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Marketing from luxury goods to normal business: an overview of marketing strategies in Italian libraries

It's a hard job to sketch a general picture of the situation of Italian libraries, not only on the specific aspect of marketing, but on every aspect in general. Every time we need to use the results of some research, we have to deal with a quite total lack of systematic, comparable and reliable data.

Unlike other countries, in Italy the jurisdiction about selecting, collecting and processing data on libraries is not clearly defined at a national level, neither it is easy to see a job division shared among different institutions. Nowadays, it is nearly impossible to deal with certain and homogeneous data on Italian libraries, either referring to their numbers or to the amount of their collections.

This lack of data calls our attention to the fact that **the Italian library system is a non-system**, characterized by huge jurisdictional fragmentation.

The nearly fifteen thousand tesseras of the Italian libraries' mosaic share only a general weakness, poverty and low levels in work and success, in a social and cultural environment marked by a huge difference between the North and the South of the country, by low educational levels, low access to cultural goods and an inveterate habit of non reading.

These are all factors that do not support the tipsy and carefree perception Italians keep having of themselves, as a people able to cope with any economic crisis, drawing energy out of their own inexhaustible supply of culture and creativity.

Today in our country at the centre of political discussion there is the topic of competitiveness, seen as the ability of the System Italy as a whole to keep pace with other industrialized countries, thanks to a productive system able to give an acceptable welfare level and a social system able to watch over hardships and social exclusion.

Innovation, productivity and creativity are items in the agenda we hear repeated every day by politicians and industry leaders, as keys to access to a good future for us and our children.

As these items are strictly linked with knowledge and information, we, as librarians, feel directly concerned with the matter. We wonder whether our libraries are really able to do their share in this direction, and whether they can make the difference today and in the future.

We wonder again whether our libraries are a surplus of the past, as a prehistoric fossil, or whether they'll be able to survive in the future, becoming a productive resource for our country. Whether they'll be able to keep up with users' needs, to listen to them and adapt their organizational strategies to those needs. Whether they'll be able to communicate clearly with them and with all the other stakeholders – first of all politicians. Whether they will be able to build and maintain a proactive relationship with other partners in the information chain, in order to join forces and create positive synergies. We wonder whether the libraries will be esteemed as reliable and accredited partners, gifted with a **brand so strong and recognizable** as to let every citizen refer with confidence to them, because he clearly knows their role and what he can expect from them.

These are quite difficult questions to answer, enclosing all the different facets of library marketing. Now Italian librarians could reply to them in different ways since some libraries could make it, others could not and others still might make it only if willing and able to undergo great changes.

In such a variegated context, full of lights and shades, beside libraries which have consolidated during the years an excellent level of services, we can find a library desert. Near advanced and daring experiments in space and services organization, we find closed libraries. Facing huge investments for new buildings at European level, we can see big cities ignoring the importance of libraries for quality life development.

Today on this occasion I would try to share with you the point of view of the many Italian libraries pushing on to innovation. These libraries have determined to enrich their professional apparatus with marketing tools.

They have to get over **a double starting handicap** on their identity and the social perception built up brick over brick. The first handicap consists in **conceiving the library as the place preserving the culture of the past**, while it should be the place producing the culture of the present. The second handicap deals with the “original sin” of every library which is to be **an articulation of the Public Administration**.

In order to get over these handicaps, the most active and change-oriented Italian libraries had to take after Ginger Rogers, the famous dancer, who was more talented than her partner Fred Astaire, because she kept pace with him dancing backwards and wearing shoes with uncomfortably high heels.

So, **libraries are dancing backwards**: I want to say that they are challenged to produce innovative services, enlarge their social basis and broaden the perception of social advantage, dealing with a heritage from the past which is very rich but very heavy too.

Just think of only one of the events which have significantly marked the identity of public libraries in Italy. Let us step back to the Sixties in the Nineteenth Century, when Rome was not yet the capital, and the Government of the young Kingdom of Italy promulgated a law on the dissolution of all religious orders and stated that all the goods in monasteries and convents were to be of public property. At that time the extraordinary collections belonging to the monasteries' libraries were conveyed to the nearest local libraries. This event has remained etched in depth on the identity of those libraries, which had to deal with the consequences of this graft.

The need to preserve illuminated manuscripts, incunabula or precious editions of the 16th, 17th and 18th Centuries became a priority for most public libraries of the time, just recently born thanks to legacies of local families belonging to the noble and middle classes. Long before the birth of popular libraries, soaked in a socialistic spirit, the effect was **a shifting of the identity axis**.

