STRATEGIC POSITIONING:

PLANNING TO ACHIEVE

YOUR LIBRARY'S VISION

by Ellen G. Miller

Why is that we library trustees so often see trees and not the forest? One symptom of that problem is complaints from fellow board members about "having to spend so much time on that monthly meeting."

Listen up, trustees! We're overseeing a business that is supported by tax dollars. Our libraries operate in the court of public opinion. For some of us, our libraries are one of the bigger employers in town. We need to know our governance job . . . and carry it out effectively.

Concern about board performance isn't limited to the not-for-profit sector. In 1996, 50 corporate boards were rated best and worst by *Business Week*.[1] Aspects of the best boards that could carry over to the library world include:

1. Evaluating performance of the CEO (chief executive officer) annually

2. Linking the CEO's pay to specific performance goals

3. Reviewing and approving long-range strategic and one-year operating plans

Many states provide us with trustee handbooks, continuing education and a steady flow of news items about our ever-changing industry. Unfortunately, despite those aids, too many library board members still believe their sole job is attending the monthly board meeting—and getting out as soon as possible.

THE BIG PICTURE

Whether you sit on a library or Fortune 500 board, you have two basic responsibilities. First come the legal ones. In the case of public libraries, they range from spending federal funds properly per the new Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) to following state sunshine laws about open meetings, records, etc.

The second basic responsibility is fiduciary. Some folks have trouble understanding what "fiduciary" means, but it's simple: Being a good shepherd. That's why you so often see the following language concerning fiduciary responsibilities: "To exercise rights and powers for, and on behalf of, others with diligence and care."

How to assure that your board carries out those two responsibilities? By following the POSCERV management model. Adapted from the public administration literature,[2] its seven elements are:

Planning

Operations

Staffing

Communications

Evaluation

Resources

Vision

Take a look at your monthly board agendas for the past 12 months. Understandably, operational issues will show up frequently. However, guard against operations being the tail that wags the dog. Each of the remaining six POSCERV items should appear at least once annually, including the written performance evaluation of your head librarian.

GETTING ROI

Why worry about POSCERV and the big picture? To assure that your governing body is spending time on the right items, not micromanaging daily operations.

Library trustees are very busy people. We usually have other community commitments, to say nothing of family involvement and jobs. We can't waste time. It's essential for us to get return on the investment (ROI) of our precious discretionary hours.

The fast-approaching 21st century provides a good reason to step back and take a careful look at our boards' ROI. Are we getting the results our library needs? Are we working effectively as a governance body? Are we looking far enough ahead?

Planning and visions come under constant scrutiny in the library world, often due to the premises or methodology used.[3,4] For example, the Public Library Association' Public Library Development Program (PLDP) has been discussed, cussed and revised since its introduction in 1987. The latest version was unveiled at the 1998 PLA conference

Others question planning and envisioning because the rate of change is so relentless in the library world. They criticize taking time to create a plan that's obsolete when written. Are these comments relevant? Yes. Are they crip-

pling? No. The answer lies in creating a strategic planning process that meets your current and future local needs while addressing the big picture.

VISION LEADS THE WAY

From a business perspective, vision and supporting plans are essential. They show how to allocate scarce resources. They also reduce the strife between competing units or factions since the organization's leadership adopted the plans and vision.

I believe that the linchpin of a successful library is its vision. Vision is defined here as a shared image of a desired reality, of what we wish to become.

Most everything varies about a library planning process:

■ Who's in charge: Head librarian or board?

■ What methods to use: Standard format from a local, regional or national group? Written and/or telephone surveys? Focus groups? Interviews with leaders and/or influentials? Meetings with civic, social and/or political groups? A mix?

■ Planning period covered: Five, 10 or 15 years?

■ Leadership: Outside facilitator or do it yourself?

Whatever your methodology, do get the opinions of a maximum number of target audiences. Friends of the

Library, employees, volunteers, customers, non-users, voters, elected officials, community groups, decision-makers and influentials lead the list. Where applicable, do include your library foundation's board and membership.

