

START A REVOLUTION

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START A REVO LUTION

STOP ACTING LIKE A LIBRARY

BEN BIZZLE

with Maria Flora

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editions

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*Dedicated to Phyllis Burkett
without whom none of this would ever have happened*

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FOREWORD

IT'S BEEN SAID that when Walt Disney was casting for the first *Mickey Mouse Club* TV show he didn't want professionals. He advised the staff not to go to talent agents to find Mouseketeers, "Go to a school and watch what happens to you. You'll notice that you're watching one kid. Not any of the other kids, but sooner or later your gaze will always go back to this one kid. That kid has star quality."

Ben Bizzle is that kid.

I met Ben in 2012 when my dear friend and librarian extraordinaire, Janie Hermann of Princeton Public Library, and I were moderating a marketing track at the "Computers in Libraries" conference. After one of the sessions he showed us the billboards his library had created and we immediately wanted him to present for our track. Now mind you, it took us months to come up with that program. We were certain we had lined up the best marketing ideas and speakers in the library field and yet it took us all of five minutes listening to Ben to add him to the venue.

That's the impact Ben has on people.

He's smart, insightful, and funny. The excitement and energy he puts into his projects are contagious. Like me, he came to the library field as an outsider with neither library experience nor an MLS, and fell in love with the people, purpose, and possibilities that libraries can offer their communities. He is a brazen storyteller who will make you laugh, cry, and cringe. He sees problems as puzzles that need to be solved and is always generous whether he is sharing the credit or figuring out a way to share his ideas with others.

That's Ben.

This is an important book, not just for marketers, but for anyone who wonders how successful libraries do it. This is the real story—not the one we write up for awards or tell once everything is said and done. No, this tells it like it is, with all the bumps and bruises that successful libraries encounter on their path of progress. It tells the story of how courage and

collaboration contribute to success; the importance of leaders who let others lead; and what happens when libraries listen to their communities. He'll tell you how to do everything his library did, but you'll have to pay attention to the bigger story if you really want to find success.

Ben likes to say he's just a tech guy who knows a little about people. I say he's the guy who wrote the book that just might start a revolution.

NANCY DOWD

Coauthor of *Bite-Sized Marketing:
Realistic Solutions for Overworked Librarians*
The 'M' Word Blog

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

True friends stab you in the front.

—OSCAR WILDE

THESE ARE THE people who inspire me, motivate me, challenge me, and keep me honest. I'm not always an easy person to deal with, and these people love me anyway.

I need to begin by thanking Maria Flora for helping me organize all the jumbled thoughts in my head and teaching me how to “write my voice.” I could have never written this book without you. While there, I want to thank John Flora for loaning me his wife to work on this project. Also, thank you to Carson Block, Ned Potter, and Josh Tate for your contributions to this work. And thank you to Nancy Dowd for writing a foreword that makes me sound better than I could ever hope to be.

Thank you to Morgan Sallee for supporting and tolerating me during this process. You are a beautiful soul and I'll always love you. Thanks to my mom, Kathy Ray, for letting me vent my frustrations to her, and then offering her compassionate words of wisdom, “Ben, quit whining and just finish the damn book.” I finally finished it, mom. And a very special thank you to Joe Box, my best friend and partner in crime throughout this journey. You give me the courage to do things I probably shouldn't do.

Thank you to Brandi Hodges, Valerie Carroll, Melloney Dunlap, Micah Brightwell, Nina Darley, Wade Brightwell, and Sarah Stuart. You folks are the creative team. I'm just the guy with the big mouth. Thank you to all of my coworkers at Craighead County Jonesboro Public Library. You are a family to me in a way you will never know. And you remind me that I'm still just the guy who hasn't fixed your printer yet. I wrote this book, but you did this work. This is your book, not mine.

