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System Branding in Three Public Libraries: Live Oak Public Libraries, Charlotte Mecklenberg
Library, and Richland Library

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Abstract

This research examines the development of the system brands of three public libraries: Live Oak Public Libraries, Richland Library, and Charlotte Mecklenberg Library. A system brand may be defined as the overall brand of a library system, as opposed to any of its sub-brands, such as those associated with individual library services, branches, departments, and events. Using a descriptive, case study approach, this research characterizes the efforts behind branding in these library systems.

Keywords:

Brand, Branding, Brand-building, Public Libraries, Libraries, System, Marketing, Philosophy, Image, Identity, Management

Short Title:

System Branding in Three Public Libraries

This group of case studies constructs a series of narratives regarding the creation and development of the brands of three public library systems: Live Oak Public Libraries, Richland Library, and Charlotte Mecklenberg Library. These libraries were selected as their comparison provides important insights into how branding happens in public libraries. This research focuses on a type of branding - system branding. A system brand may be defined as the “master” or overall brand of a library system itself, as opposed to lesser, but related, “sub-brands,” such as those associated with individual library services, branches, departments, and events. The actual process or steps of branding have been well treated in widely available, popular resources, such as **Creating Your Library Brand: Communicating Your Relevance and Value to Your Patrons** (Doucett, 2008). While this analysis touches upon sub-brands, it primarily focuses on the way system branding occurred at these three institutions.

The American Marketing Association (“AMA”) has defined a brand as a “name, term, sign, symbol, or design or a combination of them intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of the competition” (Argenti & Druckenmiller, 2004, p. 368). Branding is also done in nonprofits, and public libraries can benefit from branding. In the commercial world, branding happens in such various ways as the selection of a name, the creation of an appealing or memorable logo, the development of

attractive packaging, or the production of unique advertising messages (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000). However, libraries “trade” in the less tangible world of values and social improvement and merit a somewhat different approach.

There is insufficient research on the development of library brands. This paper attempts to characterize how master or system branding occurred in three public libraries, and broadly examines their development over recent years. As noted by Petromilli, Morrison, & Millon, (2002), brands often exist within the context of other brands, and so may be part of a “brand architecture”:

“Brand architecture” is the way a company organizes, manages, and markets their brands. It must align with and support business goals and strategies. Different business strategies require different brand architectures. The two most common types are: “Branded house” architecture – employs a single (master) brand to span a series of offerings that may operate with descriptive sub-brand names and “House of brands” architecture – each brand is stand-alone; the sum of performance of the independent brands is greater than they would be if under a master brand. Neither type is better than the other. Some companies use a mix of both. (p. 22).

Thus, brands are often embedded in a complex network of other brands, inclusive of variously subordinate sub-brands or competing, similarly strong independent brands. For example, a large institution can have individual goods and services marketed under its system or master brand, which is often represented by its legal or corporate name. Those individual goods and services are termed “sub-brands.” Many public libraries have multiple brands, but they also have an overarching, system brand.

At times, certain sub-brands may eclipse the system brand in terms of “mind-space” or the level of awareness of a particular brand by its target audience and become independent brands. Public cognizance of all brands ebbs and flows over time for many reasons, such as the amount of promotion and publicity invested in them or whether they fulfill some lasting need.

Branding is a technique which has long been used in marketing, but is relatively new in libraries. In a sense, it is a business practice that has been imported into the culture of public libraries because of their need to survive in sometimes harsh economic environments. Libraries must compete for public support and be persuasive about their value. Branding is about much more than just naming something; it is the coordinated communication of the meaning and value of whatever is branded (Kylander & Stone, 2012). Branding is also about identifying and meeting the needs of the patron. This research conceives the development of system branding in these three libraries as an adaptation of branding as it is commonly practiced in the business world.

It is arguable that, for non-profit entities such as the public library, the most important part of branding is the expression of the mission and vision of the organization in a clear, comprehensible, and compact way to stakeholders. Even institutions that have no clear identity generate an image of themselves – a bundle of associations – in the minds of customers and so, arguably, branding happens, whether it is intended or not. Human beings naturally build up a set of meanings regarding the people and organizations they interact with or encounter. In the public library, brand-building is an effort to make this process as positive and advantageous as possible. Admittedly, branding is a framework for considering how perceptions are developed. As such, in public libraries, branding can involve the substantial efforts of artists, marketing and public relations professionals, librarians and library administrators, as well as policy makers, business

leaders, and library stakeholders, who care about and understand the practice as more than a purely commercial undertaking.

Many libraries cannot afford to invest substantial resources into the branding process. However, branding does not have to be expensive, and the need for branding is clear in light of the numerous competitors with library services, such as bookstores and the Internet. For example, Barnes & Noble draws extensively from the classic image of books and wooden bookcases to promote its stores through interiors which invoke the look and feel of a spacious library (Pritchard, 201; Floor, 2006). On the other hand, some library websites borrow from their commercial competitors to provide a more sophisticated, user-friendly appeal. This, of course, presents certain dangers because patrons may confuse the services of their tax-supported institutions with those of a more pecuniary or profit-oriented nature. Understanding how branding works can help non-profit organizations avoid this problem.

