

Developing a Brand Strategy for Ontario Public Libraries

DRAFT

Phase 3 & Final Report

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Introduction

The Symposium: Libraries 2020 clearly called for collaboration across the public library community to be ramped up with five priorities established to realize that end. From these priorities, collaborative initiatives were outlined and leadership organizations were identified to move these initiatives forward.

Collaborative #3 “Library branding and promotion: creative a distinct identity with local and provincial messages” to be lead from the Federation of Ontario Public Libraries (FOPL) indicates that an overall brand for Ontario’s public libraries is considered an essential component of library capacity building and needs to be created. A lofty initiative with the objective of increasing public- and decision-maker awareness, use, perceived value and support, the vision is for a single brand identity for Ontario’s public libraries with messaging customizable to the provincial and local levels.

Brand Strategy Project Phase 1: Establishing the Context:

RESULTS:

In Phase 1, there were three goals with the following results realized:

1. We better understood the online environment of public libraries in Ontario and identified the 91% of libraries that have a website as well as the social networking channels in use;
2. We reviewed some of the best branding practices in public libraries in North America and, as a result, have a better understanding of what goes into particularly successful branding initiatives;
3. We identified the wealth of research available on the value of public libraries and understood the opportunities for positive messaging that spring from this research.

The Phase 1 Report submitted on February 1, 2014 presented the detailed findings related to the three goals.

Brand Strategy Project Phase 2: Branding with Internal Stakeholders:

RESULTS:

In Phase 2, there were two goals with the following results realized:

1. We successfully engaged senior management from public libraries across Ontario in this branding project – gaining buy-in – and received feedback from this group to start to build on the public library brand.
2. We reviewed the success of the OCLC Geek the Library campaign and the ALA @Your Library campaign to better understand the measured outcomes of successful campaigns.

The Phase 2 Report submitted on July 14, 2014 presented the detailed findings related to the two goals.

Brand Strategy Project Phase 3: Branding with Municipal Stakeholders:

GOALS:

In Phase 3, there are two goals:

1. To engage selected municipal stakeholders – CAO's and city managers –to get their buy-in and gain their insights on the present position of the brand of Ontario's public libraries and to get feedback on where the public library brand should go - including emerging target audiences for libraries – as well as the strengths and weaknesses of these institutions and the competitors.
2. To synthesize the results of the work with all the internal stakeholders over the three phases of this project and to draft recommendations for next steps to fulfill the collaborative initiative to realize a distinct identity for Ontario's public libraries.

This report presents the findings related to these two goals representing this final Phase 3 of the project.

Background: Definition of a Brand

A brand is the proprietary visual, emotional, rational and cultural image that is associated with an organization, setting them apart from the competition. A brand is a promise to deliver value. For all key audiences, it has to stand for something that is credible, compelling, engaging and differentiating in order to drive the desired perceptions, behaviours and attitudes.

NOTE: The process being used for this project is taken from the Centre of Excellence for Public Sector Marketing's "Guide to branding in the public and not-for-profit sectors" (Ottawa, 2009).

Introduction to Branding

As markets become more competitive, and clients become more demanding, organizations must work harder to secure their fundamental relationships. Building distinctive relationships with clients and stakeholders is what branding is about, whatever the market, whoever the client. **Many members of the public and not-for-profit sectors are hesitant to recognize that they face stiff competition** and they fail to see the need to put an emphasis on branding and positioning. However, this view is slowly changing as more leaders in these sectors are recognizing that they are in a competitive market with limited funding.

Steps to Building a Brand:

The starting premise is that the development of a brand is a process of decision making; making tough decisions regarding what an organization must and can do to realize its desired brand state. It is also based on the belief that a brand strategy starts with analysis and ends with action – and along the way, it must build momentum and buy-in by engaging all those involved in developing common ground.