Thank you to all the people in the library industry who have been friends and inspirations to me: Carolyn Ashcraft, David Lee King, Sarah Houghton, Emily Clasper, Patrick Sweeney, J. P. Porcaro, John Chrastka, Kathy Dempsey, Janie Hermann, Rebekkah Smith Aldrich, Sue Considine, Stacie Ledden, Stephen Abram, Jane Dysart, Kevin Smith, Jenny Levine, Nicolette

Sosulski, Nina McHale, and so many others I know I'm leaving off. I'd like to particularly thank Jeannie Allen for coming up with the idea of the "Library Dropbox." Thank you to the members of ALA Think Tank. I admire the passion, brilliance, and commitment you show every day, as you share ideas and give of yourselves to make our industry better.

Finally, I want to thank David Eckert for fostering an environment of creativity and providing us with the security to fail with confidence. You are a true leader.

PRELUDE

THE JONESBORO STORY



WRITE A BOOK?

It was about 11:15 on the morning of Wednesday, October 24, 2012. Mel-loney Dunlap, our graphic designer at Craighead County Jonesboro Public Library, and I had just finished our first national presentation at the Internet Librarian conference in Monterey, California. Our presentation, “Marketing on the Edge,” was about the technology and marketing strategies we had implemented at our library. We’d gotten quite a bit of attention over the previous few months for our “Meme Your Library” ad campaign, a series of humorous posters, postcards, and billboards we created using the popular Internet eCard meme as a template. But we’ll get to all of that later. Suffice it to say, the presentation went well. People really seemed to embrace the idea of using humor as an effective way for a library to engage the community.

As we were gathering our things, a few people came up to the stage to ask questions or comment on the presentation. Once everyone else had left to go to their next sessions, a woman approached and handed me her card, introducing herself as a representative for a publishing company. She asked if I’d ever considered writing a book about the things we’d just presented. Initially, I thought she was joking. I’d been a wreck two hours earlier, letting my nerves get the better of me at the prospect of presenting in front of a few hundred people. I knew the presentation had gone pretty well, but the idea that anyone would actually want to read a book about our library just seemed ridiculous. So, naturally, I told her I’d think about it.

IN THE BEGINNING

Let’s back up a bit. In March 2008, I saw an ad in a newspaper that the Craighead County Jonesboro Public Library was looking for a technology director. After seven years of managing technology in a hospital, where emergencies were literally life and death, working in a library sounded pretty refreshing. I submitted my resume and was called in for an interview.

I was met by David Eckert and Phyllis Burkett. David was the assistant library director and had just started in December 2007. He was an enthu-

siastic guy who laughed kind of loud and talked a lot. Phyllis had been the director of the library for twenty-eight years. She epitomized every stereotype I ever had about what a librarian looked like. Both were very personable, and our interview lasted for more than three hours. It had been more of a relaxed conversation than an actual interview, until, near the end, when Phyllis looked at me very seriously and asked, “Do you have what it takes to take this library to the next level?”

I didn’t have any idea what she was talking about. When I walked into that interview I didn’t even have a library card. I didn’t know what level the library was on or what the next level looked like. But I did know the answer to that interview question. I confidently assured her that I absolutely had what it took to take this library to the next level.

In May 2008 I became the director of technology at the Craighead County Jonesboro Public Library (CCJPL) in Arkansas. On my first day of work, I met Joe Box, the systems administrator who had just started in January. Upon our initial introduction, I felt like David and Phyllis had intentionally kept us from meeting before I accepted the position.

Joe was wearing a black T-shirt, baggy jeans, and combat boots. I was wearing a green and pink-striped Polo, khaki pants, and dress shoes. He had a full beard, a receding hairline with a long ponytail running down his back, big steel rings in his ears, and a pierced eyebrow. I was standing there, clean-shaven, multiple hair care products in my hair, and my sunglasses perched on top of my head. Joe was in his mid-twenties and looked like someone you’d warn your daughter about. I was in my mid-thirties and looked like someone’s middle-aged dad.

As I reached to shake his hand, all I could think was, “Oh God. He’s one of *those* guys.”