In libraries, the most common example of branding appears to be the ready-made “@your library” mark, which is supplied, along with various promotional materials, by ALA through its Campaign for America’s Libraries (Gould, 2009). As possibly the largest and oldest national branding initiative associated with libraries of all kinds, its popularity over the years reflects the need for branding or telling the “story” of the library. In 2015, the @your library® brand was retired and replaced by the similar Libraries Transform public awareness campaign.

Overview of Literature on Branding

Since 1950, when the American Marketing Association established that the word “brand” refers to something which identifies or differentiates a product in the marketplace, brands have increased in number to the point where they are ubiquitous. In a 1998 review of the literature, de Cheratony and Dall’Olmo Riley, found twelve major themes related to brands: (1) a relationship,

(2) a logo, (3) a legal instrument, (4) shorthand (an abbreviated way of representing the product), (5) risk reducer (from a social, financial, time, performance, and psychological perspective), (6) a positioner (something which insures recognition), (7) a personality (such as celebrity or the type of people who use the product), (8) an identity, (9) a vision in the minds of those who manage the brand, (10) a value adder, (11) a cluster of values, (12) an image, (13), a company, and (14) something which is evolving. Thus, branding can be approached on various levels of complexity and sophistication, and the literature has demonstrated the lack of a set definition of the brand (Isacc, 2000). The dynamic nature of the brand is represented in the academic literature in terms of models, some of which involve both the product's image in the minds of the consumer and the product's identity, as created by its managers (de Chernatony & Dall'Omo Riley, 1998). As David Arnold notes (1992), brands have evolved into personalities of their own, outgrowing the simple technical definitions of the past. As brands have become more numerous and part of modern culture, so have the methods used to analyze them. Methods may vary from simple surveys to techniques, which are designed to uncover subtle, subconscious meanings, e.g. the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (Zaltman, 2007) and Clotaire Rapaille's Culture Codes (Adams, 2006). Such creative attention may be due to the fact that brands are the "art and cornerstone of marketing" (Kotler, 2003, p. 418).

Hariiff and Rowley (2011) summarized the academic and professional literature on the research on branding of U.K. public libraries, noting the following four themes: "the legacy brand image, the need for a new and clear brand identity to help to re-shape brand image, the role of staff in delivering the brand, and the contribution of a national branding campaign" (p. 348). Of particular note were the presence of a negative library perception among some individuals related to experience, family, and media, a lack of a positive and clear identity for libraries, and a

perceived failure of libraries to deliver on their brand promise. As Hariff and Rowley (2011) further noted, a multiple case study methodology is particularly useful on the subject of public libraries and branding, in under-investigated areas: “The case study approach has the potential to gather insights into successful branding process and strategies, and the challenges and key factors in their management” (p. 350). Drawing more recently from OCLC’s 2014 research report, entitled “At a Tipping Point; Education, Learning and Libraries,” Grant (2014) confirms the realities observed by Hariff and Rowley, that “the book” has further cemented as the brand of libraries in the mind of users, and the public library continues to have a brand which is not seen as inspirational.

Overview of Approach

A qualitative, case-study approach was used to uncover how branding occurred in libraries. This research provides descriptions of the creation of the system brands for the following three public libraries:

1. Live Oak Public Libraries (LOPL). A medium-sized library system, located in Savannah, Georgia, this paper covers the branding initiative which led to a new brand for the library being unveiled in 2002;
2. Richland Library (RL). A medium-sized library system located in Columbia, South Carolina. This library rebranded itself in 2013 but has used branding techniques for many years;
3. Charlotte Mecklenburg Library (CML). A large library system, whose headquarters is found in Charlotte, North Carolina, CML has re-branded itself twice since the recent recession. The last re-branding effort was unveiled in 2014.

The case study method allows for a depth of knowledge of a phenomena or process that, in many ways, is not easily obtainable by other methods. According to Yin (2003), one of the early proponents for the case study, this method is particularly useful when it is difficult to conceptualize something apart from the context in which it occurs:

Case study research continues to be an essential form of social science inquiry. The method is appropriate when investigators either desire or are forced by circumstances: (a) to define research topics broadly, and not narrowly, (b) to cover contextual or complex multivariate conditions and not just isolated variables, and (c) to rely on multiple and not singular sources of evidence. (p. xi)

Yin (2009) emphasized that the case study method focuses on decisions or sets of decisions and why they were taken. In the instance of the library, the branding process seems particularly suited to the case study method because it allows the researcher to make connections to the history and traditions of the library, the organic and changing information nature of the organizations in which the brands are implemented, and the lives of the people affected.