Developing a thoughtful vision is the single most important step any public library board member will ever take. Authorize the extra time, effort and money to get ideas, concerns and suggestions from as many target audiences as possible. Casting your net widely helps create the vision that will drive your publics' library for many years.

TARGETING DOLLARS

Envisioning is like a freshly-baked, from-scratch macadamia nut and white chocolate cookie. It takes all the right ingredients to get desired results. For envisioning, one essential ingredient is target audience analysis that distinguishes customers from stakeholders.

■ Customers: Those who use your services and products. . . or should use them.

■ Stakeholders: Those who care about your services and products . . . or should care.

Why split customers from stakeholders? To better match limited resources with needed visibility and impact. For a public library, customers usually include in-house patrons, dial-access users, telephone users, etc. Don't forget your non-users; they have opinions you need to know.

Stakeholders typically include Friends, library foundation board, community groups, elected officials, civic leaders, influentials, voters, etc. Of course, individuals may show up in both groups.

Often an entity identifies sub-groups within the larger customer and stakeholder categories. That helps to target limited dollars and staff hours even more carefully. For example, in January, 1998, the Urban Libraries Council board adopted four priority areas for its attention and resources in the coming years.[6] Those areas are (1) capacity building, (2) urban issues, (3) personal learning support and (4) urban youth.

Reading those four ULC areas brings to mind possible customer and stakeholder sub-groups such as employees, neighborhood and urban leaders, underserved populations, families, home schoolers, youth, seniors, for-profit and non-profit partners, and elected officials. These sub-groups are similar to those that public libraries might identify.

Alert to head librarians: Don't worry that your board is micromanaging when it discusses customers vs. stakeholders. The more your board delves into these target audiences, the better it will understand your implementing those yet-to-be-defined positioning strategies.

ABCS OF POSITIONING STRATEGIES

What are positioning strategies? Succinct statements of how an organization desires to be seen or considered by its customers and stakeholders.

Positioning strategies are to strategic positioning plans as macadamia nuts are to that irresistible, fresh-out-of-the-oven cookie: Essential! The recipe for an overall strategic positioning plan often includes:

1. <u>Goals</u>. The overall goal of a strategic positioning plan is simple: Obtaining additional resources from decision makers in order to provide more and better services. Those resources include larger operational and/or capital improvement budgets, increased mill levy(ies) and additional positions.

For public libraries, the decision-makers especially include voters and elected local and state officials. For other libraries with trustees, such as private and public colleges and universities, key decision-makers are usually the provost, vice president for financial affairs and president.

How to reach your goal of more resources? By gaining the advocacy of an increasing proportion of customers and stakeholders. As used here, advocacy means taking the opinion of another as one's own.

Customers and stakeholders' advocacy can be demonstrated through testimony and other official support, informal comments, officials' decisions about your library's recommendations, and/or voter behavior at the ballot box.

2. <u>Customers vs. stakeholders.</u> (See above section, "Targeting dollars" on the why and how of categorizing target audiences.)

3. <u>Division of labor between the board and administrators</u>. When you write your plan, be sure to set up a division of labor between board and administrators/staff that assures peers talk with peers.

Here's where we trustees can be especially helpful, keeping in regular contact with community leaders and elected officials. We should also be out speaking to key groups such as the Chamber of Commerce, Rotary, Parent-Teachers Association and Knights of Columbus.

4. <u>Primary and supporting positioning strategies</u>. These are the concise, arresting statements of how you want to be seen by your customers and stakeholders. The primary positioning strategy is supported by other, more detailed brief statements.

Taken together, the general and support positioning strategies help differentiate an organization from its competition while providing a foundation for internal and external communications. Over time, the positioning strategies are utilized in all written, verbal and electronic

communications.

5. <u>Action steps</u>, including who will be responsible for carrying them out. Steps for board members may include:

Courtesy briefings of VIPs

Participating in the library's speakers bureau

Assigning each board member to specific elected officials and community leaders

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WORDS DO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Indiana's Valparaiso University made history early in 1998 when its basketball team for the first time made the NCAA Final 16 tournament. But its Moellering Library had achieved a campus "first" in 1997 by adopting a strategic marketing plan, following a series of university strategic planning activities.

