

# **TURNING 'COLD SELLERS' INTO 'MUST HAVES': MARKETING UNSOUGHT LIBRARY PRODUCTS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

According to Marketing theory, unsought products are those that consumers do not know about, do not ever consider buying or have negative attitudes towards. Goods and services such as health insurance for young people, pre-paid funerals and encyclopaedias require significant, ongoing marketing efforts if they are to be successful. (Pride 2007 p.200). This paper argues that many goods and services in academic libraries fall into the category of unsought products.

Subscription databases of journal articles and reports are among our unsought products. Their relative inaccessibility compared with public search engines, the complexity of use, and the sheer number of choices discourages many students and leads them to prefer competing information sources. The meaningless names of many databases have no brand recognition, personality or equity likely to entice a browsing student to explore them further, and the search techniques needed to uncover the wealth of information within are often beyond their skill level and motivation.

Many librarians are familiar with the model of the marketing mix: the 4 Ps – Product, Price, Place and Promotion. In recent years we have made considerable adjustments to two of these elements, place and promotion, in attempting to reach our clients. There has been, for example, a concerted effort to take advantage of emerging technologies to engage the current generation of students. This paper focuses on the product itself.

Most of our first year students have survived 12 years of education without using EBSCO. Why start now? What marketing strategies can librarians employ to turn “cold sellers” into “must haves”?

# **TURNING 'COLD SELLERS' INTO 'MUST HAVES': MARKETING UNSOUGHT LIBRARY PRODUCTS**

## **Introduction**

Over the last eleven years, while I have worked as both a business liaison librarian and a sessional tutor in Marketing, I have been conscious of the contrast between the theory I teach the Marketing students and practices being carried out in the library.

Librarians have become acutely conscious of the information seeking and communication styles of the current generation of students and have gone to great lengths to employ new technologies to address two elements in the marketing mix – place (distribution) and promotion. The first of the ‘4Ps’ – Product, has also come under scrutiny. Insights from usability research have led to improvements in library home

pages, and companies such as EBSCOhost have recently made significant improvements to their search interfaces. Portals such as VuFind or AquaBrowser show great promise as a way of reducing problems with using our products and, consequently, the final 'P' of the marketing mix – Price. Consumer behaviour in libraries suggests patrons are not willing to pay the price, in terms of time and effort, of using current systems.

This paper considers library products in the light of theory presented in marketing courses and outlined in most introductory textbooks.

Products – the term includes both goods and services - are generally allocated to one of several classifications. The focus here is on those assigned to the category of 'unsought products'.

### **Unwanted products**

Introductory Marketing textbooks usually contain a definition of 'unsought products' that goes something like this: unsought products are those that consumers have never heard of, do not feel the need for or have tried and rejected. It is generally estimated that new products fail at a rate of around 80%. The reason is usually a lack of understanding of customer needs (Harrison 2008). Viewers of 'The Gruen Transfer' on ABC1 will have seen professional advertising teams taking up the challenge of devising campaigns for unlikely products such as whale meat steaks for the Australian barbecue market (ABC1 May 28, 2008, 9 pm) and global warming (July 16, 2008). The segment uses humour to illustrate the point that unsought products require an enormous marketing effort. This is the position we are in when promoting some of our library products.

The unsought products at the centre of the present discussion are the aggregated databases of journal articles available at all libraries and regarded as a core resource by librarians in academic institutions. Whenever we demonstrate three or four of these to a large group of students in their second or third week of university study we are doing the equivalent of a sales representative making a cold call – attempting to sell a product to someone who has never considered it before.

### **Cold selling**

Anecdotal estimates of successful cold calling range between 1% and 10%. Why do we expect to have better luck? Our 'prospects' have successfully completed 12 or 13 years of education without developing sophisticated searching techniques or using anything other than a search engine. Why should they accept the unwelcome message that they need to change their approach and learn to negotiate their way through a long and complex set of oddly named databases with different interfaces and conventions?

Marketing scholarly information resources is a process, not a one-off event. It might be more successful to take a cross-selling approach, starting with some of the features of a well-known product such as Google then moving to EBSCO or GALE. With Google we can share common experiences and build a bridge to the databases whose benefits and attributes are so readily communicated. We have to motivate students to want to 'buy'.

Often we are attempting to provide solutions to customers who are not aware they have a problem.