In a country strongly marked by illiteracy, where the school was compulsory only as an expression written in a law not yet complied with, those libraries, “grafted” with the monasteries' collections, **set the tone for the idea of library** growing in the collective imagination. Being placed in great buildings rich of frescoes, full of art and history, the libraries easily became “cathedrals of culture”.

This particular destiny has weighed on the **“mixture” effect** suffered today by the Italian library system. In fact, for a common citizen and even for a scholar there is **some difficulty in recognizing the different roles** of a national library compared to a university or a public library, because many public libraries have got a historic tradition and a location not so dissimilar from a research library. And one can easily imagine how this mixture effect can be the natural habitat for a serious marketing problem.

Today new libraries are conceived in a basically different way respect to the cathedrals of high culture: they are **designed as squares open on to the civic environment** and able to nourish the sense of community. They are beginning to be a place where the civic identity can be built, where one has the chance not only of using library collection, but also of spending leisure time in a space of high social quality. The library is one of the last places where one is not obliged to spend money in order to be considered a welcome guest.

In the last fifteen years some attempts to adopt the Gutesloh model (the three levels library) have been carried out; but more important is the fact that some Italian librarians have successfully experienced **a full re-writing of the entrance area**, using the key of friendliness and attention to every user.

I said before: “dancing backward”: all these innovations must deal with the extraordinary weight of tradition, not only in the collective imagination, but in the mind of librarians too.

One has to consider that for Italian librarians it’s quite difficult to free themselves from **the tyranny of the catalogue**, and to get rid of **the collection hegemony**.

If one asks Italian librarians: “What are your library assets?”, they would not answer, for example, “thirty thousand users and one hundred and fifty thousand loans a year”. No doubt the answer would be “two hundred thousand books”. **At the centre of professional attention there is still the collection, not yet the service.**

One can easily find confirmation of that in the fact that lower level operators are directed to the front-office services, while upper level librarians work in front of the screen of a computer, usually open on the OPAC. **Closeness to the users is a**

signal of low power. When librarians get on in their career, they leave the room where users are. This is another marketing problem.

I must say that this opac-centred approach is not caused by a pernicious contagion among librarians: in Italy the central bibliographical service doesn't work as it should. Therefore every librarian is obliged to produce his own records. **In the library of every little town, the core business is cataloguing. On the catalogue librarians have built their feeble professional identity.** One can understand that in a country where the access to such positions is weakly disciplined, librarians don't enjoy a clearly recognized professional status, but they are common civil servants working in a library. In this situation **the competence in cataloguing has been like a rubber ring** against a sudden transfer to the Office of the registrar of births and deaths, and against the crawling replacements of professional librarians with keen volunteers or a generic staff full of good will.

When I was a young librarian, I remember how proud I was to be able to catalogue, and how strongly I felt the importance of cataloguing for my professional identity. Only this way I was able to distinguish my position from that of my nearest colleagues of the Cultural Department.

Getting older and wiser, I have developed the idea that a library director is first of all an organizer and a manager of information and documentation services, a listener of users' requirements, an analyst of the community needs, a builder of partnerships, a money procurer, a communicator and a promoter of the library as a productive force in the community. **Catalogue goes into the background.** But, getting older and wiser, I can't forget that I won the competition for the director position only because I brilliantly got through the ancient books cataloguing examination. So, Latin and Greek were for me at the time my personal marketing tools.

We left our friend Ginger dancing backwards. And now we have to let her dance on high heels.

All the libraries in Italy are part of the Public Administration. Till the end of the Eighties it played the role of a brake to development. It was an awkward elephant, interested only in finding food for itself, not in producing something useful for the country. It was a machine for national wealth redistribution, without

control on its effectiveness and efficiency. Since the Nineties things have remarkably changed. The citizen has run along the line from subject to customer; a reformation process has clearly developed, opening the public administration to people needs; the logic of common utility has come into the organizations, and we have begun to measure, evaluate, listen to and promote.

The public sector has begun to handle efficiency and effectiveness tools, and this way it has begun to gain its right to survive, in spite of funds cuts, showing its ability to be an engine, and no more an obstacle for the development.

The Public Administration has made giant steps towards modernization , not simply increasing the communication with citizens, but **conveying the logic of social marketing into the heart of its managing processes.**

It has begun to put the citizen with his needs and his requirements at the centre of its attention. It has begun to aim feed-back reactions from users at organizational changes: there is no point in caring for users' needs, if those needs cannot play a transforming role on the organizational strategies. This is the **"learning organization" dimension** which has spread bit by bit through the Public Administration, through libraries and maybe thanks to libraries.

