

Symposium Athens, October 7 2011 Redefining library services: responding to the economic downturn

Looking ahead. Experiences with Public Library innovation in the Netherlands

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*NB: for additional factual information I refer the reader to my PowerPoint presentation*

### Introduction

It is a great honor for me being here in Athens today. I sincerely hope that my lecture will be of any help to you in these difficult times.

My name is Ankie Kessler. I have been working in public libraries for almost twenty-five years now: something I certainly never imagined would happen after finishing library school long ago.

I have worked in different library functions, but for the past 12 years I have been a CEO and president of a public library. The last two years of the Library A to Z, a library organization working for 225.000 residents in four municipalities, with 12 branches.

I see myself more as a "change manager" and a "social entrepreneur" with a compelling vision of public libraries and the opportunities offered to them. So I stand in front of you today, not as what we call in Dutch soccer terms a "Bobo," or a VIP person from the Netherlands, but as a simple, down-to-earth library director, with limited resources to spend on quality services that benefit the widest possible audience.

The library organization I work at is only two years "young", and was created by a merger of four separate library foundations: Alblasterdam (18,000 inhabitants), Dordrecht (115,000 inhabitants) Ridderkerk (44,000 inhabitants) and Zwijndrecht (44,000) inhabitants.

At the moment we have 12 branches, 65 FTE (110 employees), and an annual budget of € 7.000.000, -. 85% of which is grant money.

Our main branch is located in Dordrecht, the oldest city in the historical region of Holland.

### Core values and functions

The Library A to Z is providing residents with access to knowledge and culture. Two of our primary functions are to stimulate reading, and media literacy education.

If we perform these tasks well, and in line with customer demand, these primary functions add value to society. This is an important task which is not always easy.

Our core values are: hospitality, innovation, and surprising people. The library organization consists of three pillars. It is solidly founded on the following principles:

The physical library, the digital library and the dynamic library. These pillars are inseparable.

Our branch has been firmly divided for the past 10 years when it comes to a vision on the future. The decentralized structure of our library system has many advantages, such as the creation of local co-operation, but it actually also has a downside. Right now everyone realizes that the demand for our expertise and services has changed substantially, and that the available resources have shrunk, so it finally seems possible to work on the things we really agree upon.

We fully understand that by working together locally to improve our services, we first need to establish the priorities of this collaboration.

Marketing and re-positioning the library are two important priorities. For example, it was relatively easy to convince the majority of Dutch public libraries to switch to a unified house-style within a short time.

Every November, the successful, nationwide campaign "Nederland leest" is held. All public libraries give away a free book to their members, and they organize meetings where people can discuss the book, and share the pleasure of reading.

The branch has developed the "library store" based on retail concepts, and on the ways stores try to please their customers. This concept not only deals with how to design a library, and how to present the collection, but also with building collections, processing, logistics, and training the staff. The first results are promising: libraries reach more customers, and achieve a higher amount of efficiency.

Currently, more library concepts are developed nation wide - I will give the examples later on in my talk. These concepts are utilized by local libraries, and benefit the local communities.

Human resource management: employees are our capital. Expertise, the ability to translate demand into a service, a product or a collection is necessary for the future, and for the quality of our current services. For this reason, our industry is convinced we need to focus on increasing knowledge, training, and sharing experiences. Libraries are required by a system of certification

### **Changes**

Times are changing, and the future is uncertain, in the Netherlands just as in Greece. The political conditions have changed, the digitization of information provides more opportunities,

but generates new questions as well. Questions that challenge us greatly, pertaining to our core competencies.

Although society attaches great importance to knowledge and to reading, people read less, or at least borrow less books. The public no longer takes the library for granted.

Sitting behind an information desk waiting for questions to come -- that period is gone. New questions and changing demands in Dutch libraries ask a different attitude of our employees. Our library staff attaches great value to existing norms, and standards of quality. The book always came first. Customer demands, and the personal development of our customers, were not in the picture.

Meanwhile, many new services have been offered, but we did not promote these to our (new) customers. We clearly must invest more in marketing these new services. The message to the public and the government is twofold: we need to change, and raise the service level. We really cannot cut back, but when it is necessary, we choose a future-proof library, and let go of things that once had great value to us.