1. **Conducting internal research**
 - **Determine the brand's present position and that of competitors**
 - **Get buy-in from all internal stakeholders**
 - **Decide where to go and how to get there**
2. Conducting external research
 - Determine the brand's present position with the public
 - Get buy-in from all external stakeholders
3. Developing potential branding models
 - Craft the necessary communications
 - Validate direction with internal and external stakeholders
4. Deploying a 1 – 2 year implementation plan
 - Integrate strategy across segments and media
5. Monitoring the impact
 - Monitor and maintain the brand

Project Approach: Conducting Internal Research:

The focus of this project has been on Step 1 to building a brand – conducting internal research.

Determine the Brand’s Present Position and that of Competitors: **COMPLETED**

In addition to other related goals, in Phase 1, we reviewed the landscape of public libraries in Ontario, specifically focusing on their web presence and social media channels in use. This environmental scan enabled us to better understand the current position of the diverse library brands in play in the province as well as evaluate the opportunity to disseminate a new brand using these technologies.

In Phase 2, we conducted surveys to get specific feedback from the internal stakeholders – management, trustees and employees of libraries – on the present brand position of Ontario’s public libraries as well as that of competitors, gaining intelligence on the existing state of public libraries as perceived by these internal stakeholders. We also sought their insights into possible preferred values and characteristics to inform the desired state.

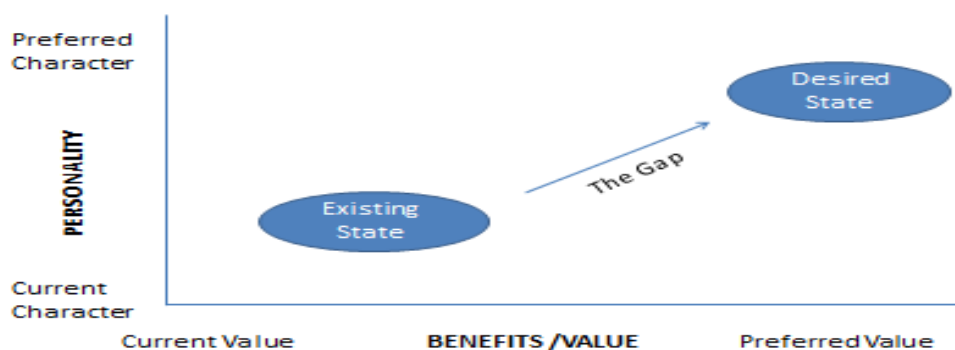
In Phase 3, we engaged more internal stakeholders – municipal CAO’s and city managers – in one-on-one telephone interviews to gain further insights into the existing state of public libraries as well as the desired state.

Get Buy-In From All Internal Stakeholders: **COMPLETED**

At the conclusion of Phase 1, a presentation was offered at the OLA SuperConference to begin the process of gaining buy-in. Then, throughout Phases 2 and 3, using webinars as well as direct one-on-one interviews, we have worked with the internal stakeholders – from CEO’s of public libraries to trustees to municipal CAO’s – to gain buy-in for this initiative.

Decide Where to Go and How to Get There: **NEXT STEP**

The approach through Phases 1-3 has been to provide input on the existing state and the desired state – representing intelligence needed for the tough decisions required from the project Steering Committee.



Phase 3: Branding with Municipal Stakeholders:

In Phase 3 of this project, it was important to address the internal stakeholders who had not yet been approached: the municipalities.

Goal #1: Engage the Municipalities:

I interviewed selected individuals to engage these municipal stakeholders – CAO's and city managers – to get their buy-in and gain their insights on the present position of the brand of Ontario's public libraries and to get feedback on where the public library brand should go - including emerging target audiences for libraries – as well as the strengths and weaknesses of these institutions and the competitors.

Approach:

For the purpose of this internal stakeholder research, I was provided with the names and contact information for a total of 6 individuals within municipalities by SOLS and OLS-N. These individuals all held the title of either Chief Administrative Officer or City Manager. Of the 6, two were located in OLS-North's jurisdiction and four were located in SOLS' jurisdiction (although one contact is now located outside of the province). I worked with the Executive Director of FOPL, on behalf of the Steering Committee, to ascertain what we wanted to learn from these individuals regarding the existing state and desired state of public libraries in Ontario. We decided to focus on the same issues addressed with the other internal stakeholders in Phase 2 who participated in the survey in order to gain comparable insights. Questions were provided in advance to interview participants.

