

# Increase Library Usage through Strategic Merchandising

**Presented by Kathy Dempsey**

**Consultant, Founder: Libraries Are Essential**

[www.LibrariesAreEssential.com](http://www.LibrariesAreEssential.com)

[Kathy@LibrariesAreEssential.com](mailto:Kathy@LibrariesAreEssential.com)

[www.facebook.com/LibrariesAreEssential](https://www.facebook.com/LibrariesAreEssential)

**Author: *The Accidental Library Marketer***

[www.LibrariesAreEssential.com](http://www.LibrariesAreEssential.com)

**Blogger: The “M” Word: Marketing Libraries**

[www.themwordblog.blogspot.com](http://www.themwordblog.blogspot.com)

**Editor: *Marketing Library Services* newsletter**

published by Information Today, Inc., Medford, NJ

[www.infotoday.com/mls](http://www.infotoday.com/mls)

[kdempsey@infotoday.com](mailto:kdempsey@infotoday.com)

**LinkedIn:**

[www.linkedin.com/in/kathydempsey](http://www.linkedin.com/in/kathydempsey)

Medford, NJ

## General Recommendations

- + To get buy-in and cooperation systemwide, include all staff members in the planning. People are more invested in anything if they feel as if they're a part of it.
- + "Willingness is more important than money. If people have the willingness to make changes, they'll find a way to do it. If they don't have the willingness, no amount of money can help." from Kathy Schalk-Greene, then Assistant Director of Mt. Laurel, NJ library during its groundbreaking Trading Spaces project.
- + Use some before-and-after pictures to illustrate what a difference this work can make.
- + Make extra weeding and de-cluttering part of the project. Make more space to spread things out for nice displays so they look fresh and uncluttered. Visitors are not impressed by seeing how much you have, they only care about what interests them.

## Recommended Steps and Strategies

### **1. Analyze Current Conditions**

- + Have an outsider evaluate and comment on the present layout, design, & merchandising in several representative branches. "Walkabouts"
- + Poll managers at every branch about weaknesses they perceive, and also about strong points that might benefit others in your system.
- + Get the whole staff involved at the beginning. Specifically:
  - \* Tell everyone what you want to do and why. What outcomes do you expect, and how will it benefit them?
  - \* Ask each employee to be part of branch analysis, in their own branch or in another.
  - \* Ask frontline employees to write down "trouble spots" that patrons often report or ask about. If many users ask the location of a certain area or item, that indicates a need to move it or to create better signage. (People love to complain—give them that chance!)
- + Get patrons' opinions! Ways to ask them can be as simple as in-house paper surveys, as interesting as scavenger hunts, or as in-depth as focus groups.

**TIP:** Ask people to think about (or visit) a favorite bookstore or retail shop and to write down exactly what they like about it (physically, not price or location). What makes it friendly, cozy, or easy to use? What makes them want to go back?

### **2. Decide What You Want to Change**

- + Chose a few simple things to start with. Don't overwhelm everyone by trying to do them all right away. You might even try something and decide it doesn't work, then try it another way.
- + Change is a process, not a destination. Remember to stay flexible.

### **3. Determine How to Evaluate Success**

- + Before you implement anything, figure out how you'll determine its potential success. This knowledge might change the way you need to implement, so have a plan for that first. Set goals.

+ Decide what you'll be measuring (quantitative) and take your baseline measurements before making any changes. (gate count, general circ, fewer directional questions, higher circ on certain collections, etc.)

#### **4. Implement the Changes**

+ A little at a time is fine. You don't want to change so much overnight that regular customers walk in and aren't sure where they are!

+ If you move an actual collection, you'll need extra signage at first to signal that. Having roving staffers in strategic spots to help patrons find it would be really helpful.

+ Be sure to build in staff time for this work. Call in volunteers to help move things after hours if necessary. (family pizza / moving party?) Or if certain janitorial / municipal staff need to do the work, thank them with some treats.

**TIP** from Joan Bernstein, who was director of Mt. Laurel, NJ library during its groundbreaking Trading Spaces project: "The staff must be made to understand that merchandising is a new part of their jobs and it means other things will have to give a little bit. Also, merchandising is a never-ending process. It requires constant attention ... but it's worth it!"

#### **5. Publicize Your Changes**

+ Why make changes that people have been asking for, then not bother to tell them you've fulfilled their wishes? Get back to people who participated in surveys or focus groups, etc.

+ Alert the media! "Makeover" stories are popular, and people love "before" and "after" shots.

+ Consider having a "grand re-opening" type of event, or at least invite some officials to come in for tours or photo opps. (Only do this if you have some very obvious, dramatic-looking changes.)

+ Propose an article for the library press, blog about your changes, or make a video for YouTube. Sharing with your professional colleagues can build your pride, increase your system's recognition, and bring chances for further articles or conference presentations.

**TIP:** Applying for awards can bring you more fame and \$\$ to use on further improvements!

### **Specifics for Signs and Displays**

#### **+ Elements of Effective Visual Merchandising**

Balance: Asymmetrical rather than symmetrical balance with the display.

Size of Objects: Place the largest object into display first.

Color: Helps set mood and feelings.