And as he stood and shook my hand, all he could think was, “Oh God. He’s one of *those* guys.”

Thus began a wonderful friendship. We came to appreciate each other’s intellect, technical savvy, and brutal sense of humor. It’s hard to call it work when you geek out on computers and crack jokes with your best friend every day. But they keep paying us for it, so we keep showing up.

IF YOU BUILD IT, THEY WILL COME

Our predecessors in the Information Technology (IT) Department had built the library’s technology infrastructure using a lot of open source

software. Things like e-mail, content filtering, user management, and connectivity required constant maintenance. Our first year at the library was spent rebuilding the infrastructure at all our branch libraries, installing a new mail server, and putting security measures in place to resolve issues with spam, viruses, and Internet content filtering.

In March 2009 David Eckert, our assistant director, and I went to the “Computers in Libraries” conference in Washington, DC. Until then, Joe and I had been working on technology upgrades that weren’t necessarily library-related. With neither of us having any background in libraries, we were still learning about the technologies specific to the industry. But “Computers in Libraries” would change all that. It was my first opportunity to hear how other professionals were integrating technologies into the library environment.

I specifically remember David Lee King’s session about website design. He was talking about the user experience and how important it was that we not only provide access to library resources, but also create a digital environment that is easy to navigate and aesthetically appealing. He definitely wasn’t talking about our website at CCJPL. It was neither easy to navigate, nor aesthetically appealing.

By 2009, our library’s website was already several years old. It consisted of page after page of links, text, and clip art, without much structure to any of it. Some of the links worked and most of the words were spelled correctly. As is the case in many libraries, our website was a little-used afterthought. It provided basic information about the library branches, had a calendar of events, and linked to several research databases. There was no other digital content and the only interactivity available was an e-mail address where patrons could e-mail the library.

After getting approval from the board, Joe and I formed a staff committee from the various departments in the library and began working with a local web development company on a new website. We decided we wanted to design the sight similar to the websites of online news outlets. The news media and libraries share the common challenge of providing significant amounts of information and making that information quickly and easily accessible to the general public.

Utilizing images and graphics to catch users’ attention, a menu structure that made accessing information throughout the site fast and intuitive, and a new content management system that made updating the site easy for staff, our focus was on simplicity of access. (See figure P.1.)



FIGURE P.1
CCJPL 2009 website redesign

We launched our new website on December 1, 2009. Shortly after launching the website, we signed a contract with OverDrive to provide e-books and audiobooks to our patrons. With the availability of e-books and audiobooks as its centerpiece, the new website was our first step in tearing down the walls of the library. We were breaking away from the perception of the library as just a building full of books. We were becoming a provider of digital information and entertainment and reaching into the homes of our patrons.

In 2010 we turned our attention to the mobile environment and began development of a mobile website for the library. We'd witnessed the explosion of smartphones and knew our next step in expanding the library's reach was to develop a mobile presence. Our process for creating the mobile site was very similar to the approach we used to develop our main website. We again formed a committee and started discussing what services we could provide in the mobile environment. Our focus was now on extending our digital reach beyond our patrons' homes and into their hands, wherever they might be.

OverDrive already had a mobile website and app available, so it was a natural choice for the platform. We also purchased Airpac, the mobile catalog available through our ILS vendor, Innovative Interfaces. We

worked to integrate as much device functionality as possible into the site, as well. The e-mail addresses, phone numbers, and addresses of our branches were all linked, so that with a single tap, patrons could e-mail, call, text, or get directions to our locations. We went with a simple layout, again attempting to create a clean and unintimidating user experience for our patrons. Our mobile site launched on August 11, 2010.

A couple of months later we looked into a service called Freegal Music, which provided downloadable MP3s that patrons could keep forever. While they didn't provide a mobile app for the service until 2012, we were still able to integrate a link to the Freegal site onto our mobile website, adding music to the collection of digital services we were providing on multiple platforms.

