

Marketing - the missing link to promoting reading engagement?

By Mali Jorm

Snapshot

Mali Jorm, Head of Libraries at Bacchus Marsh Grammar, explores the theory and practice of marketing in relation to the promotion of reading for pleasure in a school library context. Jorm offers examples, and practical ideas, from experience and a clear, insightful discussion of the important role marketing plays in all of our interactions.

The national push to embrace explicit literacy teaching and phonics has made demonstrable gains in the reading ability of many Australian students. However, just because they can read, does it mean students *want* to read?

Teacher librarians have a significant responsibility to keep young people motivated to keep reading, both to extend their language skills and to consolidate their self-identity as a lifelong reader. This can be a challenging task with a crowded curriculum, competing non-school time pressures, screen time prioritization and the rising importance of peer-group social activities in adolescence. More than ever, teacher librarians have to be skilled marketers, which can be challenging when this is not our area of expertise.

‘As school libraries have a captive community of users, the role of marketing can be overlooked by school librarians. However, without consistent marketing, the school library risks not being seen as important by the school community. This can have significant impacts on funding and staffing.’ (Kaeding, 2025)

Reading motivation research promotes fostering attributes such as self-efficacy, access to choice, and being part of a reading community. However, reading motivation research doesn’t always link to the science of how we successfully influence people into behaving certain ways and internalising a self-identity which values these behaviours.

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Fortunately, marketing is something that we are all intimately familiar with, even if it is mostly as a consumer. Observing how large brands operate in the marketing sphere can provide us with a masterclass in what works effectively to draw people in; although it doesn’t always reveal the scientific motivations behind particular actions. Marketing is of course more than a sharp logo and a viral ad, and draws heavily from the field of consumer psychology. Consumer psychology is a diverse and extensively researched area, which covers areas such as memory (how readily available information about a product is available in a consumer’s mind), ease of information processing (how accessible and easy to understand a marketing message is), methods of persuasion (e.g. commitment to a behaviour, ability to be influenced by others, product scarcity), and motivation (personal hierarchical goals, psychological drives) among many other things.



Applying the science of influencing human behaviour for corporate objectives can seem antithetical to building a genuine love of reading. However, humans have complex mechanisms for developing brand (or activity) loyalty and forging personal identities which align with being lifelong readers. Our role as literacy promotion experts is to consider all avenues which may benefit our students and their connection to reading for pleasure. Possessing even a generalist understanding of consumer psychology research can powerfully influence how we market the school library and reading to students, staff and the wider community.

The first step in the marketing journey is to think of your library as a brand. In schools, we can often be subsumed by our school's marketing image which can make this more challenging. A school library brand should reflect the values, style, design and colour scheme of the school branding, but

have a clear and distinct name and look. If your library name is long or unwieldy, consider an abbreviation or acronym which has more spoken and written appeal. Once established, your brand needs to be recognizable throughout all of your library messaging. Consider the use of slogans, mascots, motifs or design elements which will tie all of your communications together.

It's important to note that a brand can't be an empty design package - it needs to stand for something. Think about the space, energy and services you offer. What is the 'vibe' of your library? What makes students want to go there to engage with reading? Are you a small space with lots of laughs and love and know all of your students by name? Are you an information-focussed space with access to the best journals, resources and reference services? Are you a cosy and quiet retreat from the hustle and bustle of the rest of the school? Your 'vibe' needs to be reflected successfully through your branding and communications. Think about Coca Cola's 2019 slogan 'Open Happiness'. Instead of focussing on the characteristics of the beverage, it focuses on what the brand stands for - fun, enjoyment, and an invitation to join. Their campaign materials consistently reflected this message - usually featuring people outside, in a group, enjoying the moment.

Research by Tampubolon & Kusuma (2018) found that 'students have preferences in choosing a place for reading by looking at its physical and social characteristics'. Focusing on the physical attributes (e.g. soft, warm, quiet, bright) and the social characteristics (e.g. collaborative, close, focussed, connected)

give us an image of the kind of marketing language and imagery we could use to sell our space to students as an attractive place to read. Highlighting the desirability of the library as a place to

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read books is an important aspect of developing library reading culture; however, we also need to market the appeal of reading itself.