Information was gathered through historical research, observations, as well as analyses of brand-related documents (e.g., mission, vision, and value statements) and the examination of the social media and web presence of each system. Data was also gathered through semi-structured interviews with library staff, administrators, and public stakeholders, such as trustees. The study included the following individuals:

1. nine interviewees from Live Oak Public Libraries, including three senior managers who had branding, marketing or communications responsibilities, one supervisor, a trustee, and the President of the Friends of the Library, as well various stakeholders/supporters

from the outside community, such as an art professor and his student, who contributed their branding services to the library;

2. fifteen interviewees from Charlotte Mecklenberg Library, including four senior managers who had branding, marketing or communications responsibilities, one staff branding specialist, three librarians, a web designer, and various stakeholders/supporters from the outside community, including a private branding specialist; and
3. twelve interviewees from Richland Library, including three senior managers who had branding, marketing or communications responsibilities, two public relations staff, a librarian, a trustee, and various stakeholders/supporters from the outside community.

The three libraries from the Southeastern part of the United States were selected because this approach offers a next-generation perspective, with indepth discussion of the varying payoffs and risks that different libraries have found from a strong brand, as opposed to a mere paean to branding. Interviewees are not identified, except where specifically noted as such, and there was some overlap in interviewees for the three library systems. For example, some individuals interviewed were contracted to provide professional services for two or more of the libraries, such as architects, who do not necessarily live in the communities where they have a particular construction project.

Live Oak Public Libraries

Branding is an ongoing process at Live Oak Public Libraries, whose main office is located in Savannah, Georgia. According to Crawford (2004), Live Oak Public Libraries serves a population of some 338,000 persons located in three counties: one urban (Chatham) and the other two rural (Liberty and Effingham) (p. 44). Savannah was the first capital of Georgia, and

seems, on the surface, to be a traditional southern town, having the largest historic district in the country. But Savannah is also a center for art and culture and is the location of the Savannah College of Art and Design, the largest art school in the world (Rhoades, 2008). It is within this vibrant historic environment that the headquarters and most of the branches of Live Oak Public Libraries (LOPL) can be found.

Development of the Live Oak Public Libraries' System Brand

Developing a system brand is much more than just creating a new name for an institution, though this can be an important part of the life of a library brand. According to the Live Oak Public Libraries' Library History (2010) website, before it selected its present name, the library system had undergone a number of changes in its official designation, primarily to reflect the particular city or counties it served at the time. However, the formal development of a system brand did not really start until it changed its name from Chatham-Effingham-Regional Library (CEL) to Live Oak Public Libraries in 2002.

After the completion of its Long Range Facilities Plan in 2002, the staff and trustees of Chatham-Effingham-Regional Library decided that the library needed a framework to help guide its growth and clearly define its vision for the future. After several months of intensive efforts, *Libraries for Tomorrow: A Strategic Plan for Live Oak Public Libraries 2003 – 2008* (2003), was created and would become a key document for understanding the Live Oak Public Libraries brand (Live Oak Public Libraries Board of Trustees and Planning Committee, 2003); the *Strategic Plan* specifically refers to the competition the library system faces, and describes it as one of the main reasons for the brand's establishment:

Live Oak Public Libraries is promoting a "brand", in this case public library service, to a community that has that has many other options from which to choose to obtain books,

videos, DVDs, programs, and access to the World Wide Web. Library planners took an important step toward creating a brand identity for libraries in Chatham, Effingham, and Liberty Counties when they decided to rename the library system as Live Oak Public Libraries. The new logo focuses community attention on the library and reinforces the library as a brand worth choosing. (p. 11)

According to Rowley (2013), the essential task of brand decision-makers is “to tease out and communicate” the values of the brand; in the case of Live Oak Public Libraries this was achieved, in part, through the explicit formulation of separate sets of values for the library system and the Board of Trustees, along with Mission and Vision statements for the library system (p. 60).

As noted by Doucett (2008), if a library’s strategic plan contemplates the institution’s desired role in the future, then it is likely referred to as a “vision statement,” and if the strategic plan discusses the library’s role today, it is usually called a “mission statement” (p. 42). In contrast, “[a] library’s branding statement is more externally focused. It is meant to convey a library’s role to the public in terms that are meaningful and relevant to that public” (p. ix), as demonstrated by LOPL’s brand statement, which follows:

Especially for the person who is looking for self-improvement, intellectual stimulation, accurate information, and a sense of community, Live Oak Public Libraries is the public institution that provides free and convenient access to a wide variety of resources and programs. (Live Oak Public Libraries Board of Trustees and Planning Committee, 2003, p. 11)

These various statements and formative documents represent the verbal or textual component of

the brand and provide the philosophical foundation upon which the libraries' system brand was built. For a casual observer, the most discrete form of branding at LOPL is probably the library system's logo. A system's logo is often the principal visual manifestation of a brand, as in the case for LOPL, where it is prominently displayed on the front of its buildings. However, as these documents show, library branding is about much more than just a name or logo; rather, it relates to the long-term outlook and plans of the institution, as well as the needs of the community in which the library is located.