Questions used in telephone interviews:

- To put the public library's service into context, what is the biggest challenge your community is facing?
- Who is the #1 target audience with whom the public library should engage?
- What library services would most benefit this target audience?
- When / if they do not use the public library services, where does this target audience go to access the required services?
- When the target audience chooses to go elsewhere for service, what motivates them to make that choice?
- To realize greater success, who does the public library need to partner with: 1) in municipal government; 2) in the community?

Observations:

Community Challenges:

The challenges identified by the library sector participants in the survey conducted in Phase 2 were echoed by the municipality sector and essentially fell into two categories, depending upon the circumstances of the community:

1. Rampant growth in the community with resulting infrastructure challenges.

- “We are a rapidly growing community. And the demand to sustain old and develop new infrastructure – and having the ongoing financial wherewithal to support that infrastructure – is a challenge.”
- 2. Economic hardships resulting in population stagnation / decrease and employment challenges.
 - “Our biggest challenge is our stagnating – and aging – population.”
 - “Our challenge is local employment. Industry is leaving – and the result has been significant unemployment.”
 - “It boils down to money. Certain councillors are taking a very hard line with the library budget.”

In either case, the impact on the community was a financial one with pressures being applied to the tax base with corresponding repercussions on the municipal budgets (which includes the public library).

#1 Target Audience:

The municipality sector lined up with the library sector responses regarding who the target audience was for library services, agreeing that the biggest audience has traditionally been students and seniors. And, while acknowledging that these audiences were important, the internal stakeholders from the municipalities also saw an audience that was largely under-served and under-appreciated in terms of the weight they carry in a community: **business people and middle-aged adults.**

- “Our target audience is who we can reach – for now, that’s students and seniors. However, there is a huge group in the middle. The target audience should be those mid-life rate payers who may not be current library users and who may be largely unaware of the services offered by the library.”
- “The library has become a hub for internet access in our community and two audiences have been well-targeted by this service: youth for after-school homework support and older people, enabling them with computer access. Who’s missing? The 40 – 50 year olds who may be needing employment support.”
- “The business community. Finding a way to provide services to the business community will gain long term support. My perception is the business community does not see the library system as a service for them.”
- “The library needs to start partnering with small business groups. This is a real opportunity as employment is a key issue for this community.”

Library Services:

The municipality sector agreed with the library sector responses in terms of the value that public libraries bring to their communities: credible, trustworthy, reliable resources. However, the CAO’s also anticipated that future demand will be for more and more electronic products and services delivered in a mobile format. They also perceived that the public library did NOT have the pulse of the community

and that market research was required to align the public library with the public's demands and expectations.

- "In the future, materials will be mostly electronic. People need access to appropriate, reliable, trustworthy reference and recreation materials. But those materials will be mostly electronic. Libraries need to anticipate those new formats and get ahead of the curve."
- "The library's services need to be taken outside of the box that is the library. Find ways to more mobile services. Create download stations in other places that the community goes – arenas, parks. And then make sure that the community is aware of what's available at that it's "for free" – as in, already paid for with their taxes."
- "What is the target audience expecting from the library? The users have expectations that the library is not aware of. And then, once the library can serve those expectations, the users need to know how easy it is for them to access and use those products and services."

The Competitors:

According to the CAO's, the public library has two competitors: online and ignorance. Like the library sector, the municipality sector all agreed that the Internet was where the target audience was accessing required information services. They also mentioned social networks and school. However, more important was the perception that the community was not aware of the services the library could provide – a perception with which, from the survey results, the majority of the library sector participants also agreed.

- "The people are disengaged."
- "The target audience assumes that they would have to pay for library services. They don't know it's free. So they are buying the books, resources, music, whatever they are interested in directly. They don't think about the library."

The Competitors' Strengths:

With the municipality sector and the library sector agreeing on the library's greatest weakness: lack of awareness on the part of the public, they were also in agreement on the strength of the competitor: convenience. Clearly, the opportunity is for the public library to make its resources – certainly its online resources – known for being accessible and convenient.