Supporting data for this position can be found in two research reports from OCLC.

### **OCLC surveys**

‘The 2003 OCLC environmental scan: pattern recognition’ indicates that library users value ‘self-service, satisfaction and seamlessness’ and that ease of use, convenience and availability are more important than information quality or trustworthiness. (OCLC 2005 p.vii).

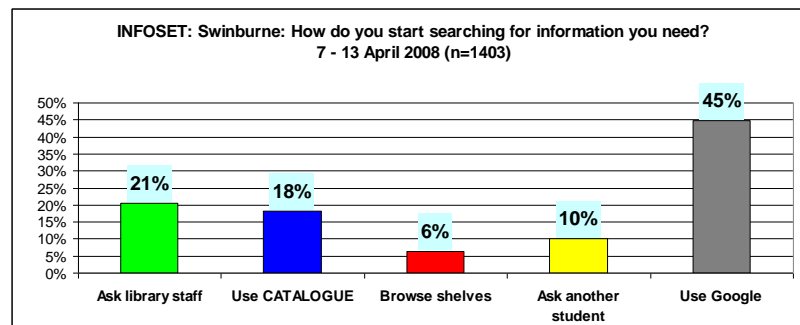
‘Perceptions of libraries and information resources’ surveyed 3,300 information consumers from United States, Australia, Canada, United Kingdom, Singapore and India, gathering over 20,000 open ended responses (OCLC 2005 p.ix). Respondents, aged 14 – 65 years, were users of academic, public, special and school libraries. Responses were remarkably similar across the six countries. When asked “what is the first thing you think of when you think of a library” most participants answered ‘books’ (OCLC 2005 Appendix B p.807). This image of the library is so strong that it overwhelms our attempts to reposition ourselves as cutting edge providers of electronic sources of information.

It was found that 84% of all information searches begin with a search engine and only 1% with a library website. This figure rose to 2% if the respondent was a tertiary student (Williams 2006). Question 505 asked how familiar respondents were with a variety of information sources. Only 8% said they were very familiar with online databases and 26% had never heard of them. The picture is not quite so bleak for college students - 50% were familiar with online library resources (OCLC 2005 Appendix A p8). Eighty nine per cent of college students across all regions begin electronic information searches with a search engine. Two percent begin with a library website (OCLC 2005 part 1 p.17) and 2% with an online database. The search engine used most recently by 62% was Google. The Australian figure was 64%. When asked how they learn about new information resources 61% said they found out from a friend while 8% said they asked a librarian (2005 part 1 p.19). Thankfully the figures were much better among college students. Thirty-three percent asked a librarian and 36% used the library website. Nevertheless, when looking for an electronic source of information fewer than 15% consult a librarian. Sixty-one per cent rely on friends. (OCLC 2005).

People are confident they can self serve. Respondents believe the quality of information from search engines is as high or even higher than that from a librarian-mediated search (OCLC 2005 part 6 p.5). When asked how they judge the trustworthiness of information, 86% of respondents felt they could rely on their own commonsense or personal judgement to decide (OCLC 2005 part 6 p5). If they had any doubts they checked another website to verify the information. The ramifications are clear. One of our major selling points when promoting the aggregated databases is that they contain scholarly, peer-reviewed journal articles. Apparently customers are unimpressed by this.

The OCLC data are three years old now but at Swinburne we have been surveying students at the five Melbourne campuses regularly about similar issues for some time. In

April 2008 we asked ‘How do you start searching for information you need?’ There were over 1,400 responses and the results showed a clear preference for Google with 45% of respondents choosing this option.



Similar figures have been recorded every year since 2003. Swinburne’s mix of higher education and TAFE students, and inner and outer suburban campuses probably make it fairly representative of student populations around Australia.

Libraries score poorly on convenience and ease of use: both vitally important to users. (Wisniewski 2007). Yet we think we are covering the convenience angle, with extended opening hours, all night access to labs and flexible communications channels. Unwieldy products are the sticking point. Many databases are complicated to locate and use. Euromonitor, for example contains wonderfully useful data but has a number of preliminary screens to negotiate before it is possible to even begin searching for it. Then the searching itself is not easy as it involves a complex hierarchical system of menus and categories and some strange terminology such as ‘Geographies’. As Williams (2006) states ‘our patrons don’t share our threshold for “simple” and “easy to use”.’

