time last year, I couldn't help but notice how incongruous they seemed within the the Australian bush setting. Framed by tall eucalypts, the stones bear witness to a palpably different culture and technology than that indigenous to the area. It occurred to me that libraries are sometimes like local tourist boards – spruiking 'attractions' that don't always sit comfortably within their adopted context.

Are we at risk in libraries in 2010 of building lots of little stone circles – interesting to look at and fun to show the visitors but incongruous and potentially irrelevant to the people we serve?

Much has been written of online gaming in libraries as a means to attract young people. While I applaud any initiative that creates a new library user, I wonder how many resources have been wasted along the way by libraries trying to project a hip image?

Libraries typically strive to lead the technology adoption curve. It is a strategy born in part of our professional temperament but also our desire to overturn negative stereotypes. In a bygone age of mainframe computers and mediated online searching, this strategy served us well. We could and did lead the way often.

Social networking has changed the game though, and with it comes both opportunities and choices – too many choices, I would argue, to be sustained by limited library budgets and skill sets. We have to be more discriminating and accept that it is ok in 2010 for the local office supplies store 'geek' to know more about wireless networking than us.

Trying to be the hip kid on the block with the latest 'next big thing' is more likely to bring libraries undone by taking our focus away from core business – finding ways to help people.

Some weeks ago I re-discovered an old friend – Edward De Bono's book *Six Frames for Thinking about Information*. De Bono's technique helps to focus our attention in order to better notice things and understand what we see. The frames encourage us to more clearly see purpose, interest, and value in not just raw information, but ideas, assumptions, conclusions, and, potentially, technologies.

As the bright shiny gizmos of last year gather dust on a shelf, I challenge us all to look ahead to 2010 with a renewed commitment to exploring new technologies that actually fit our library context, relate to where our customers are on the technology adoption curve, and thereby return real value to our user communities.

- From the desk of the Library Provocateur

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