- "People go elsewhere because it's convenient and it's easy. There's no hassle. They know that they will have immediate access. Amazon has really turned the spotlight on the customer. Between Amazon and Netflix, they've created a customer-focused access model that the library needs to consider for its future."
- "They're going online at home because it's convenient. Distances in a rural community can be great. And our library branches are well distributed, but there's resistance to having to go anywhere physically. Libraries should be spreading the word: go online – but don't go to Google, come to the library online."

Library Partners:

The responses from the municipality sector indicate that they feel very strongly about the importance of close ties between the public library and the municipal government – and that those ties should be even closer with some respondents calling for an end to library boards. Further, the CAO's indicated that local engagement can also ensure a positive relationship between the library and rate payers, raising that awareness so critical to the library's success.

Municipal Government:

- "The library needs to take the time to develop an understanding and appreciation with local government."
- "The only time council sees the library is at budget time. Really, the library needs to position itself to be seen as a component of the municipality's business and strategic plans."
- "The library benefits from close ties to municipal finance and admin departments. However, the ties to the municipality could be even closer without the historical need for autonomy as evidenced by the library board. In some case, that administration-type spending could be handled by the municipality rather than duplicating those expenses in the library."
- "There are some natural partners within municipal departments – for example, culture and heritage, museums and archives."
- "Without the library board, the library could be fully integrated into the municipal structure."

Local Organizations:

- "Libraries need to be present in the community – with a physical representation of the library by library staff. Local groups they should be involved with include sports organizations, cultural groups, historical societies, the chamber of commerce. Get out of that box. You need to market yourselves to the community."
- "The library should be seen as complementary to the entire education system."
- "Finding a way to provide services to the business community will gain long term support. My perception is that the business community does not see the library system as a service for them."
- "Communities have various organizations focusing on development and learning. Engaging with these groups would be very beneficial."
- "In our community, the library has started to partner with small business groups – but this is a huge opportunity as employment is a key issue here."
- "There are opportunities with long-term care facilities and adult senior centres."

Barriers to Success:

The library sector's response to this issue came down to awareness, staff and facilities – concerns that were largely echoed by the municipal sector in these interviews with some very pointed comments made.

- "There is a real lack of understanding of the library's role as well as the services provided by the library on the part of the community. This is the biggest barrier."
- "We have facilities challenges. Unfortunately, our library buildings are old and were designed with an orientation towards the circulation of books. And with the advent of more electronic

resources, the wiring in the buildings is a problem. People are using the spaces differently. We need to provide wired work stations. Fundamentally, the purpose of the buildings has changed.”

- “The library needs to market itself. They need to anticipate where people are going for information – and get ahead of that curve – and then raise the public’s awareness of what the library has to offer. Services provided should run the gamut from recreational reading to being a source for local information. The library needs to work to stay relevant.”
- “The library really needs to get the message out there that libraries are important to communities – and describe the benefits of what libraries bring to their communities. There is a ‘silent majority’ out there who is uninformed about the future of public library services. They see a proposal to spend money and they don’t understand it ... so they can – and have – gotten plans killed. The library needs to engage with all members of the community.”
- “The public library is a symbol of a free and democratic society. This is an important message that needs to be strongly conveyed to communities. The public needs to know this.”

Goal #2: Synthesize the Results:

The following analysis and draft recommendations for next steps are the result of the work done with the internal stakeholders over the three phases of this project to the end of realizing the Symposium 2020's collaborative initiative to create a distinct identity for Ontario's public libraries.

Analysis:

In Phase 1, we indicated that "Most successful branding efforts start with the development of a sound brand strategy that takes into account stakeholder input and client perceptions. This approach involves articulating your desired brand identity." Through the three phases of this project, we have done in-depth work with the internal stakeholders to develop the profile of the existing and desired brand. The perceptions of the library brand as expressed by the clients / general public is work to be completed in a future project.

Throughout this project, we focused on the following questions to guide the articulation of both the existing and desired brand states:

- Who – is your target market?
- What – do they want?
- Where – do they get it?
- Why – do they not use the library?