Cockrell and Anderson (2002, cited in Smith and Reynolds, 2007) report on a usability study that shows participants typically do not use descriptions, explanations, search hints or help screens provided in library databases. Instead they use their web searching techniques which are not always appropriate. This poor search strategy means they frequently do not find anything, so they quickly give up. There is a clash with students’ expressed preference for unmediated, seamless access and library databases that cannot be used to their best advantage without expert assistance. After one or two dispiriting attempts to make sense of a source such as Factiva, students return to the familiar – usually a search engine.

The situation is further complicated by the number and seemingly counter-intuitive arrangement of the databases. For example users tend to go to publishers’ home pages rather than library sites when seeking a particular journal title and may pay for access to a title they could have viewed via their library’s subscription.

Customers only take in a certain amount of information and the proliferation of library products and libraries’ efforts to promote them all may be inhibiting our efforts to market our electronic resources in particular (Keller 1998).

## Product Adoption Process

A number of marketing theories and models have relevance to this discussion. The product adoption process that consumers move through is one. What factors impact on the likelihood and rapidity of a product's being adopted by the target audience?

Some characteristics affecting the diffusion of new products have been identified as:

**Relative advantage** – if a product is clearly superior to its competitors it will be adopted rapidly and its antecedents abandoned. Fax machines were taken up very quickly as they were an obvious improvement on any previous way of transmitting hard copy across a distance. The same advantage cannot be claimed for our databases of journal articles over other online sources of information. Their superiority is not immediately obvious to students and it can be difficult to convince them that it is so.

**Product complexity** - If a product is complicated to use, its adoption is slowed. Even after having been told by their lecturers that the databases are more appropriate for academic research, students continue to prefer Google because of its ease of use.

**Compatibility** – Consumers are more likely to adopt products that conform to their existing expectations and values. This is the reason why library web pages are being designed to appeal to a Web 2.0 savvy, Generation Y customer. But all that hard work making the library pages look appealing could be wasted when the student clicks through to a commercial product and encounters the unfriendly navigation there. Libraries are serving as distribution channels for database vendors and would be able to do this more effectively with more biddable products. Seth Godin (2007) talks about the mismatch of using new technologies to market old products. For Godin this results in a 'meatball sundae' which is 'messy, disgusting, ineffective.' He points out that companies that have used Web 2.0 marketing techniques successfully have been promoting fresh new products not using 'cool new tools' to prop up existing structures and products (Godin 2007 p.xii). Before we place VuFind or similar software over the top of our search interface let's rationalise and redesign the product portfolio underneath.

**Visibility** - How evident are the desirable features of our product? Product adoption is influenced by the communicability of its benefits. Some databases do this much better than others. Students requiring information about an Australian industry can readily see the benefits of IBIS but will struggle to locate equally good or even more helpful information from Euromonitor because its structure does not lend itself to intuitive searching.

## Boston Consulting Group Matrix

Another model that libraries could use to advantage is the Boston Consulting Group (BCG) Matrix. This allows a company to classify its products into four types - stars, cash cows, dogs and question marks - to help it determine how resources are best allocated and what marketing strategy should be pursued. (Boston Consulting Group 1973). Use of this model could help a library avoid the scattergun approach of spreading its financial and human resources across 300 or more databases. What are examples of our Stars – those



products that already dominate and have further growth potential? EBSCO is the obvious one. What are our Cash Cows – products with a large share of the market but unlikely to grow much more? Are our promotional efforts commensurate with their importance? Most basic library services fall into this category. What are our question marks, those products needing a big investment in time or money to get them right? Perhaps federated search engines such as SuperSearch which has great potential but is not yet user friendly is one of these. Finally there are the ‘dogs’, products with a subordinate share of the market and low prospects for growth. Sometimes we need to make the tough decision to euthanise these ‘dogs’. Into this category I would put all the index/abstract-only databases unless there is a very real possibility that they will provide full text soon. These products do not meet our target market’s needs. They clutter up library web pages and get in the way. Let us focus on those products that do meet customers’ needs. Make them more prominent and if there are irrelevant extra products that have been bundled as part of the price package, find a way to hide them. Let’s also hide or replace redundant fields and codes in the drop down menus of many databases. Data included for North American users can be confusing for Australians. Other companies operating in international markets adapt their products accordingly. Why cannot US-based database developers do likewise?