Account of the Creation of the Brand: The Renaming of Live Oak Public Libraries

Sometime in the early 2000's, several individuals associated with Chatham-Effingham-Liberty Regional Library, decided the time was right to re-brand the library (Few, 2002). Library leadership had concluded that the name Chatham-Effingham-Liberty Regional Library (CEL) did not represent any particular identity and was not helping the library; they noticed that news media generally had difficulty when referring to CEL, and observed that the name was frequently garbled in reports by them. Those same library leaders were seeking better ways to promote the institution in the community. And so, representatives of Live Oak Public Libraries (then known as Chatham-Effingham-Liberty Regional Library or CEL) contacted a faculty member of the Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD) about the development of a new brand for the system.

The request from CEL was taken up by the SCAD professor, as it was his practice to select a different nonprofit and help it re-brand whenever he taught one of his computer art classes. However, it was agreed that the library system would first need a better name. Subsequently, a process was initiated, which would result in the creation of a new Live Oak Public Libraries brand, comprising (1) the development of a name and (2) the selection of a

corresponding “mark” (the logo and the type).

From the start, it was decided that the work of renaming the library system would be kept in-house and would be done in an organized manner, sensitive to the needs of both the library and its patrons. In this stage, potential names were developed and then researched in order to determine that no Internet domain or other associated problems existed, such as legal ownership by another entity.

According to interviews of various library representatives and other individuals associated with the rebranding initiative, selecting a new system name involved the coming together of a group of approximately a dozen individuals, who met in the library boardroom and developed a group of possible names in a brainstorming session. Next, the names were sent to library staff and voted on. “Live Oak Public Libraries,” was chosen, in part, because of the significance of live oaks among the inhabitants of the area. Citizens of Savannah and the Low County traditionally cherish live oaks, perhaps more than any other flora or fauna of the region, and the name conveniently lent itself to a rich taxonomy or set of related terms, such as “acorns,” which could be used to readily brand various programs, projects, and resources, making it an excellent system brand (Few, 2002). A thematically-related mascot named TWIGS was developed some time later, to appeal to children. Squirrels, of course, are associated with trees, especially the live oak. The selection of “live oak” impacted development of the system in other ways. For example, when the new “green” or LEED-certified Southwest Branch of LOPL was erected, its shape was designed to accommodate nearby oak trees, and it even had a life-size, realistic, sculptural live oak, crafted by the NatureMaker company, and placed in the center of the children’s room (Hanick & Palmese, 2008). Thus, the system brand was ready inspiration for both the built environment and its many sub-brands, all related to the overarching live oak name

and suggests how brand builders might consider nomenclature in the selection of a system brand. When the new designation was agreed upon, the library leaders went forward with finalizing the necessary permissions for the change. In the next phase, the mark (logo) was developed.

Development of the Live Oak Public Libraries Mark

As this research shows, a new system brand for public libraries is often associated with the development of a new logo. In this case, as previously mentioned, the logo was created as part of a class project by a student at the Savannah College of Art and Design. The SCAD professor and students, who were involved with this process, met regularly throughout the semester to discuss the many ideas which were subsequently generated. In the first part of the semester the students researched library logos throughout the United States, mainly through the Internet, but, soon discovered that there were no “good logos.” The dearth of acceptable logos was challenging because it forced the class to work without a comparable body of exemplary brands.

Each of the students was asked to come up with a typeface for a font and a mark. So a series of rough drawings was prepared by them. The number of initial layouts ranged from 10 to 15, which were “put up on the wall” and considered to see “what worked and what didn’t.” The winning logo was the intellectual creation of a single student artist, Santiago Andrade-Mora (Few, 2003); however, his ideas were critiqued by the professor and the other students in his class. And so, in this sense, the effort was collective.

Andrade-Mora did extensive research as part of his effort for Live Oak Public Libraries, including examining statements from the library, which discussed its mission and goals, as well as meeting with the staff of the library system on several occasions. When he visited the headquarters of LOPL, he took all the brochures he could find, and focused on what the brand

was then and what library leadership hoped it would become. As he noted in an interview with local media, the system logo would be more than just about books:

The idea of a book is literal, so I used a book and a semi-circle, which is related to the world, a product with a global atmosphere because (the library) not only provides reading services but Internet and computers [*sic*] access related to the world. (Few, 2002)

Andrade-Mora's notes demonstrate the depth of his research, as the brand was developed, and included numerous variations of the logo. Reproduced below are a few examples of the many intermediate logos which evolved over time (Figs. 4.1, 4.2, 4.3,) as well as the finished final version, Fig. 5.4.