And now I would like to introduce to you the main ideas we Italian librarians are discussing about nowadays:

#1 Marketing actions as linked to advocacy actions

The efficacy of a marketing action depends on its ability to galvanize public support and increase awareness about the real value of libraries, involving consumers as supporters and testimonials of the library. Two years ago the national movement "No pago" (i.e. I won't pay to read) was born from the grassroots of local libraries to oppose a national law scheme , in view of the infringement proceeding started by the European Union against Italy (among other countries), perceived as being "guilty" of not bringing about the required remuneration of authors and publishers for library loans. "No pago" movement, led by the public library of Cologno Monzese, a little town in the Milan suburbs, has undertaken to gather the worries of librarians together with those of readers, authors and even some publishers

against the direct or indirect tax on reading. The importance of this campaign is based on advocacy: many important writers, scientists and intellectuals have sided with the libraries, becoming extraordinary testimonials of library value. First signatory of the campaign was the Nobel Prize for Literature Dario Fo. Never before libraries gained such room in the Media; never before thousands citizens gave evidence of their affection to libraries.

#2 Cooperation as strategic choice

Job sharing is the most effective way not only to restrain costs and improve quality of marketing actions, but it's above all the best way to reach **the tipping point of the collective awareness** of what libraries are, what they do and what difference they can make in one's life. Partners of the libraries in this campaign are about three thousands paediatricians all over the country, who enrich their medical advice for parents with a recommendation to read and to use the library as an important tool for a good development. Doctors, schools and libraries have planned together many successfully reading programs for families. But what I want to emphasize is that **libraries for the first time have a clear message and speak with a unified voice all over the country**. It's quite a good goal reached by a library system which is a non-system, as I said before.

The unified voice is an important keyword for the spreading in Italy of the international campaign "@t your library", promoted by our national library association. Taking part in the campaign is the best way for a library to learn how to use the personal pronoun "we" instead of the "I". That is clearly happening in a country where there are eight thousand parish-pumps.

#3 Proactivity with other partners in the information chain

Librarians have begun to open up their mind to the external world, in order to look for some allies able to support libraries and to appreciate their help.

This implies that librarians must fill in their address book with a crowd of new contacts. They must create and maintain a personal and professional network with other partners interested in reading; and above all they must be aware **that the library point of view is not the only one**, and that library cannot always play

the starring role, but sometimes it can take part in projects directed by others. This is quite the case of the Presidi del libro (i.e. the Strongholds of books), an important and growing project born in the South of the country three years ago. "Presidi del libro" is the brand of several strong readers groups, which share the same passion for books and create from the grassroots new conditions for promoting reading, seeking allies in schools, bookshops, local governments and libraries too. This movement is directed by one of the most refined and active publisher, Giuseppe Laterza, who last year was able to gather all the protagonists of the book chain, in the National Book and Reading Promotion Forum. There were, of course, and in the front row, librarians too. Just today, June the 23th, in Rome there is a national meeting where all the partners in this project are discussing on creating a new institution dedicated to reading promotion, financially supported by publishers. There will be some librarians present; only a feeble practise in ubiquity prevents me from being there.

#4 Librarians and politics

Librarians must learn to sit at all the tables where a discussion on key issues, such as intellectual freedom, equity of access and narrowing the digital divide, is going on. Just two years ago an Italian librarian was accused of obscenity under an article of the National Criminal Code, because she lent a legally published book entitled "Scopami" (Fuck me) to a minor aged 14. The book appears on a list of recommended books for teenagers issued by the Italian Ministry of Work and Welfare as part of an anti-drug campaign. Just few days ago, on June the 17th, after a conspicuous campaign acted by librarians all over the country, under the coordination of the AIB (Associazione Italiana Biblioteche, i.e. Italian Library Association) the Judge decided to acquit the librarian of the charge. Libraries, librarians and freedom itself have won the battle, just because librarians got out from behind their desks and soiled their hands with politics.

"Come back to politics" is one of the slogans used by the new president of the AIB, professor Mauro Guerrini, both because a growing number of national and local political issues have a direct impact on libraries and their users, and because libraries themselves can leave their mark on decisions.

#5 Intimate relationship between the destiny of the library and the destiny of the librarian

It's impossible to promote libraries if you don't promote who makes them into what they are. Success is a goal for libraries, and for librarians too, and they must give up being ashamed of themselves. An invisible librarian is a good prerequisite of an invisible library. So also in Italy librarians have begun to promote themselves, to build personal websites, to show how precious their know-how is and how valuable it must be considered.

