



# OPINION

Each month, OPINION features contributions from invited guest writers. The opinions expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect those of the Australian Library and Information Association.

OPINION

## Library DNA revealed

*What are the basic building blocks of libraries? In the technology torrent that defines the 'Digital New Age', where the internet presents as marketplace rather than reliable information source, Ian McCallum says libraries are as they've always been: safe places for people, stories and ideas. Libraries are Durable, Necessary and Adaptable – that's the real DNA of libraries.*

While we may not all share the same understanding of the term 'library' – according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* first used in English by Chaucer c1374 – today's library is much more than the *OED*'s definition of "A place set apart to contain books for reading, study, or reference". The book has spawned the audio book and the large print book and lately the ebook, and the journal has morphed into the database. Libraries continue to carefully select printed materials and create and select digital items, delivering them through an increasing number of in-person and electronic channels.

2012 is the National Year of Reading. We need it, badly. In 2006 just over half of Australians aged 15-74 years had adequate or better prose and document literacy skills. These are the skills needed to perform such tasks as reading the label on a food container, printing a boarding pass, navigating through unfamiliar cities, checking email, helping kids with homework, applying for a job and filling out a government form. Almost half of us have difficulties with what the other half takes for granted. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, between 1996 and 2006 the proportion of the total population with adequate or better prose literacy rose slightly from 52.5% to 53.6%, but in the 15-24 age group, the smart phone cohort, the numbers fell from 59.1% to 55.4%, a drop of more than 6%.

What chance do we have? We struggle to read and we are bombarded with messages we didn't ask for. Recent analyses reveal that, "Today an average Australian internet user receives more than 1000 display ads each month, highlighting the significance of digital advertising in the broader media landscape..." A thousand ads a month! Facebook was the top display ad publisher in January 2012 with a 23% market share. And Facebook is 'free', 'paid for' by those ads we try in vain to ignore. Add the now openly commercial Twitter, the TV, the radio, the papers and outdoor advertising. There's no escape in this the best of all possible worlds. Who to believe?

Books and other library materials tell stories, provide explanations and help us understand our

place in the world. Libraries can be in buildings or in cyberspace, and people know they can be trusted. What other sources of organised and reliable information are there in our society? Who doesn't have an axe to grind: government, media, business?

Despite the challenges of promoting library services, at least half the population are regular customers, even if their grasp of the range of services is less than comprehensive. Nevertheless, the 2009/10 consolidated National and State Libraries Australasia figures show visits at more than 114 million, up nearly 3% on the previous year. That's approximately five visits per head per annum for our total population. Libraries are popular destinations.

Often perceived as 'book places' rather than storehouses for ideas or sources of stories that transport readers to different places and times, or as activity centres for beginning readers and their parents, libraries have nevertheless retained the public's trust. Customer satisfaction surveys consistently return approval ratings of 95% plus. Maintaining

this privileged position is more than sufficient reason for many libraries to review their approaches to customer service in today's consumer and network-oriented Digital New Age.

The result of such analysis (incidentally the main building block of evidence-based practice and knowledge management) is a reaffirmation of service delivery in the context of providing safe places for people and ideas. But this time there is an additional element – indeed a funding imperative: extending services to new customers in order to provide a greater return on resources invested.

One of the wonders of the Digital New Age is that easily shared inventory control systems, library-based digitisation projects, and consortium licensing arrangements reduce the incremental costs of growth. It no longer costs a thousand times more to reach a million customers than it does to reach a thousand. So roll on the coalescing of phones and all other types of computers, and bring on the National Broadband Network: libraries will continue to be safe places for people, stories and ideas. Durable, Necessary and Adaptable.

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"...LIBRARIES ARE AS THEY'VE ALWAYS BEEN: SAFE PLACES FOR PEOPLE, STORIES AND IDEAS. LIBRARIES ARE DURABLE, NECESSARY AND ADAPTABLE."