Live Oak Public Libraries Intermediate and Finished Logos

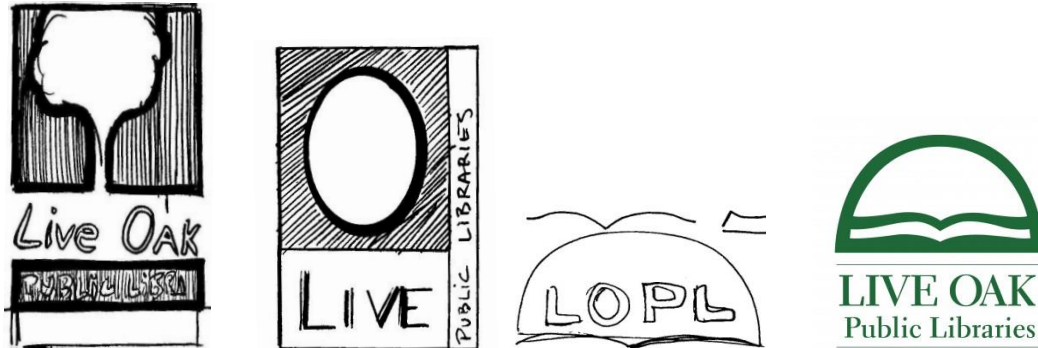


Fig 1 Prototype Logo “Live Oak”, Fig. 2 Prototype Logo “Live,” Fig.3 Prototype Logo “LOPL,” and Fig. 4 Prototype Logo “Live Oak Public Libraries” Selected Logos Showing Development of LOPL Logo Over Time, Courtesy of Santiago Andrade-Mora

The re-branding of LOPL was widely considered a success in the community and, unlike the other system brands discussed herein, has been retained without significant change (except for a color change from the original blue to the green version, shown in Fig. 4), undoubtedly reflecting

not only the popularity and success of the brand, but also the nature of the community in which this institution is found, which cherishes meaningful things. Additional branches that have been recently added to LOPL include libraries with children's departments that have transportation and ocean-related themes.

Charlotte Mecklenburg Library

Over the years, Charlotte Mecklenburg Library (CML), formerly known as the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County or PLCMC, has repeatedly demonstrated and been known for excellence in library service. As the winner of the 1995 Library Journal/Gale Library of the Year Award, CML enjoyed the confirmation of this reputation on the national level (Bethea, 2011). Perhaps the best example of CML's exemplary and innovative approach to branding is ImaginOn, an institution created from the marriage of the children's section of CML's Main Library and the Children's Theater of Charlotte (CTC). ImaginOn is a block-long building, which includes a playhouse, theater, children's library, teen loft, studio, and it has unique and extraordinary architectural features specially designed to appeal to children and youth ("About ImaginOn," 2016).

The name recognition of ImaginOn and its popularity in the community, inspired officials at PLCMC to undergo a formal rebranding of the system in 2009 ("CMLibrary: Library history," 2016). ImaginOn's name and identity had been developed by a core team of members drawn from the library and CTC, though, at the time, this process was probably not formally conceptualized as branding (Holt, 2008). The details of the development of the ImaginOn brand and CML's sub-brands, are beyond the scope of this paper, but the ImaginOn brand, as exemplified by its playful, evocative name, represents an attempt to speak to a contemporary culture that does not always understand or appreciate the public library.

Charlotte Mecklenburg Library (CML) has been successful in the development of its system brand because of the creativity and resourcefulness of its dynamic library administrators, in-house marketing staff, and outside branding experts. Located in the fast-paced City of Charlotte and the populous County of Mecklenburg, North Carolina, some of its brand-related development work has been performed by professional marketing agencies, which often prefer to remain in the background, letting their clients step into the limelight of new brand campaigns. Such work can involve numerous activities, including product naming, website development, logo design, and the creation of promotional materials of every kind.

This research focuses primarily on the efforts associated with rebranding the system in the last decade. As background, it should be noted that CML was organized in 1891 as the Charlotte Literary and Library Association (“CMLibrary: Library history,” 2016) and has undergone several name changes. The Library has come a long way since it was offered \$25,000 by Andrew Carnegie to build a library on land donated by the City of Charlotte, North Carolina in 1901 (“CMLibrary: Library history,” 2016). According to the CML website, during fiscal year 2015 (July 1, 2014 to June 30, 2015) approximately 3.2 million patrons visited the Library, and the library lent over 6 million items (“CMLibrary: Library by the numbers,” 2016). Today, some 20 locations still remain, including a Main Library and ImaginOn. In 2013, CML reported that it was the largest provider of free access to computers in the area “and each year the Library presents thousands of public programs, including classes that support literacy, educational success, and career development” (“CMLibrary: Charlotte Mecklenburg Library today,” 2016).