'If we want students to see reading as something valuable, enjoyable, and worth their time, we have to sell it with the same enthusiasm as we would any other high-interest activity. A well-marketed reading culture doesn't just encourage engagement—it normalises reading as an essential and rewarding part of everyday life.' (Mace, 2025)

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Reading culture can be a complex school attribute to foster, but a clearly planned, ongoing marketing campaign can help. When running a campaign, frequent, consistent messaging is key. The 'Rule of 7' states that a marketing message must be seen at least seven times for it to make an impact on a consumer. In schools the challenge is to develop a multi-channel, high visibility campaign which will harness the power of repeated messaging. Schools often have restricted channels available, so think creatively - consider assemblies, pastoral care times, screens, large scale posters, audio announcements, stands or stalls, non-traditional

advertising formats (like balloons, gardens, canteen specials etc.) and student ambassadors.

Reading promotion messaging needs to take advantage of the spacing effect. The spacing effect shows that information is retained more effectively if there is a space between being exposed to information for the first time and subsequent exposures (Noel & Vallen 2009). This is the same psychological phenomenon as 'spaced practice', the memory technique we teach our students to help them retain learned content. Library marketing campaigns need both repeated exposure and space between exposures to be effective.

The cognitive bias of the 'frequency illusion' posits that once we have something in the forefront of our minds, we notice it more readily. We see this phenomenon when we buy a new car or pair of sneakers and suddenly notice all the other people around us who have the same product. Keeping library services and promotions in the forefront of students' minds helps a) reinforce the fact that the library is a big deal, and b) increases awareness that their peers are engaged with its use.

The effect of peer influence is extremely powerful within all demographics, but is particularly pronounced amongst adolescents. Many teens, particularly boys, do not have a friendship group which talks about or encourages reading (Merga, 2014). Therefore, it is vital to find ways to highlight peer reading in a demonstrable way. Cialdini's (2007) first principle of persuasion, 'liking' states that we are influenced by people who we like - those who we view as similar to us and those who we aspire to be like. Library champions (students who are both strong library advocates and influential with their peers) can serve a similar role to social media influencers in normalising and promoting the habit of reading to their peers.

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Something often talked about in social media marketing is creating 'buzz' or 'hype'. Hype campaigns frequently build up awareness of an event or product before its release. Hype leans heavily on the psychological effects of anticipation. Consciously anticipating joyful events is a very effective way to increase happiness and improve emotional well-being. Letting our students know things that they have to look forward to in the library space such as new book releases, events or promotions can potentially have an even more positive effect on library engagement than the events themselves.

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The concept of false scarcity creates consumer demand by limiting access to a product. This can be done through events like limited time promotions or practices like limited edition runs. These practices lean into both the resource hoarding inclination of humans, and the social aspect of 'fear of missing out'. Nearly all events or promotions can be altered to have false scarcity, and the 'limited time only' or 'exclusive' nature of them can become part of the marketing language used during a campaign. The Premier's Reading Challenge is a good example of this - it's literally just reading books; however, the rules and time limit are very motivating, and peer participation can help drive this even further.

Visual messaging is an essential part of furthering your library's brand or campaign narrative. Services like Canva make attractive design accessible to non-designers, however a pretty layout without substance won't further your objectives effectively. Marketing campaigns are a lot like books - an attractive cover design will draw you in, but it's the strength of the narrative which creates an enduring connection. Campaigns need to tell a story, either within themselves or as part of an overarching brand narrative. Consider images or photos which clearly further the narrative.

Research by LaPointe et al (2016) showed that people pay more attention to images showing animate objects (such as humans and animals) compared to inanimate objects. A challenge for visual messaging is that quality photos can be hard to come by without a professional photographer on hand. One of the reasons why stock imagery is so popular is that it can provide photos which are specifically crafted to clearly illustrate a story or mood. If taking your own

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photos, consider using student actors who can portray a mood rather than just 'students reading in a library'. It's also worth considering modifying stock illustrations to represent your school uniform or look.

Consumer psychology and its influence on marketing is a rich and well-researched field which has many applications for reading promotion. Incorporating a few simple techniques such as brand narrative and storytelling, fostering emotional connection, repeated and spaced messaging, cultivating peer champions, building anticipation, creating false scarcity and

visualisation of a mood can provide new avenues to engage students with reading for pleasure and becoming life-long readers.

To read more about consumer psychology influenced library practice, follow Mali at: www.threespheresoflibraryskills.com

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