By the end of 2010, we had created a robust digital environment for our patrons. In just over a year, we'd gone from no significant digital presence at all to offering a wide range of library services on multiple platforms. In 2009 virtually no one was visiting the library's old website. Since launching the new site in December of that year, we've had over 1,100,000 visits to our website. Our mobile site has received over 125,000 visits.

The impact, however, wasn't immediate. It took time to make the public aware of our web presence and digital services. During its first year, our mobile website averaged 20 visits per day. Today, it averages 138. Mobile traffic now makes up over 30 percent of our website traffic. The growth patterns in usage of our e-books, audiobooks, and music have been similar. We delivered 4,618 e-books and audiobooks to patrons during our first contract year with OverDrive. In 2013, 41,834 titles were downloaded. Likewise, in our first year of offering music through Freegal, patrons downloaded 10,836 songs, compared to 38,052 in 2013.

I'd like to be able to say we foresaw all of this, that it was part of some long-term technology strategy, but that simply wasn't the case. In 2009 we had a bad website and wanted to create a better one, believing it would help us better serve our community. The growth rate of our digital library has exceeded even our loftiest expectations. In the process, it has become as integral to our success as any of our physical offerings. It is simultaneously an entity unto itself and a digital representation of who we are as an organization.

ADVERTISING WHEN ADVERTISING WASN'T COOL

The successes above aren't exclusively a result of the work we were doing technologically. During this process, we were also developing new and creative ways to increase public awareness of the changes taking place at the library.

Prior to 2009, the library had a very traditional approach to community awareness. Without any form of digital outreach, we relied on the promotional approaches still dominant in many libraries today. There was a long-standing relationship with the local newspaper, so stories were written about events at the library or new services we were providing. We also had a constant stack of fliers at the checkout desks, as well as bookmarks, lots of bookmarks. Our "giveaways" were the expected: bags, notepads, and magnets. The problem with these approaches isn't that they're not good. It's that, by and large, they're reaching an audience that already uses the library.

That being said, Library Director Phyllis Burkett, who was responsible for all marketing decisions, had begun to see the value of promoting the library in new ways during the economic recession. Taking advantage of a weak advertising market and understanding the role the library could play in helping our community recover, she hired public relations and graphic design interns from the local college to create "Save Money @ Your Library" promotional materials, including four billboards. This campaign, coupled with an increase in services related to job searching, computer training, and resume review, gave the library the opportunity to assist thousands of patrons during this challenging time. She also saw an opportunity to begin promoting the library at the local movie theater, signing an annual contract for a thirty-second ad that would run on all fifteen screens before every movie, a promotional approach still unheard of in libraries.

Despite the success of these initiatives, there were several limitations with our approach: hiring student interns for public relations and graphic design made it difficult to establish a consistency of voice and public image. Additionally, while Phyllis knew everything about the library and its value to the community, her many other responsibilities limited the time she could devote to working on marketing.

A ROSE BY ANY OTHER NAME

Having built a robust digital library for our patrons, I began encouraging Phyllis to make the public relations (PR) and graphic design positions

permanent and full-time, convinced that if we were to continue to grow as an organization, consistency of promotion was going to be integral to our success.

In January 2010 Phyllis went to the library board, proposing the creation of a full-time position for a virtual librarian, a PR role also responsible for maintaining content on the library's website and fledgling Facebook page.

Sometimes, it's the smallest thing than can shape your future. To this day, I believe the job title was the reason the board approved the position. Phyllis was savvy. She realized they weren't likely to approve a full-time public relations position. However, she did believe, correctly, they would support the creation of a librarian-type position to manage our new virtual services, as well as take care of some PR responsibilities.