Roots of the Brand

The roots of the system brand of Charlotte Mecklenburg Library (CML) can be found in many places. CML is an institution which until recently did not publicly define its brand. Instead,

CML published Mission and Vision statements, as well as its Library's Core Values (Innovation, Lifelong Learning, Freedom to Know, Integrity & Trust, and Staff Appreciation) ("CMLibrary: Vision, Mission, & Core Value," 2013). Nevertheless, the history of the institution and the interviews obtained show that the development of its various institutional statements and formative and guiding documents provided the foundation upon which the current system brand was built.

The earliest version of a brand for CML can be seen in the powers, purposes, and duties of the Library, which were originally set forth by the North Carolina Legislature when "Charlotte Carnegie Public Library" was incorporated by act of the General Assembly, Chapter 16, Private Laws of 1903, "[t]o establish and maintain a free library for the use, without any charge" (Sec. 2). CML's brand continued to evolve over the years, and a snapshot of this development can be seen in an early mission statement from *The Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County: Five Year Plan*, which recited:

The Mission of the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County is to make available to all residents, by convenient and free access, a wide variety of expertly selected library materials and resources for the public's educational and informational needs; to promote the enjoyment of reading and books, lifelong learning, citizenship and the appreciation of the world's cultural achievements. (1999)

The current CML Mission is similarly expansive: "[w]e create a community of readers and empower individuals with free access to information and the universe of ideas," ("CMLibrary: Vision, Mission, & Core Values," 2016). It is significant that the current CML Mission restored the reference to "free" service that disappeared for a time; this addition may have been both a response to the economic challenges arising from the recession and a reminder to the public of

the great gift of the public library. The importance of the language of these statements is more fully appreciated when examining the ImaginOn Mission: “ImaginOn brings stories to life through extraordinary experiences that challenge, inspire and excite young minds”; the difference or lack of connection between the ImaginOn Mission and the CML Mission suggests how it was possible for ImaginOn to evolve into an independent brand in the minds of the public (“About ImaginOn: Mission,” 2012).

2009 Branding Initiative

As stated earlier, in 2009, invigorated by the success of ImaginOn and concerned about the length of its name, leaders of the public library system of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, instituted a formal re-branding initiative, which began with the dropping of its previous name of “Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County” (PLCMC) for the more succinct and pronounceable “Charlotte Mecklenburg Library” (“CMLibrary: Library history,” 2016). A multiphase rebranding initiative had been planned for 2006-2007 (Block, 2007). And so research was initiated on the perception of the library in the community, which led to the conclusion that the best way to go forward was to develop a new, more distinct brand for the library system, including a corresponding system logo, as noted in a news release from the library in 2009:

The most recent decision to change the name was made in 2007 as part of a larger initiative to better communicate the impact of the Library. The library’s long name had become an acronym - PLCMC - that was meaningless to most customers. This was documented in “person on the street” interviews with average citizens, many of whom did not know the Library’s name or what PLCMC meant. (“Library begins gradual change to new name: Charlotte Mecklenburg Library,” n.d.)

The research on PLCMC, referenced above, determined that the library system had major problems with its nomenclature, confusion about its name, image, and relationship to its numerous sub-brands, including, most notably, ImaginOn. Because ImaginOn was so distinctive, members of the public were not always aware of its association with the library system. In response to these challenges, the library decided to rebrand.

In the years following 2009, the rebranding initiative was largely completed, including the name change. A new brand manual and nomenclature standards were prepared, as well as a new system logo, and launch of social media presences on Facebook and Twitter, and web site redesign. The development of the new system brand was positively received by the community. Over time, CML has actively cultivated numerous brands, but, as a response to the recession, it refocused its efforts on the Charlotte Mecklenburg Library and ImaginOn brand, and some sub-brands were eliminated to prevent dilution of the overall CML brand.

2014 CML Brand Update

The original emphasis of the 2009 brand was “what the library can do for me”; however, in November 2014, CML updated its brand with a new system logo and look and feel to library web and promotional materials (“CMLibrary: Our brand promise,” 2016). In order to explain the difference in emphasis of the new initiative, in comparison to the previous version of the brand, the CML website provides the following brand promise:

As part of that (new) branding initiative, we asked you to tell YOUR library story. We invited you to tell us how the library has helped you by completing the sentence, “Because of my library, I can _____”. The stories we gathered were truly inspiring. (“CMLibrary: Our brand promise,” 2016)

This rebranding of CML was a gift from a Charlotte marketing agency Wray Ward, who designed a new logo to inspire users to think of all the possibilities associated with the library. The new logo focuses on the “I” in “Library” and is meant to inspire stakeholders to think about the positive role of the library in their lives; in its latest stage, the brand has become more personalized and focused on the autonomy of the individual, summarized as “I can.” (“CMLibrary: Our brand promise,” 2016). Thus, CML once again demonstrates what might be referred to as its brand “nimbleness” – the sensitivity with which it responds to the need for changes in its brand due to various opportunities and challenges, which is, no doubt, another reason for its continued success.

