



How to be competitive in the educational & cultural landscape: the challenge of the “Carol I” Central University Library in Bucharest, Romania – case study

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Abstract:

This paper presents the strategy which „Carol I” Central University Library Bucharest constructed to respond to the needs of its users and to gain more visibility and attractiveness. The strategy features three innovative projects meant to reposition the Library in order to shift away from the paradigm of being a mere library, in the classical sense, into becoming the epitome of a cultural establishment, as intended by its founder, King Carol I. Book Street, Library Night and Energy Forum are the three surprising success stories lived of one of the most important university libraries in Romania.

Introduction

„The library is a growing organism” according to Ranganathan’s fifth Law of Library Science¹. Change is a prerequisite to growth and therefore libraries today are faced with real challenges. Libraries have already shifted from their old static status of conventional organizations to the so-called hybrid structures. This is partly due to the rapid changes in Information and Communication technologies and the ever changing needs of the users. As Sharon Gray Weiner

¹ LEITER, Richard A. Reflections on Ranganathan’s Five Laws of Library Science. Web resource available at: http://www.aallnet.org/main-menu/Publications/lj/LLJ-Archives/Vol-95/pub_llj_v95n03/2003-28.pdf [Last visited: 03/04/2012]

states, „visionary leadership, an elastic organization and receptivity among the staff to a different vision are required to respond to large-scale changes”². The changes are important and discontinuous. In this context, libraries must overcome the routinisation and adopt innovation with the aim of transforming the old structure into an open, dynamic and more visible one. Library services, library staff skills and library strategic objectives all have to shift from book-centric to user-centric, in accordance with Scupola’s vision.³ The user must be seen and involved in the innovation process as co-creator and as resource.

Among the provocative trends which have to be considered, the following have an important impact:

- Decreasing funds for libraries and high rates of documents price,
- Continuing emergence of new media formats and channels,
- Users diversity in age, education and skills, culture and needs,
- Change in social and cultural attitudes,
- Community co-creation and involvement in education, culture and knowledge through users experience and requirements, by using the library resources and facilities,
- The libraries new status seen as *community builders* or as *knowledge navigators*, according to Sohail Inayatullah who says: „The best way to serve as community builders is to go to the community”⁴.

Libraries can also be seen as an experience, be it a cultural experience, an educational, a social or a technological experience. It depends on those who lead the library which facets are deemed worth to be discovered by the users. It also depends on the users’ needs as observed by the librarians or assessed by sociologists.

One option is to open the library, to preserve the places of quietness and calm but to step out, towards the community and to be part of the present world which moves at a hyper-pace, both culturally and otherwise. As a matter of fact, as O’Reilly stated about Web 2.0, the libraries must continually adapt to this "perpetual beta", in which „any stability other than the acceptance of instability is insufficient”⁵. Moreover, being aware of the influence of mass-culture as it was defined and criticized by the Frankfurt School’s representatives, and observing that Couldry’s practice theory⁶ could be applied in the library environment along with the media research, it seems to be a good idea to shape the library as a bridge between the high culture and the mass culture. On one hand the university library users read Shakespeare or Balzac, study the Pythagorean Theorem, explore the concepts of Nietzsche or Hegel or write papers based on articles downloaded from scientific databases like Proquest or ScienceDirect. On the other hand, the same users like to read magazines, go shopping, socialize, watch movies, listen music, spend time in bistros or to go to the theatre. So, there is a solid link between all these cultural and educational needs which could be met by implementing the organization’s strategy through innovative projects that would reposition the Library in order to shift away from the paradigm of

² WEINER, Sharon Gray. Growing Pains. In: The Whole Digital Library Handbook. Chicago, 2007, p. 161

³ SCUPOLA, Ada ; NICOLAJSAN, Hanne Westh. Service innovation in academic libraries : is there a place for customers? In: Library Management, vol. 31, issue 4/5 (2010), p. 304-318