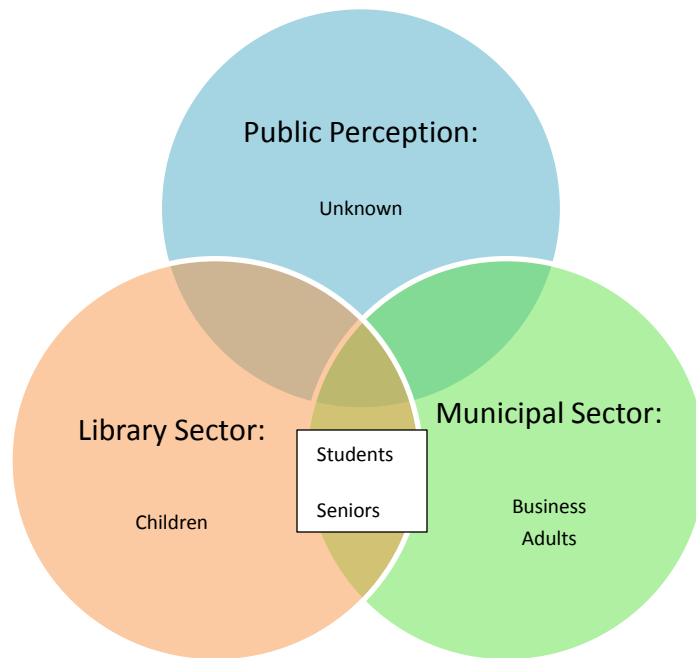
The final question:

- How – are libraries going to change?

Is a question to be addressed by the Steering Committee and the stakeholders in a future project as the desired state is identified.

Who?

The greatest disparity amongst the internal stakeholders – specifically between the library sector respondents who participated in our survey and the selected municipality sector participants who were interviewed – arose in answer to the question: “Who is your target audience?”



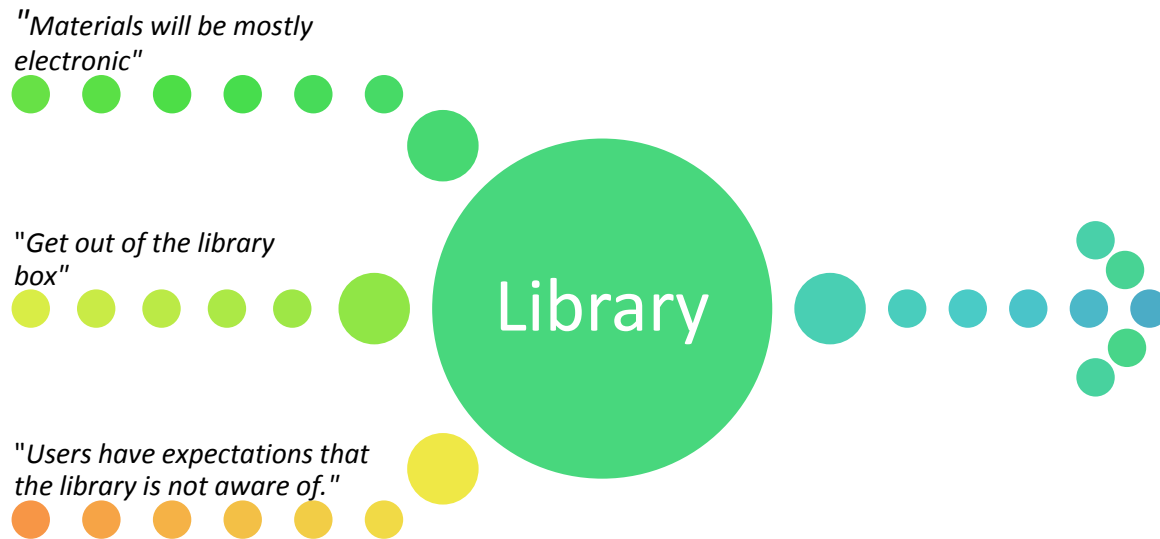
As illustrated, the library and municipal sectors agree that students and seniors are current audiences for the public library. However, the library sector perceives that children are a significant target audience while the municipal sector believes that the business community and mid-life adults are audiences that are currently under-serviced or not serviced at all. The municipality sector participants indicated that both these audiences represented an opportunity for the desired state of the public library.