Richland Library

Richland Library (formerly known as Richland County Public Library or its initials RCPL) is a medium sized public library whose headquarters is located in Columbia, South Carolina, and, according to Crawford (2014), serves a population of around 320,000 (p. 45). Though recent developments are contemplated, this study focuses largely on the period of extensive system branding that occurred from 1979-2009, when it was led by its Executive Director, C. David Warren, who was honored for contributions to the library and community by proclamation of Congress (111 Cong. Rec. ER823, 2009). The evolution of the system brand of this public library is, like the other libraries considered in this research, centered on changes in its name and associated modifications of its guiding documents. Richland Library’s system brand has undergone three major phases: (1) a period, when it was simply known as “Richland County Public Library,” which might be referred to as the “Love Your Library” phase; (2) the 2000 “RCPL Spells...” Campaign, and (3) the Richland Library phase, when the name was shortened. The first two periods were overseen by Warren.

As part of early efforts to promote the library system during the “Love Your Library” or first phase, simple messages such as “I Love My Library” and “I Love RCPL,” were created and used in publicity materials of various kinds (Feinberg and Keller, 2010). For example, when visitors came to tour the library, they were supplied with stickers with the “I Love My Library” theme on them. And so love became the central or dominant theme of the system brand of Richland Library and was promoted through mass media and by other means. This brand continued to be nurtured and developed by library leadership over time, supporting a major expansion of the library, which required substantial funding, as the library needed a new main branch and the replacement or remodeling of most of its older branches. The “Love your Library” theme was integrated into the promotional activities leading up to a bond referendum, and the inaugural date for it was purposely selected to coincide with February 14, 1989, Valentine’s Day; as Warren noted:

What a perfect day to have a specially called referendum for a public library! We had a campaign, a very professionally run campaign, built around “If you love your library, get out and vote.” And, of course, we used the heart and the idea of the heart of the community. And we built the library in the very heart of downtown. Those are all points and things that went into our marketing, our selling the concept, getting voter approval, getting funding, and creating something that people love and consider to be so important to this community. (p. 144)

Focusing, in particular, on individuals who were likely to vote for the bond referendum, the campaign was said to have had the highest percentage of votes for the passage the type of measure in the county’s history and was even referred to as a “love affair” in the local media. When the votes were tallied “73 percent of those voting said yes to the issue of the \$27 million in

bonds for capital improvements to the library system” (Crismond, p.68). The bond referendum was considered a triumph for the library, and the new main library was opened with a festive parade and activities reflecting the “Love Your Library” theme. The legendary artist and children’s author Maurice Sendak, a friend of a Richland Library children’s librarian, even allowed his images of the Wild Things to be used in the decoration of the children’s department of the main library, where the artist intended that they “represent freedom and pleasure and affection” (Roughen, 2015, p. 3). A logo for the system was also subsequently developed.

In the next phase of Richland Library branding, the system acronym “RCPL” played the central role in a major marketing campaign initiated by Warren. As Norman Oder noted in the same edition of *Library Journal*:

In the program, "RCPL Spells...", the library partnered with a variety of local businesses in billboard and television advertising. Each business took a different word (e.g., "service," "proactive," and "variety") to complete the phrase; for example, a local realtor sponsored the campaign "RCPL Spells...Open Doors." The library got a package worth \$1 million at no cost, and the sponsors got discounted advertising from media outlets willing to donate extra time to the library. As the general manager of a local hotel put it, 'It is certainly a win-win partnership.' (pp. 38-39)

Thus, the Richland Library brand was developed to reference the experience of superior library service that connects people to the library. The “Love Your Library” transformed into a theme more focused on the individualized benefits available through library that were then evolving. As reported by Oder, among the advantages of this version of the system brand, which focused on nontraditional library users, were an increase in circulation of 12%, as well as increased

visibility; of those surveyed, 20% of them visited the Library because of the campaign.

Additionally, “it led to a new campaign ... based on the American Library Association's @ your library concept, valued at \$1.5 million” (p. 39).

It should be noted that the development of the Internet also impacted the Richland County Public Library brand. For example, the “RCPL” acronym, which the library worked to popularize, was used in creative ways, such as “MyRCPL,” (representing personalized service through new library technologies). During this period, significant marketing efforts were invested to ensure a connection in the minds of the public between the “RCPL” system acronym and the public library, including the development of a popular jingle. Thus, awareness of the system brand was reinforced using both visual and auditory elements.