### **Generic Marketing Strategies**

This is an appropriate time to discuss one of the models of Michael Porter, a leading contributor to the literature on marketing strategy. Porter believes companies must choose one of three generic strategies - focus, differentiation or cost leadership - to achieve sustainable competitive advantage. If we focus on marketing our high performing products and remove the ‘dogs’ our students are far more likely to use and value the library. Alternatively we could choose a differentiation strategy. What makes us different from Google for instance? Among other things we provide peer-reviewed, trustworthy information in an organised fashion and with expert guidance available if wanted. We could even consider Porter’s third strategy – cost leadership. If we shed some of our least used products, the price students pay in terms of time, convenience, ease of use, navigability and comprehension will be greatly lowered. Failure to follow one or other of these strategies can result in what Porter calls being ‘stuck in the middle’ without any competitive advantage. As the OCLC surveys indicate, many information seekers do not see any advantage in referring to a librarian rather than a search engine. “Respondents indicated that search engines deliver better quality and quantity of information than librarian-assisted searching – and at greater speed’ (Tennant 2006).

### **Branding**

Libraries are making a concerted effort to use branding strategies to reposition and reinvigorate their image but have to contend with entrenched stereotyped thinking about what libraries are for. The authors of the OCLC ‘Perceptions’ report conclude that the word ‘library’ is perceived in a strikingly similar way across all six countries, that ‘library’ is in fact a global brand, one with a nostalgic, book-based position in consumers’ minds. It is a physical place rather than a network of resources. Tennant

(2006), quoting the report, notes that 'books' is the library brand. There is no runner-up.'

Godsell (2007) reports on a British study investigating the increasing number of consumers who do not trust brands. On average, 57% of people trust companies generally, but 84% trust Google. They base their opinion on the personal experiences of themselves and their friends. The company trusted by the greatest number of British people is the pharmaceutical company Boots. This was attributed to its longevity, familiarity and product offering. On these criteria libraries should score well. Libraries have been around a long time and people are very familiar with them. But it is certain of our products including our electronic resources that are the problem. People perceive that Google makes their lives easier. We librarians must often seem to be complicating things.

### **Co-branding**

Product proliferation dilutes the impact of branding. Co-branding a database so that the logos of the database vendor and the subscribing institution are both apparent is already available and worth doing. Students will relate more readily to a product that incorporates the name of the university or college they attend. At least they will recognise it. The confusion caused by the siloed approach where interfaces from vendors all look different and the purchasing organisation's branding disappears could be ameliorated, and the integrity of the library's internet design less compromised (Tennant 2000). New products associated with strong brand names have a much higher chance of succeeding than weak or unknown brands.

### **Branding – Choosing the right name**

What do marketing experts tell us about what makes a good brand name? A good name choice is one that 'requires no introduction, no explanation and very little advertising to give it clout' ([brandidentityguru.com/brand-name.htm](http://brandidentityguru.com/brand-name.htm), Brand Identity Guru 2008).

A good brand name is easy to remember, spell and pronounce. Ideally it suggests the benefits associated with the product, e.g. PicturePerfect televisions, LifeLong luggage, Power Stroke tennis rackets or Lean Cuisine low kilojoule meals. These descriptive names are persuasive semantically but particularly so if they are salient to the product category and suggest something about the type of person who might use the brand. (Keller 1998). Some brand names used in libraries are good but others are meaningless or obscure – they do not tell us anything about the product and where it is positioned. Nor do they support a brand strategy or even arouse the curiosity of a potential user. The name Elsevier Science Direct does not reflect the content or indicate when it might be the appropriate source for an information need. Why would a Tourism student turn to Wiley InterScience or Expanded Academic ASAP? They don't sound like Tourism resources. Neither does Australian Public Affairs Full Text. How many young people would even use a term like 'public affairs'?

Our naming traditions do not communicate the benefits of using aggregated databases. Instead we stress the size, e.g. ProQuest 5000. We annotate our subject guides with descriptions of the range of topics and number of articles contained in a database. Students are not persuaded by this. They know the web is huge and telling them that there are hundreds of thousands of journal articles to sift through, may actually be a

disincentive to search a database. The de-motivating effect of too much choice has been well documented (Schwartz 2004).