Fortunately, there are already many good, new, and fresh examples in the Netherlands. The so called "retail" libraries, for example. They are so popular that people started using them for work, or to meet friends. These newly outfitted libraries are big crowd-pullers, especially in shopping areas.

### **Financial crisis**

Living in Greece, you, more than anyone else in Europe, are currently experiencing what a financial crisis means to people. Unfortunately, your future is highly uncertain.

So excuse me for giving a few numbers that apply to my organization that I have experienced as being significant.

- Circa 30% of the Dutch library branches have to close within the next few years.
- No library law exists, only (non committal) agreements between the central and the local governments.
- On average, budgets decrease with 15%.

**BUT**

When the wind is up, you can either set up a wind screen, or you can build windmills to create new energy!"

In Holland we have a different climate, and often a lot of wind, but I imagine you understand the meaning of this metaphor.

Incidentally, this statement is not mine, but taken from a small book, entitled:

OMDENKEN (think the other way around)

When you are able to think the other way around, you will experience that this gives you a lot of energy.

### **Disappearing libraries and new libraries**

Earlier, I stated that within the next several years at least 30% of the libraries in their current form will disappear. Sometimes they will disappear completely, but in most cases, new, smaller servicepoints will replace them. In Rotterdam, one of the largest cities in Holland, almost twenty district libraries will close in the near future. Instead, the library will re-appear in various schools for primary education, in the form of a service points, and under the product name "Schoolbieb".

Schools, but also cultural and welfare organizations, are eager to provide a shelter to the library. In most cases, therefore, no rent is charged.

### **From building to function**

The library building is no longer the central concept. Besides the digital library, there is an increasing demand for advice on reading promotion, and media literacy. This means that our librarians will function more and more as advisers.

The new central concept will be providing services.

Instead of buildings, advisors, cross over with other organization based on our core competencies, the library of the future is promising and necessary, but it requires a change in our vision at times, approach and appearance.

What is needed to achieve this is entrepreneurship, flexibility, new skills, and ICT applications.

### **Output in the social sphere**

Focusing more on output in the social sphere provides libraries with two opportunities:

1. Legitimation for their existence
2. Giving direction to the library's program

Libraries have to show they can actively contribute to society, instead of merely functioning as a safety net for surfacing problems.

Especially at the present time city governments, schools, and other institutions are looking for reliable partners on the basis of full co-operation, to support them in achieving their goal.

### **The three pillars**

The A tot Z library is building a future-proof library on three pillars.

Each pillar must be re-invented, based on our new core functions and by using many years of experience and new skills.

#### **1) The physical library**

##### *Retail concepts*

The concept of the library as a shop. Customers feel welcome, and are tempted by the presentation of the collection to stay longer and to borrow many books. There are many opportunities for presentation, frontal presentation of books, grouped together based on subject or sphere of interest. Novels and non-fiction are presented together on topic matters. The collection is tailor-made, and highly demand orientated. The result is more members, and an increasing number of loans.

##### *Public meeting space*

The space is so cozy and inviting, that it is very tempting for a visitor to spend time there. The digital capacities, wifi, content, game consoles, everything is considered. Through being active in the center of society the library knows its customers very well, knows the currency, which themes are important. That makes it possible to organize all sorts of activities around these themes. Lectures, exhibitions, workshops, and so forth.

##### *Digital possibilities*

These possibilities stimulate personal creativity and pursuing of new interests

The physical library is firmly based in the local community.

#### **2) The digital library**

I have already told you about the nationwide efforts to achieve a Library.NL point. The goal is to develop one communal site on which content is shared, and different widgets are offered. In the future, it will be possible to access the entire Dutch book collection by one search entry.

But also on a district level, local libraries support the project, by accessing information, a challenge standing close to the people in the neighborhoods.

**3) The entrepreneurial library** is a pillar that is not explicitly mentioned in their mission by other colleagues. We, however, do, because in this part of our business, lies the advisory role, the concept of service.

#### **Providing services**

This relates to advice on reading promotion, digital support, media education, etc.

It is new for us to work in this way. It requires more attention to market oriented work, and to our specific expertise. Targeted marketing is required, a good profile of our organization, and flexible ICT applications.

I like to see the library as a customer-orientated, active and industrious mediator of information and services between people and organizations.