The most recent or last phase of system branding at Richland Library, which began after a new executive director came on board, may be said to have begun in 2012, when the name of “Richland County Public Library” was changed to “Richland Library.” A local, Columbia marketing firm, ADCO, assisted with this “new, identity, theme, and look,” including the development of a different system logo (“Richland Library launches new look, new name, new brand,” 03 December, 2012). As the ADCO site further explains, market research was done to determine public perceptions of the library, but by that time it was discovered that members of the community no longer commonly referred to the library as “RCPL” or even “Richland County Public Library,” but, rather, “the library.” Along with the revision of the set of values and mission statement of Richland Library, a new vision statement was created, and a new “look and feel” was given to the Library’s website. Perhaps the best statement of the latest adaptation of the brand may be found in Richland Library’s *2013-2016 Strategic Plan* (n.d.) in a document, expressed as a series of brand promises, which still echo the love theme, developed years before;

these brand promises proclaim that Richland Library is “welcoming,” “caring,” “committed to offering you the best,” “helpful,” “fresh and fun.” Each of these qualities is explained in further detail in the *Strategic Plan*. During this process, some of the library’s previously adopted values were dropped, such as “lifelong learning,” and other values were added, such as “innovation,” “talent development,” and “risk-taking,” signifying the ways libraries are increasingly meeting the unique needs of individual patrons, such as with a customizable website. As part of its rebranding process, a new tag line - “Access Freely” - was also introduced (“Richland Library launches new look, new name, new brand,” 03 December, 2012).

Discussion

This work examines whether, and to what extent, system branding occurred in three public libraries: Live Oak Public Libraries in Savannah, Ga., Charlotte Mecklenburg Library in Charlotte, N.C., and Richland Library in Columbia, S.C. In this research it was found that system brand building is commonly manifested as a change or shortening in the name of the library, typically followed by the development of a new logo and various related forms of visual rebranding, such as through redesign of a library’s website. However, system branding also resulted in a sequence of changes in many other areas of the library, including marketing and promotional materials, electronic communications, and even the physical appearance of the library, such as the murals at Richland Library and the sculptural tree at Live Oak Public Library which are themselves complex expressions of the brand through architecture and interior design. On the other hand the design of a building can influence branding, as in the case of ImaginOn, whose playful environment and elaborate décor inspired the ImaginOn name. Branding is often an iterative process in the sense that once a system goes through branding, it may be more likely to undergo re-branding, so that branding carries the seed of re-branding within it. In a general

sense it could be said that branding has increased in importance in each of these libraries over time. In fact, when observations and interviews were being performed, it was found that all three institutions now have individuals with advanced training, education, or experience in branding. Nonetheless, the recession has forced some institutions to pull back on their development of sub-brands, such as Charlotte Mecklenberg Library, which is focusing more on its system brand.

All three libraries showed that the development of each of the new system brands has both a verbal and a visual component. Verbal components range from names to mission, vision, value, and even brand statements, in which the library's brand is made more explicit. Visual components include logos, architecture, interior design, the appearance of event materials, and the look and feel of the library website. It could be argued that, due to the Internet, visual branding has eclipsed verbal branding in contemporary American culture; if such is the case, branding has become a necessary vehicle for institutions of all kinds to promote their virtues in the public arena. Branding enables library representatives to communicate in the *lingua franca* of the online world and be understood, as well as to be responsive to rapid changes in technology.

Libraries are faced with serious competition on many fronts, and professional branding services sometimes do require investment of financial resources. However, marketing campaigns can be implemented through ready made materials provided by the American Library Association (Gould, 2009). There are also popular books and websites to assist libraries with branding. Libraries sometimes get free or discounted work, but quality is not guaranteed. And so logos need to be created by artists with a graphic design background (Doucett, 2008). The branding efforts described in this research appear to have been accomplished at relatively low cost to the taxpayers and the apparent benefits have far outweighed the investment. Nonetheless,

regarding the extensive branding found, the three libraries studied may be outliers or exceptions. Perhaps smaller libraries would not show relatively comparable amounts of branding. Brands have important legal implications as well, such as in the case of trademarks. In this regard, legal counsel should always be consulted to make sure that there are no problems with new library nomenclature and visual identity.

Conclusion

As shown by the case studies described herein, some public libraries are branding and re-branding their systems. The efforts of Live Oak Public Libraries, Charlotte Mecklenburg Library, and Richland Library, show that branding is essentially about the communication of the basic identity of an organization in a clear, compact, and compelling manner. Branding is rooted in the idea that institutions, like people, create a set of impressions about themselves – a bundle of meanings – in the minds of the individuals who interact with them. The case studies presented here demonstrate how these three libraries approached branding and that institutions which use outside branding professional resources tend to rely more on those resources over time, where they are available. In other words, public libraries appear to recognize and respond positively to branding expertise, and continue to develop their brands. Thus branding becomes a part of their long term strategy. System branding is an exercise through which libraries can think about and reinforce their underlying purposes and even re-invent themselves. In the three libraries studied in this research, system branding was chiefly manifested through changes in names, logos, and websites, as well as the development of brand-related documents. In its simplest form, branding was accomplished through the selection of a new name (or name variant) and mark (logo and type). And this process appears to have been largely positive in each case. However, branding is a practice which is best understood in the light of the complex history and tradition of the public

library. The libraries described here successfully used the techniques of branding to build on the values, which, continue to inspire them.

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