Brand equity is huge in good brand names. It is difficult to think of a single library-related brand that has any. Most have no brand recognition, no personality and few acquire brand loyalty. We should be researching our names with the target market with a view to finding some which convey the promise that the solution to an information problem can be found there (<http://www.brandidentityguru.com/brand-name.htm>).

#### **Brand loyalty and switching behaviour**

Will we ever hear anyone talking about “EBSCOing” rather than “Googling” when they need information? Google is the ‘category killer’ of information provision. Brand awareness is almost universal and it is positioned in customers’ minds as the quick and easy answer to an information need. How do we persuade users to switch to a library database? This partly depends on the strength of their brand attachment. Consumers can be divided into five groups:

**Brand Loyals** (loyal to our brand)

**Other Brand Loyals** (loyal to a brand other than us)

**Favourable Brand Switchers** (they use our brand but others as well)

**Other Brand Switchers** (mainly loyal to another brand but might be persuaded to try ours too)

**New category users** (non-users of the category either because they are unaware of its existence or are unimpressed by our offering) (Rossiter and Bellman 2005 p.83).

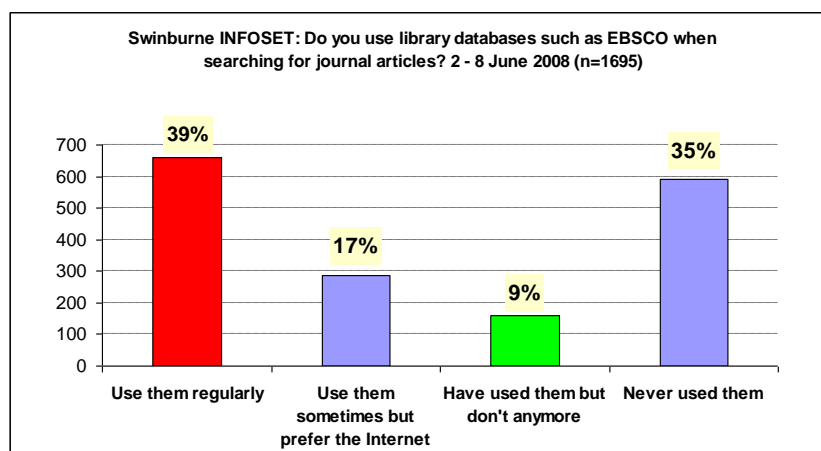
Putting aside any obligations to ensure all students are given instruction in using the databases, and looking at these groups from a purely marketing perspective, the best strategy would be to concentrate on those most likely to switch. We need to work hard with the ‘favourable brand switchers’ so that they gradually become ‘brand loyals’ too. To do this we need to have products that appeal on the criteria valued by the target market, i.e. quick and easy access to quality information that suits a particular need, not only ‘just in time’ but also ‘just for me’ (Schmidt 2006). If we can identify these ‘favourable brand switchers’ and target our strategies towards them we are likely to have more success than launching an undifferentiated campaign of the ‘database of the month’ variety. The ‘new-to-category’ users require a massive effort as everyone who has been involved in a large scale information literacy program for first year students knows. We also need to nurture and reward our loyal customers so that they stay with us and hopefully generate positive word of mouth publicity.

Studies in retailing indicate that brand switching occurs during a promotional campaign but does not endure once the promotion is over (Deighton 1994). This is evident when we observe our second year students’ approach to searching for information. They have often forgotten everything they learnt in their first year information literacy sessions: clearly they have not been practicing the skills regularly as was intended. This is probably because they are ‘Other Brand Loyals’ (OBLs) – loyal to Google.

Persuading OBLs to switch is notoriously difficult. It can be induced by making a product more easily available, by making improvements that will appeal to consumers

or by emphasising the lack of risk. Google is so widely available that we cannot outdo it on that count. We have had some success concentrating on the risk factor, telling students that their assignments will be more acceptable to academic staff than those researched via Google. Improving the product is about all that is left to us now.

EBSCOhost has been promoted strenuously at Swinburne and is the most heavily used database. To test the degree of loyalty we recently (June 2008) asked almost 1,700 students: 'Do you use library databases such as EBSCO when searching for journal articles?' The graph indicates that 39% of respondents are effectively 'Brand Loyals', 17% are 'Other Brand Switchers' and 35% are 'New-to-Category'. Nine percent have given up.