⁴ INAYATULLAH, Sohail. Which future for libraries In: Foresight, Volume 9, Issue 4 (2007), p. 55-57. Web resource available at: <http://www.emeraldinsight.com> [Last visited: 03/04/2012]

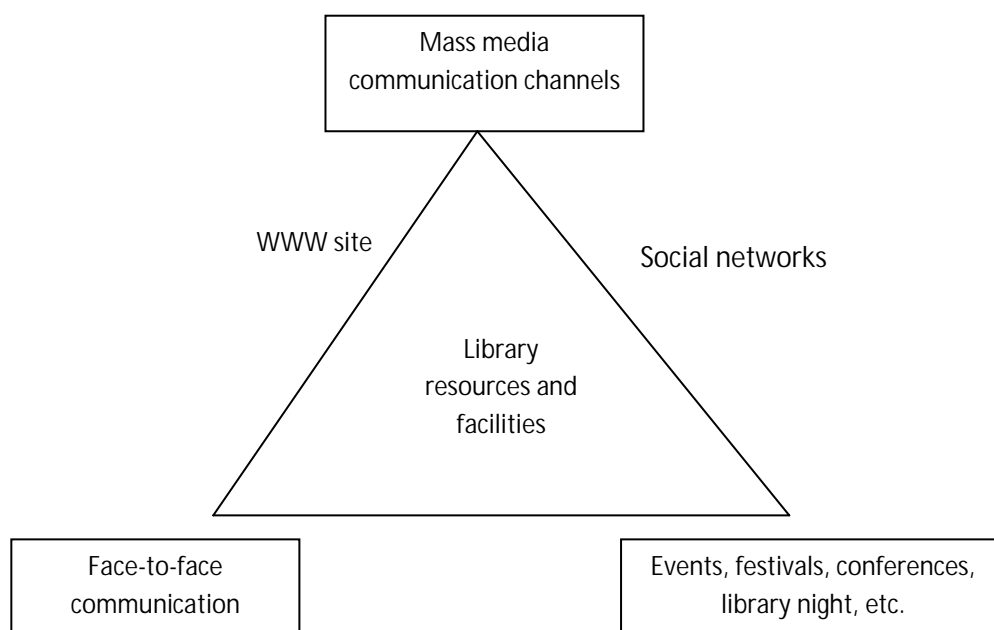
⁵ O'REILLY, Tim. (2005). What is web 2.0? : *Design Patterns and Business Models for the Next Generation of Software*. Web resource available at: <http://www.oreillynet.com/pub/a/oreilly/tim/news/2005/09/30/what-is-web-20.html#mememap> [Last visited: 03/19/2012]

⁶ FOURIE, Pieter J. New paradigms, new theory and four priorities for South African mass communication and media research. Web resource available at: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/02560041003786474> [Last visited: 03/04/2012]

being a mere library, in the classical sense, into becoming the epitome of a cultural establishment.

The model designed for implementing such a strategy is focused on specific target audiences, comprises surprising projects developed on different levels, being attractive, open to improvements and flexible. The model has to be built on a sustainable basis with funds acquired through donations, private-public partnerships, cultural exchanges and projects. It has to be implemented in a way that is reinforcing by constantly delivering the messages to the target audiences through different media channels and using various transmission patterns⁷ applied in the library, beyond the classical consultation pattern and conversation pattern.