Focal Point: Where product and props/signage and background come together.

Lighting: Should accent focal point, if possible.

Simplicity: Less is more so know when to stop and don't add too many items.

+ Major displays should be 10-20 steps inside the entrance and off to the right. (This is generally the most high-traffic area. You want displays in high-traffic areas.)

+ Keep sightlines clear to appear large and airy.

+ Use the ends of stacks as often as you can. Add small shelves or slatwall to allow you to display books there.

- + Even among the regular stacks, turn a few books cover-facing-out as often as you can. The covers catch the eye much more than the spines and lead to more browsing and discovery.
- + Mix-and-match books in unusual ways. For instance, one-color displays can be very striking.
- + Make a big impact in a small space with a digital picture frame.
- + A person only glances at a sign for 2-3 seconds, so it *must* be clear & legible.
- + Avoid handwritten signs! At the very least, print everything on a good printer. Also, try to put signs under plastic or in laminate rather than just taping them up. It looks more professional.
- + Sans-serif fonts are easier to read than serif fonts. And *handwritten types of fonts* are hard to read at a distance.
- + Stick to standard fonts and colors throughout the library and the system.
- + Make signs (and posters and fliers) as uncluttered as possible. Too much text or too many photos just decreases readability and detracts from the message.
- + Don't ignore the outside of your library! If a building never changes outside, it leads passers-by to believe that nothing is changing inside, either.
- + Make sure that outdoor signage is clean and up-to-date. Making it eye-catching is even better.
- + Put up welcoming signs that can be seen by people going by: "Pop in and say hello!" or "Free wireless inside!"
- + Watch the wording on signs. Consider the difference between "Don't use cell phones here" and "Please use your cell phone politely." Concentrate on the positive, not the negative.

### **Having Staff Promote Collections**

- + Just putting a bookmark or flier into a book during check-out isn't enough. It's much more effective if the circ clerk engages the patron in conversation. "Did you know we're doing...?"
- + Come up with just a few possible phrases / talking points and train every frontline staffer to use them. Nothing complicated—just a message they can convey in 10 seconds.
- + To help make staff comfortable delivering specific messages, practice! Do role-playing at staff meetings, have them repeat it to friends and family, etc. It makes a difference!
- + Use ALA's Advocacy University, especially the section on Frontline Advocacy <http://www.ala.org/advocacy/advocacy-university>

## Further Reading

### MERCHANDISING / DISPLAYING

Pinterest

<https://www.pinterest.com/LibrarianSmiles/library-merchandising>

“Visual Merchandising—Applying Bookstore Insights to Public Library Collections,” by Allison Marie Fiscus. *Public Libraries*, Jan. 23, 2018.

<http://publiclibrariesonline.org/2018/01/visual-merchandising-applying-bookstore-insights-to-public-library-collections>

Anythink Libraries (Colo.) Visual Merchandising Guidelines

[http://www.anythinklibraries.org/sites/default/files/imce\\_uploads/Anythink\\_Merchandising\\_Guidelines.pdf](http://www.anythinklibraries.org/sites/default/files/imce_uploads/Anythink_Merchandising_Guidelines.pdf)

Hennah, Kevin & State Library of Victoria (2005). *Public libraries image handbook*. State Library of Victoria, Melbourne. ISBN: 978-0-975015360.

<http://www.worldcat.org/title/public-libraries-image-handbook/oclc/68572700>

### RETAIL

*Why We Buy: The Science of Shopping* by Paco Underhill. Simon & Schuster, 2008.

(also check out Underhill's company Envirosell: "a global research and consulting firm specializing in the study of human behavior in retail, service, home and on-line environments." <http://www.envirosell.com>)

Koontz, Christie. "Retail Interior Layout for Libraries." *Marketing Library Services*, Jan/Feb 05.

<http://infotoday.com/mls/jan05/koontz.shtml>

Woodward, Jeannette. *Creating the Customer-Driven Library: Building on the Bookstore Model*. ALA, 2004. \$50. <http://www.alastore.ala.org/detail.aspx?ID=337>

Types of Store Layouts: Basic retail floor plans

[http://retail.about.com/od/storedesign/ss/store\\_layouts.htm](http://retail.about.com/od/storedesign/ss/store_layouts.htm)

Creating Attractive Displays: Visual display tips

[http://retail.about.com/od/storedesign/a/create\\_display.htm](http://retail.about.com/od/storedesign/a/create_display.htm)

Visual Displays Photo Gallery: Creative Retail Merchandising

[http://retail.about.com/od/merchandisingbuying/ig/Visual-Displays-Photo-Gallery/index\\_g.htm](http://retail.about.com/od/merchandisingbuying/ig/Visual-Displays-Photo-Gallery/index_g.htm)

### SIGNAGE & DESIGN

How Libraries Send Mixed Messages

<http://themwordblog.blogspot.com/2010/07/how-libraries-send-mixed-messages.html>

Designing Better Libraries blog by Steven Bell (Temple Univ.) & friends

<http://dbl.lishost.org/blog/>

### TOOLS TO PURCHASE

MerchandisingLibraries.com

<https://www.merchandisinglibraries.com.au>; <https://www.facebook.com/merchandisinglibraries>