"We met with faculty, students, staff and administrators," reported University Librarian Kathryn H. Carpenter. "Their input made all the difference." The facilitated planning process included student and faculty focus groups; intensive staff SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats)analyses; review of earlier customer surveys; and one-on-one interviews with key administrators.

Moellering Library's primary positioning strategy is:

"Connecting minds to the rest of the world."

The support positioning strategies included:

1. "Partnering for results, ideas and enthusiasm."

2. "Integrating information and resources for today's student and tomorrow's world."

The Library's implementation plan includes:

Meetings and/or in-office demonstrations with first-time faculty and honors students

New efforts during "Parent-Prospective Student" weekends

New library visual element for use with written and website materials

Internal steps such as rearranging collections

"Our implementation activities are being spread over several years to minimize the impact on budgets and staff,"Carpenter concluded. "We believe this is the practical way to proceed while being responsive to our customers' needs."

6. Quarter-by-quarter calendar of events. Make sure that each trustee knows what he/she is supposed to do and when. For the desired level of visibility and publicity, do work closely with the host organization.

"Wait a minute," you say. "This strategic planning positioning sounds too complicated!" Board members, our job is to see that scarce resources are used wisely . . . and position our library to get more. If you don't take the time to plan carefully before you act, you might as well sit at the board meeting and burn dollar bills.

Do you implement your strategic positioning plan all at once? Most libraries can't afford it. Just make sure that over time all of your library's written, verbal and electronic communications get updated. The outcome is a consistent message to all your target audiences.

TRUSTEE STEPS

Your vision is done. The strategic positioning plan has been adopted unanimously.

Now it's time for action. Board members, get ready to carry out your part of the division of labor. Just keep these items in mind:

1. Reality factors. "Hold on," said the head librarian concerning a speakers bureau for the upcoming bond election. "My trustees can't even remember our collection size from one board meeting to the next! How can they be trusted to present information accurately?"

Start by asking for volunteers from your board. You may get only one or two trustees who have the desire and time to do public speaking, but all of them should be able to accept one-on-one assignments to keep key officials informed about library issues.

Help your trustees by providing tools such as:

■ Fact sheets

■ A presentation script or outline

■ One or two handouts such as your annual report or copies of recent media coverage

Those tools should reflect your general and support positioning statements as well as providing statistics, facts and customer comments.

2. Getting ready. "But what am I actually supposed to do?"the board member asked plaintively. "What should I say? What about questions I can't answer?"

Don't drop your board members into 60 feet of water swarming with hungry crocodiles. Start slowly. Coaching and role play are effective ways to get your trustee familiar with your fact sheet and script. Most important, they reduce the anxiety and risk your trustee may feel.

3. Starting out. Conduct the first two or three meetings jointly with your head librarian. This will help relieve his/her anxiety. It also lets you, the board member, see how he/she answers questions.

While you're still doing joint presentations, get feedback from the head librarian after each session. Effective feedback needs to be timely and specific; few opportunities are better than the drive back from a joint presentation. You may have some suggestions for your librarian, too.

4. On the road. Finally the time comes when you're on your own. What about the question you can't answer? Just write it down, along with how to contact the questioner. Turn it over to your head librarian.

As President Jack Ryan found in his early stump appearances,[7] nothing energizes more than the positive give and take between speaker and audience. Some board members should like the visibility; a few may even want to take on more assignments.

NEW DEMANDS, NEW RESULTS

"Nobody told me I'd have to talk to people when I got on this board," the trustee sighed.

That's true for many of us. However, we're in a new era. Explosive growth in information media and customer demands can't be met by "same old, same old" resources.

As the governance body, our job is to achieve our vision which benefits our customers and stakeholders while carrying out our legal and fiduciary responsibilities. Doing our job right means gaining the advocacy of those critically important decision-makers: Voters, mayors, city councils, county commissioners, state legislators and other officials.

What's the measure of those decision-makers' advocacy? Authorizations—whether at the ballot box, during city council meetings or as part of the legislative session—that provide additional dollars and new positions. Advocacy doesn't happen by itself. It's through your strategic positioning plan that your library can gain the advocacy of additional resources that benefit your customers and stakeholders.

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