For Follow-Up:

- What is the public’s perception of the target audiences for public library services?
- How do public libraries need to change if they want to extend services to these target audiences identified by the municipal stakeholders?

What?

While the library sector's responses in regards to the question "What do the target audiences want?" did rank online access highly, they also ranked "community livingroom" as the third-most-beneficial service to their target audience. Comparatively, the municipality sector's responses to this question challenged the library to get out of its comfort zone.

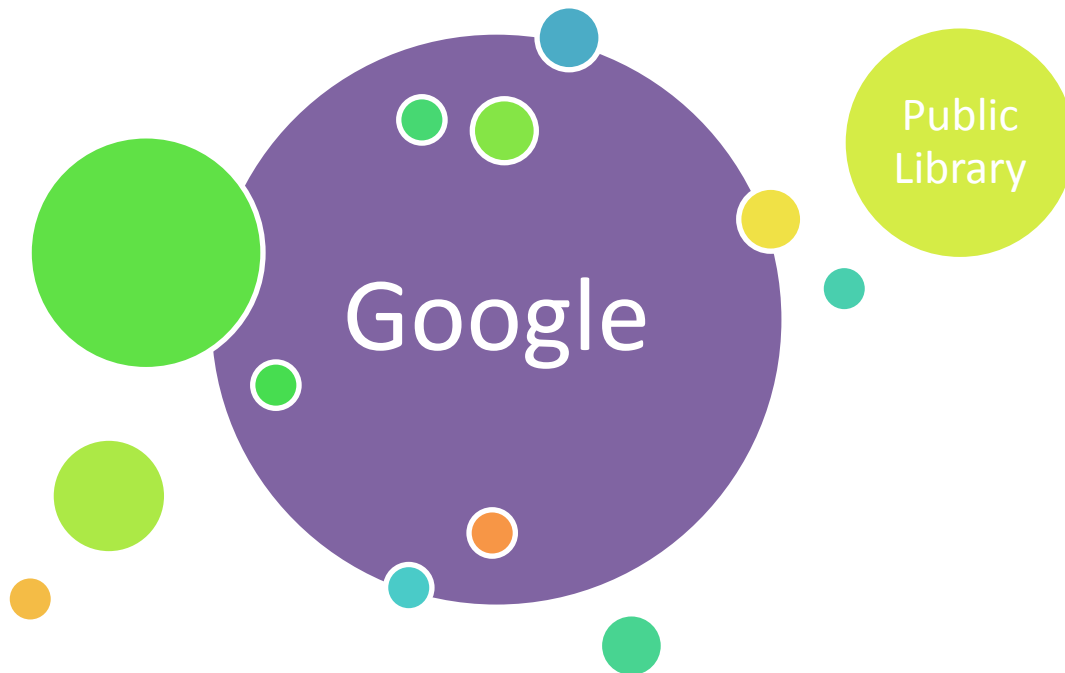


For Follow-Up:

- What is the public's perception of the desired services from their public library?
- How will public libraries ensure that they are "ahead of the curve" as demanded by the municipalities and be responsive to their audiences emerging needs?

Where?

The library and municipality sectors agree that the biggest competitor to public libraries – as evidenced by the responses to the question “Where do the target audiences access information resources when they don’t use the library?” – is the internet. The challenge for libraries is to position the library website as the portal through which their users access electronic resources – both for fee and for free. Unfortunately, despite most public libraries in Ontario having a website, awareness of all the online resources available to users via their public library seems to be very low.



For Follow-Up:

- This is a key branding challenge: how will public libraries communicate to the public about their value and benefits in comparison to that of their major competitor?

Why?

The answer to the question “Why do they not use the public library?” clearly indicates the library’s greatest weakness and highlights the competitor’s strength. The library and the municipality sector respondents agreed: lack of awareness. The public does not know about the extent of the public library’s offerings. And the public values convenience.



"It's convenient for people just to go online at home."



"They don't think about the library."