6 Stop crying

Forty years ago, when I was a child, there was a very famous character in a commercial, called "Calimero": he was a black chick, always crying because the world around him was unfair, and nobody was helping him. But he didn't do anything to change that situation: he was only crying. We children all loved him. Nowadays in professional literature in Italy the expression "the Calimero syndrome" is well established in order to point out the particular attitude of using up our energy for crying instead of acting a change.

We have learnt to fight against this syndrome beginning from the crucial question of money. While in the past we used to grumble on funds cuts, reducing services and putting up with the impoverishment, now in many cases **we begin to be able to react, leaving our desk, tripping along and looking for new money sources**. We have begun to sell our services to the users and to the city, and in some cases we have achieved a double income: first, we earn money to invest in services, secondly, **we feed our credibility** with services of quality we are obliged to manage at the highest level, because people pay to have them (I'm especially thinking of business information services, managed by some libraries in the most developed industrial districts in the North of Italy).

At the moment we need to make a cultural jump, maybe a somersault, never made before: **we must change the rules for our professional career**. We have to stop filling our CVs with a long list of articles, with the information of how many

years we have worked in the library, how many records we have inserted in our OPAC, or how many academic titles we have obtained.

In the future we must be ready to write in our CVs how much wealth we are able to catch for our library. But at the moment we are not yet ready for that. Calimero is still our hero.

7 Creativity as a strategic tool for success

As I said before, Italians consider themselves a people rich of creativity. You can smell the tradition of art and fashion in every corner of the country: that's what we strongly believe, without investigating whether it's true or not.

Well, creativity is quite a hot subject for librarians, because they are called every day to get over many obstacles, to solve problems and choose new ways for tackling them. In 1999 a new library initiative started: the "Bibliocreatività" (i.e. Library creativity), a national project with a web site and some room on the professional magazine "Biblioteche oggi" (i.e. Libraries today), one of the most important professional tools for Italian librarians. The project was conceived as a virtual space where all the librarians are to show their products and service solutions, as a mall full of winning stories, all with the invisible advantage of creativity.

#8 Libraries out of the libraries

Since 1995, all the experiences of library outreach have joined in a national movement called "le biblioteche fuori di sé" (libraries out of the walls, literally out of themselves). This expression is not casual at all: in Italian it has a double meaning of "external" and "out of mind, foolish". Choosing this definition, the librarians involved in these activities clearly showed to be conscious of **working against the rules of the professional tradition**, centred on books, because they were looking for another focus: the new user. I want to save you all the controversies inside the professional community, between those librarians engaged with enlarging social use of the library and the other librarians who charged them with having lost the importance of collection. How many books did you loose on the beach last week? – they used to ask them. In a country where only 10 per cent of

people have ever crossed the library threshold, you can imagine how important it may be to lose a few books on the beach.

9 The user as the sun at the centre of the library universe, even if it burns

The Copernican revolution which put the user at the centre of the library universe, instead of the collection, is not completely settled in Italy. While the number of customer satisfaction inquiries is significantly growing, we have to confess **not to be able yet to deal with users appraisals in a correct way**. I want to remember here an article on the value of Italian libraries which came out about three years ago in an important national magazine published by a Consumers Movement. The inquiry showed a low level of satisfaction: users said clearly that shades were more than lights. Many librarians felt involved in discussions on this inquiry, but not in order to learn a useful lesson to improve the quality of the service, but to blame the Consumers Association for not comprehending the complexity of the library service, which cannot be examined with questions so simple and poor as those used in that inquiry. Briefly, instead of listening to users (even through simple questions) and learning something useful, many librarians thought they were meeting silly and unqualified enemies. A rich opportunity lost.

#10 When acting in a marketing program, turn the brain on

A marketing action is not an extempore attempt to listen to users as a makeshift for a scientific research in customer satisfaction or for a strategic study on new library products and services. Marketing the library is not only advertising or promoting. We understood from the beginning **the complexity of marketing strategies**, thanks to important studies, essays and contributions made by some Italian scholars, first of all professor Giovanni Solimine and professor Giovanni Di Domenico. To them we must give the credit for adapting the language and the logic of marketing from the profit world into the libraries world, without any triteness. Above all they have been able to innervate marketing topics into library science,

enriching our professional tools with **new native competences**, not with competences borrowed by other disciplines.

The development of studies on marketing libraries is now driving librarians to **re-write the strategic relationship among user education, promotion, communication and building reputation for libraries**.

New scenarios are just now outlined for new research and above all for broader applications. We are at the beginning of the road, and the road home is very long. But our travelling companions can give us a hand: they are the users, our best allies.