TIME TO GET CREATIVE

Alissa Reynolds was hired for the position. She was outgoing and creative with a history in sales and management. As the first full-time person responsible for promoting the library, she immediately went to work building community relationships. Early on, she began working with local media, providing opportunities for us to reach out to the community through radio and television, as well as local and state newspapers. We developed new relationships within the business community, thereby increasing sponsorship for library programs and events. This was also the time we began experimenting with social media, started learning how to use Facebook as a marketing tool, and created our own YouTube video series. Having a dedicated, full-time person managing our marketing strategy allowed us to develop consistent marketing campaigns across multiple platforms.

Since the title of the new position was Virtual Librarian and the responsibilities included managing the website content and Facebook page, a close relationship was formed between PR and IT. Considering that we were reaching out in several different mediums, both traditional and digital, we had, by necessity, formed our first, unofficial creative team. We began exploring ways to produce content for the different platforms, which naturally led to discussions, and then brainstorming sessions, about the content itself. We felt that conventional approaches to marketing libraries hadn't made much progress in breaking down the stereotype

of libraries as dated institutions. We started exploring different approaches we could use to increase public awareness of all the new services the library had to offer.

BUMPS IN THE ROAD

Unfortunately, in April 2011, Alissa left the library to pursue a different career path. We'd worked hard to convince the board we needed a full-time employee for public relations and were convinced we'd hired the right one. And now she was gone.

It might not have seemed so bad, had we not just lost out graphic design intern a couple of months earlier. We'd been fortunate enough to keep the same graphic design intern for more than just a semester or two. Melloney Dunlap joined the library in December 2008, during her sophomore year of college, doing her college internship as well as working part-time. Having been with the library for over a year, she had begun to establish a consistency in the marketing materials we were producing.

In January 2011, as things were just starting to fall into place, Melloney had to leave her position at the library, as she was finishing her senior year of college and had to focus on school.

Having just launched our mobile site, we were looking forward to promoting all of our new digital services. Our new billboard design was to consist of an image of a smartphone, our web address, and the slogan, "Your library, everywhere you are!" It was a direct message, letting people know that the library was available to them anytime, anywhere.

With Melloney's hiatus, we were forced to bring in a new graphic design intern. Unfortunately, our new intern's style was considerably different than Melloney's and didn't translate well with the material we wanted to produce. The design and approval process were rushed and the billboard did not look good. It was very busy, with too many colors and a bubble font that made the message almost illegible. (See figure P.2.) It was the complete opposite of the simple, clean designs Melloney had been creating. Just as we were beginning to build momentum in promoting all the library's new digital offerings, it seemed as though the wheels were falling off.

While frustrating at the time, the intern situation ultimately worked to our benefit. Initially the board had been resistant to creating a full-time graphic design position. That is, until they saw the contrast in styles between Melloney and the intern we'd been using during her absence. It was



FIGURE P.2

Poorly designed 2011 billboard

clear to them that it was important to have a designer who understood our goals and whose style complemented the library.

In May 2011 the board approved the addition of a full-time graphic designer position, which was immediately offered to Melloney, allowing her to start her professional design career at the library.

LET'S GET THIS PARTY STARTED, FOR REAL THIS TIME

In August 2011 we interviewed and hired Brandi Hodges as the new Virtual Librarian. She fit perfectly with our vision for the role. She was vibrant and articulate, engaging with the public, and already popular in the community. Prior to coming to work for the library, Brandi had spent eight years as a reporter and anchor for KAIT8, our local ABC affiliate. She was also a longtime patron and advocate of the library, having personally experienced the value in the services we offer. Brandi has the type of personality that when she puts a brochure in someone's hand, she does so in a way that makes them want to read it. It had taken almost eight months, but we were finally in a position to start promoting the library the way we had envisioned.

Adding to the strength of our team, Valerie Carroll was hired on at the library in late 2011 in our Information Services Department. She's an exceptional writer and was my original coauthor for this book until she found out she was an expectant mother and had to focus on her new role. Beyond her writing talents, Valerie is passionate about the role the library plays in helping the less fortunate of our community. She's the person who makes sure we never lose sight of the people who need the library the most.

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