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The business of libraries

My family comes from a long line of 'Pennsylvania Dutch' — not Dutch at all, but actually German — a simple corruption of the German word for German Deustch. In any case, the breed is known for their frugality, and love of a dollar. This background (along with eight years spent in private enterprise) has lead me on a constant search for additional ways to fund the library service I manage — including a variety of profit making activities.

Libraries, especially public libraries (including academic libraries) are in a uniquely poor position to actually raise large amounts of independent income.

This is a result of a number of factors including the location of our service points, the layout of those service points, and at the root of it all, our basic ethos and aim.

Most libraries are not located in the best commercial location. Much as we may regret this, it means that a well-located academic or school library will be found in the centre of a campus, a special library near its internal customers, and a public library in a location which will minimise the cost of establishment.

The layout of our best service points aims to give things away as quickly, easily and efficiently as possible. Books, serials, workstations — whatever format information comes in it is offered as expeditiously as possible. Sales are almost always secondary.

In spite of these caveats, we do have some opportunities to increase our income-raising opportunities. Libraries have a particularly good profile in the community. Much as we collectively bemoan media stereotypes of our profession as grey-haired, long-skirted spinsters, we are generally perceived as providing a community service of great value.

Within the public library sphere, it is

not unusual to have more than eighty per cent of the community (including many non-users) pleased to see tax dollars spent on the local library. When a section of the academic community rises up to protest cuts in serials or monograph expenditure they are really talking about defending the library budget.

The challenge is to take this philosophical support and turn it into a practical reality. This can be done in a number of ways. The University of Melbourne Library has funded a large part of their 'Better Baillieu Project' with the generous support of the Ian Potter Foundation, the William Buckland Foundation and others. RMIT Libraries have accessed a partnership program with Hewlett Packard to support a sophisticated networked printing operation. The State Libraries of Victoria and New South Wales have funded major projects with the assistance of sponsors.

None of these have supported the core business of the library to a huge extent. All have added value to the library experience of their users, and allowed the library to provide services not otherwise possible. The common theme to all of these ventures is that they all add value to the existing infrastructure. They have all been successful, not just because they bring income into the library, but because they encourage the library to work in partnership with others, and allow 'outsiders' an opportunity to directly support a service in which they believe.

Can significant amounts of income be raised by a library through 'business' ventures? Probably not. On the other hand, I do believe that libraries can enrich the services which they offer to their constituency, and increase the level of support which they receive through a sensitive and well aimed series of programs to both raise funds and to sell service and products which are appropriate and build on the strengths of the organisation. ■