For Follow-Up:

- There is a large gap between the existing state and the desired state when defining the benefits and value of the public library.
- What will the desired state’s benefits and value look like?
- How will public libraries change to articulate this desired value proposition?

Insights:

All internal stakeholders – both from the municipality sector and the library sector – agreed on the challenges their communities were facing: Ontario’s municipalities seem to be either in a state of rampant growth with the accompanying infrastructure challenges OR are in a state of economic decline with the resulting population shifts and a decreasing tax base. Where there was a disconnect between the municipality sector and the library sector was in their responses to the challenge: the municipality sector respondents saw this challenge as a call to action on the part of the library to support a new target audience – specifically, the business community and mid-life adults whose changing circumstances can result in a change in their need for access to authoritative and reliable information resources and services. The library sector responses seemed to not reflect the challenges in their communities, focusing on their traditional audiences.

- **The “pain points” in communities can help libraries identify their differentiators for branding purposes.**

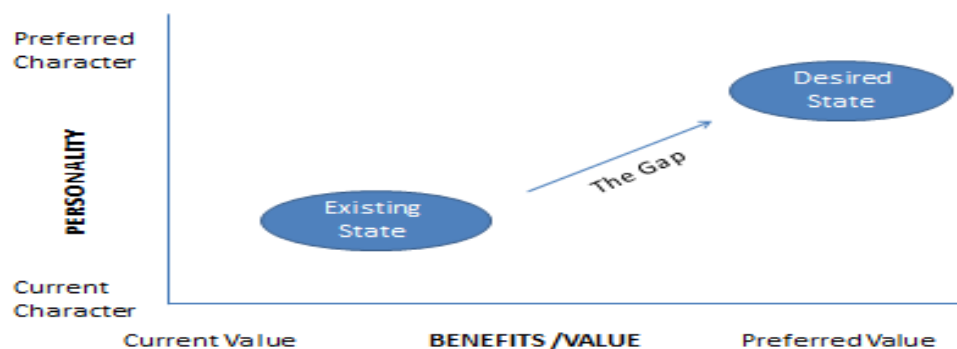
The biggest competitor to the public library is “Online”. Whether its online access to books via Amazon or Chapters or movies via Netflix or online “answers” using Google, the public library needs to ascertain – given its competitor’s strengths and its own weaknesses – what the opportunity is for its brand position.

- **Online’s greatest competitive advantage: Convenience**
- **The Public Library’s greatest weakness: Lack of awareness**

Recommendation #1:

Again, the starting premise is that the development of a brand is a process of decision making; making tough decisions regarding what an organization must and can do to realize its desired brand state. At this point, the Steering Committee should make some decisions to complete Step 1 (as outlined below) by deciding “where to go and how to get there”. These decisions are specifically regarding the existing state and the desired state based upon the benefits and value as well as the character of Ontario’s Public Libraries.

Decide Where to Go and How to Get There:



Recommendation #2:

In the steps to building a brand, the next step is conducting external research. An external organization should be engaged to help in confirming the public’s opinion of the brand’s desired state as well as validating the identified strengths and weaknesses of the public library with the market.

Steps to Building a Brand:

1. Conducting internal research
 - Determine the brand’s present position and that of competitors
 - Get buy-in from all internal stakeholders
 - Decide where to go and how to get there
2. **Conducting external research**
 - **Determine the brand’s present position with the public**
 - **Get buy-in from all external stakeholders**
3. Developing potential branding models
 - Craft the necessary communications
 - Validate direction with internal and external stakeholders
4. Deploying a 1 – 2 year implementation plan

- Integrate strategy across segments and media
- 5. Monitoring the impact
 - Monitor and maintain the brand

The following is a list of external market research firms for your consideration:

- Phase 5 <http://www.phase-5.com/>
- InnerViews <http://www.innerviews.ca/>
- Strategic Council <http://www.thestrategiccounsel.com/>
- Market Probe <http://www.marketprobe.com/>

Conclusion:

If a “brand is a promise to deliver value”, what is the unique value proposition of Ontario’s Public Libraries?

Thank you for the opportunity to work with the FOPL, OLA, SOLS and OLS-North teams.