What marketing strategies are appropriate in this situation? The four degrees of loyalty require different approaches. The 17% 'Other Brand Switchers' are a much better target for our efforts than the 9% who have become disenchanted. OBLs are responsive to campaigns focusing on specific benefits: they have to be given a good reason to try our brand. The 35% 'new-to-category' students need a different approach as there may be a technical deficit to overcome as well.

Tsao and Chen (2005) found that switching is affected by market structure and lack of differentiation between competing brands. If library users cannot perceive the differences between say, GALE and EBSCO they may not choose either, but stay with what they already know.

Studies on switching show there is a large 'inertia segment'. Wieringa (2007) found that around 70% of people do not change service providers because they will not pay the switching cost in time or effort to do so. Extreme dissatisfaction has to occur before they switch (Srnivasan 1996). But students who use search engines are not dissatisfied. They are very satisfied so persuading them to switch may be impossible. It is better to encourage them to include library-sponsored databases in their set of information resource options.

## Library databases as 'must have' products

To turn unwanted library products into 'must haves' we have to remove the dissonance between consumers' desire for seamless self service and the complexity of the databases by pressuring developers to simplify and streamline. We need databases which allow greater customisation, e.g. the ability to easily isolate Australian data and the capacity to hide inappropriate fields like US ticker or DUNS numbers.

Williams (2006) suggests links on vendor sites to subscribing libraries and details of library access in all vendor advertising. It is common practice for commercial firms to have links to distributors on their sites. If vendors provide us with promotional material such as bookmarks to distribute it is not sufficient to include the web address of the vendor, it needs to have our address as well. Advertising to the end user is ineffective if it is not clear that access is via your library which has already paid a subscription on your behalf.

A fundamental tenet of promotion theory is the notion that we should promote product benefits not features, e.g. higher grades gained, time saved, reliable information, not database size and heterogeneity.

Libraries can promote on the basis of a unique selling proposition (USP). A USP promises 'buy this product and you will get this benefit'. (Belch and Belch 2006 p255). What is an appropriate USP for electronic journal articles? The OCLC surveys suggest that mediated searching is not appealing to users. High quality, peer reviewed articles? Perhaps, but they will need to be easy to locate and many students are put off by the length and style. Maybe the recency of our offering has potential. Gaining access to articles the same day they are published on the other side of the world might be valued by a student who has waited 3 months for a textbook to arrive from North America. Personalised customer service, marketing to a 'category of one' is another USP possibility and not as labour intensive as may be feared.

The passive reference desk model where librarians wait to be approached is outmoded. They need to be visible and proactive. Reference services should include 'roving' around the library and other locations on campus, wherever the customers are.

We should use personal selling techniques not undifferentiated mass advertising. We need to collaborate with users and involve them in marketing. Using a 'person like me' in campaigns as is done in the 'puffin muffin' advertisements for iSelect health insurance products targeted at young people, is a good strategy. Employing students to be peer advocates may break down barriers and help new students feel comfortable in the environment. Smith and Reynolds (2007 p.150) found many students will seek out student workers before they ask a professional librarian.

When over half of the OCLC respondents indicated that the internet 'perfectly fitted their lifestyle' they meant it was available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, was free, and they could do it themselves (OCLC 2005). The first two of these things also applies to the databases but the third is the stumbling block.

The benefits of disaggregating the databases was a major finding of the 2003 OCLC scan. Bundling of products is not adding value but causing clutter. 'Most consumers

don't want the combinations of stuff marketers want to sell them; they'd rather put together what they want the way they want it' (Crain 2001).

Marketing has to be a major, ongoing process, targeted and concentrated on value not volume. We need to buy fewer products and focus on key resources. Less is more in terms of consumer convenience. Otherwise information seekers will hold on to the view that libraries are difficult to use and 'online searching is what you do instead of using the library' (Williams 2006). We should shed some of our electronic databases so that students are not overwhelmed by choice. And we need these databases to meet our students' expectations for quick and easy, unmediated searching.

Another truism of marketing theory is that the four elements of the marketing mix: product, place, price and promotion have to be in harmony: they have to complement each other. Such integration is essential to the effective use of marketing concepts in libraries. Marketing is about getting the right product to the right person at the right price. The price, in terms of time and effort, of numerous existing library products is too high for many potential customers.

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