Two spearheads in this concept are:

- 1) Innovative youth services
- 2) Social and cultural entrepreneurship

#### **Examples of innovative concepts**

The **train station library** in Haarlem, near Amsterdam, opened last month. Aimed at the many commuters, who travel by train to work, and want to read while traveling. It's really a great success.

Schiphol Airport of the Netherlands, houses an **AirportLibrary**. Travelers can use ICT applications, read newspapers, and magazines, and also books about our country. This library is of course primarily intended to promote all the good things the Netherlands has to offer, such as public libraries!

#### **Service points in which a bank and a library share the same space**

In the village of Fijnaart (6,000 inhabitants), two years ago, I collaborated with the Rabobank. The old branch did not receive enough customers. The library bus would disappear. At that moment we decided to work together with a bank. At the moment there is a small branch library, with an adjoining small current collection, magazines and newspapers, open for 20 hours a week. Self-service, but the staff of the bank will also help customers of the library.

In Dordrecht, the city where I now work, we hope to open a **bank / library** in a neighborhood outside the city center. This area has 18,000 inhabitants, and our current library building will disappear.

#### **School service points** in 's Hertogenbosch

In the city of 's Hertogenbosch all library branches except the Central Library will disappear. All primary schools receive a school service point instead. The collection consists of five volumes per student. The service points operate through self-service, but the library provides four hours of support daily for reading instruction and reading promotion.

#### **Neighborhood service points**

The Plug in Library, is a very new concept, a so-called staffless branch, with a lot of ICT applications, a small but up-to-date collection, and open daily for ten hours.

Two Plug in Libraries have opened thus far. There are some technical problems, but it is a very good concept, to provide at least a minimum amount of library service in a neighborhood.

#### **Biebsearch concept**

This is a concept for secondary schools. Library services become part of the virtual learning environment of the students. Books are delivered several times a week, and all students become a member as well as the staff. Advising teachers etc. The library provides an excellent search engine giving access to several catalogs and databases.

#### **Library in a store, a unique example**

Together with a children's bookstore in one shared space, we advise teachers and parents, the bookshop sells books.

Great synergy effect!

The library shop is unique for Dordrecht. A real cross over to the bookstore.

The library advises schools and parents, promotes reading, and lends out special book projects. The bookstore sells, and recommends books to individual customers. We organize activities together, and send out a monthly, digital newsletter.

The Biebwinkel is located next to the Dordrecht Central Library.

To finish, a completely different example, the **public library of Amsterdam**. It is only a couple of years old. The building has seven floors, and attracts many visitors who are attracted in the first place by the free internet computers, and the restaurant facilities.

### Our choices

What choices does the Library A to Z make for the future?

- Improve its main branches, retail concept and a third place
- Close three branches
- Invest in the bank / library
- Plan six service points
- Until 2014 our aim is to closely collaborate with at least eight high schools in the Biebsearch project.
- Reach target groups through schools, community initiatives, and supporting cultural organizations in reaching their goals.

### Nation-wide changes

In the Netherlands the library sector has been divided for a long time (and sometimes still is). There are several issues at stake:

- Should the focus be on the information function, or more on the cultural function? On the physical library, or on the virtual library?
- There is no nation-wide marketing strategy.
- We have a decentral system of funding, and no national library law.
- Libraries are small, independent empires. There is no real interest in doing things together or to share things.
- There has been no real collaboration for too long.

All these issues have resulted in a less than ideal position of Dutch libraries.

Because of the changing demands, the changing political directions, and budget cuts, changes have started to happen:

- A re-positioning of libraries is under way (not ideal yet), with a good local translation.
- National concepts get more support from local libraries, and increase in scale.
- Put residents in the first place, take their questions seriously.
- Make choices, don't hold on to the things that you think are important, but change, following the demands of your customers.



- Innovate on time, be creative.
- Collaborate with the cultural sector, and with schools, but also with local authorities.
- Make sure you become embedded in local communities.
- Stand strong together as one sector.
- Use every digital possibility.
- A library is not just a building or a collection.

A library with a future is a library about people. A library is not a building or a collection.

Its features are:

- Accessible to all
- Demand orientated
- Knowledgeable
- Flexible
- Able to change

*You can't build a reputation on what you are going to do. (Henry Ford)*