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The Long Tail

Implications for Marketing Library Services

Deborah Lee

I have the collector's gene and one of the things I love to collect is Pyrex. Not just any old dish will do—I want the 1950s vintage stuff in all its pastel glory. It's not the type of thing I can find at our local Wal-Mart. But thanks to eBay, I can connect with sellers of the good stuff anywhere in the world. (My favorite bowl was bought from a seller in Alaska.) What, you may ask, does this have to do with marketing libraries? It illustrates the power of the Long Tail, Chris Anderson's innovative description of the new market model for the Internet age.

In a standing room-only venue at the 2006 ALA Annual Conference, Anderson discussed the idea of the Long Tail, which he first introduced in a 2004 *Wired* article and then later in his 2006 book, *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business Is Selling Less of More*. Anderson turns conventional business analysis on its head. Traditionally, business models used a bell curve, a symmetrical-shaped curve describing demand for a product and the quantity sold. Most traditional brick-and-mortar businesses aimed to offer the small number of goods that generated the largest amount of sales. (It's not unlike the old 80-20 rule we learned in collection development class, where 20 percent of the collection generates 80 percent of the circulations.) Businesses sought this model out because of the high fixed costs associated with doing business; each item had to generate a certain amount of revenue to justify the floor space it occupied.

Anderson introduces the "powerlaw" curve, which looks very different. The powerlaw curve has a large peak on the left and then slopes sharply downward to the right. It is the right-hand portion of this curve, or the Long Tail, that new Internet businesses can pursue. Enterprises such as Netflix maintain large warehouses strategically located throughout the country. Since they do not have to cover the costs of hundreds or thousands of retail outlets, their overhead costs are lower, which allows them to offer thousands more titles than your typical video store. This allows Internet businesses

to pursue these much smaller niche markets located in the right-hand side of the powerlaw curve.

According to Anderson, the Long Tail concept has empowered companies like Amazon, Netflix, and eBay to tap into a heretofore underserved segment of the market. Tapping into these niche markets has proven to be highly profitable, with these companies finding that 25 to 50 percent of their total sales coming from the Long Tail portion of the market.

At first blush, the Long Tail concept seems tailor made for libraries, since their extensive "inventories" of materials are ideally suited to meeting a host of niche markets. Yet there is more to the Long Tail success of companies like Netflix or Amazon than just extensive catalogs of materials. All the information in the world is useless if you can't find what you're looking for in a timely manner. And here is where the Long Tail concept represents a challenge to libraries trying to develop successful marketing strategies.

Let's go back to my Pyrex habit. A recent online visit to eBay showed that a keyword search for "Pyrex" retrieved literally thousands of hits. Even a die-hard collector would be challenged to wade through that large a retrieval set. But eBay has developed a classification system that allows me to cut through the data in a way that is relevant to me as a collector. I can use the preexisting classification system, which includes subcategories such as "40s, 50s, 60s glassware" or I can tap into related glassware products such as Fire-King or Glassbake. It's not uncommon to find yourself bidding against some of the same collectors; I can examine what other collectors are bidding on, I can create watch lists, and I can even be notified when certain preexisting situations arise. In other words, eBay not only has the extensive array of products available but has developed sophisticated personalization tools that allows me to use my time effectively when searching.



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Exploring the Long Tail

Want to learn more about the Long Tail concept? These resources are a good place to start.

- *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business Is Selling Less of More* by Chris Anderson (Hyperion, 2006). Anderson's book is an easy and fascinating read. Anderson expands upon his 2004 *Wired* article. It was named by Amazon as one of the top business books for 2006.
- The Long Tail Blog (www.thelongtail.com)—Anderson maintained this blog as he wrote the book, often soliciting comment from the blog readers on selected portions of the text. He continues the discussion, even after the publication of the book. You can join in the discussion or just read about his latest explorations of the Long Tail phenomena.
- There are also a couple of podcasts with Anderson, where he discusses the Long Tail concept. One is

located on the Library of Economics and Liberty site, in their EconLog podcast section. Russ Roberts interviews Anderson about his book. The podcast runs 52.4 minutes and can be played online or saved and downloaded as an MP3 file at www.econtalk.org/archives/2006/08/chris_anderson.html. The second podcast is located on the IT Conversations site, where Anderson gives a short talk on the Long Tail concept and discusses it with Joe Kraus, CEO of Jotspot. The podcast runs 38.5 minutes and can be played online or downloaded as an MP3 file at www.itconversations.com/shows/detail477.html.

Case Study: The NIST Research Library *continued from page 82*

supervisors (division chiefs), and upper-echelon technical managers. Typical of the NIST organization, nearly all group leaders and division chiefs are also major project leaders in their own right. While they may have additional administrative and supervisory responsibilities, they also participate directly in research activities. As a result, their usage patterns are roughly comparable with those bench scientists considered to be front-line library users.

17. Richard A. Krueger, *Developing Questions for Focus Groups*, Focus Group Series 3 (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1998).
18. Richard A. Krueger, *Moderating Focus Groups*, Focus Group Series 4 (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1998), 21–23.

19. Morgan, *Focus Groups As Qualitative Research*.
20. Leckie, Pettigrew, and Sylvain, "Modeling the Information Seeking of Professionals"; Ellis and Haugan, "Modeling and Information Seeking Patterns of Engineers and Research Scientists in an Industrial Environment"; Hertzum and Pejtersen, "The Information-Seeking Practices of Engineers."
21. Nancy Allmang, Mylene Ouimette, and Lea Wade, "New Collaboration Methods of Laboratory Liaisons," poster session, ACRL Science and Technology Section, ALA Annual Conference, New Orleans, June 2006, www.ala.org/ala/acrl/aboutacrl/acrlsections/sciencetech/stsconferences/posters06.htm (accessed Dec. 7, 2006).

Appendix. Focus Group Questions

- In general, how do you use the Research Library's services and collection in your current SFA (NIST Strategic Focus Area)-related research work? Services can include working with lab liaisons as well as using physical and electronic resources.
- Which resources are of most value to you in your current SFA-related work? For example: journals, e-journals, databases. You can also consider your interaction with lab liaisons.
- How comprehensive do you find the Research Library's collection to be for your SFA-related research area?
- What do you find most and least helpful about the Research Library's SFA resource collection?
- How satisfied are you that the Research Library understands and meets your SFA-related information needs?
- Do you have any different information needs/work habits in your current SFA-related research as compared to previous (pre-SFA) projects?
- What one thing should the Research Library stop doing?
- What one thing should the Research Library start doing?