A possible scheme of the model:



„Carol I” Central University Library in Bucharest – brief description

„Carol I” Central University Library in Bucharest is the most important university library in Romania. It has legal autonomy, being subordinated directly to the Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sport. Inaugurated on March 14, 1895 as Royal Foundation by the first king of Romania, Carol I, with the explicit aim of providing a gateway to knowledge mainly for students, the library has been a radiant source of knowledge throughout its existence. In December 1989, during the events which led to the demise of the communist regime, the building was destroyed and over 500.000 documents, amongst which the entire collections of rare books, manuscripts and correspondence were turned to ashes. Despite all these, the Library carried on its mission, restored the old house, raised a new, modern building from scratch and is now among the most modern libraries in Europe. It consists of a central encyclopedic unit and 15 specialized faculty libraries at the University of Bucharest, professionally integrated in the complex. The collections amount to more than 2.000.000 volumes. The Main Unit offers a number of 700.000 volumes covering all fields of knowledge, and the branch libraries 1.300.000

⁷ NIELSEN, Hans Jorn. Library communication outside a library context: instant messaging as library service. In: *New Library World*, vol. 110, issue 5/6 (2009), p. 237-248

volumes, each department library holding specialized collections for the discipline they belong to. “Carol I” Central University Library is the first university library in Romania having introduced an integrated library system.

The main unit consists of three buildings: the palace of the Foundation, the Dacia building and the Boema building.

The palace of the Foundation was designed by the French architect Paul Gottreau in the neoclassical 19th century style in 1895, housing large reading-rooms, a magnificent Professors reading-room, an elegant reception area and a splendid Auditorium with 250 seats and modern audio-video equipment.



Foundation building

The Boema building was built after 1990 and launched in 2001, offering the users a surprising environment for study and research, with 7 open-access reading-rooms surrounding an Atrium, 10 cubicles, large areas for Internet access, online catalogue and scientific databases consultation, documents stacks and a chic cafeteria.



Boema building

The Dacia building was designed in the same neoclassical style as the Foundation building and houses the administration departments.



Dacia building

All these buildings represent a huge potential for organizing events.

Additionally, the results of an open-ended questionnaire together with the data collected from the in-house monitoring system, underlined the hot topics for our readers and revealed the users' expectations regarding the key role of the library in the social life of the community by fostering innovation and empowering the readers through face-to-face communication. Therefore, the idea of reconsidering the strategy in order to gain more visibility and attractiveness led us to three innovative projects meant to reposition the Library in the educational and cultural landscape of the capital city.

Strada de C'Arte Festival – our most successful project

Under the slogan *We Legalize Culture Trafficking*, a seven days cultural festival was built around the concept of “library without walls”. This meant taking the Library out on the streets of downtown Bucharest. The biggest cultural open-air festival was organized in September, 17-24, 2011. It provided people in the streets with literature, architecture, cinema, arts, poetry, music, theatre and workshops in an interactive, agora-like formula. The festival days proposed a fresh approach to the idea of a book fair and were packed with free events for all ages, including poetry readings by well-known Romanian artists, musical performances, meetings with bestselling authors, tours of the Library's reading-rooms and activities for children.



It included:

The Book Street, featuring all the major publishers



The Children's Street with creativity seminars of calligraphy, painting and sculpture



The Architecture Street



Theatre shows, concerts, award-winning movies, cultural conferences and book launches inside BCU, public debates and guided tours of the library headquarters



In addition, all the historical monuments placed in the vicinity opened their doors to visitors: the Carol I Foundation, the Theodor Aman Museum (built in 1869, the house was the residence of the famous Romanian painter Th. Aman), the Boteanu Orthodox Church (more than 100 years old), the Cesianu – Racovița Palace (an elegant building designed in the renaissance style by the French architect Jules Berthet at the end of XIXth century as residence for a rich lawyer) and the National Art Museum (the former royal palace built between 1812 and 1820, enlarged between 1882 – 1906 by King Carol I, with the help of the French architect Paul Gottreau and the German architect Karl Liman)

Aim of the project

To give attendees the opportunity to read something other than advertising billboards on the streets of downtown Bucharest – therefore we put together a street dedicated to books.

To give attendees the opportunity to listen to something different than the sound of traffic – therefore we imagined a street filled with jazz and poetry.

To give attendees the opportunity to learn more than suburban culture – therefore we built a street dedicated to debates and workshops.

To give the attendees the opportunity to observe the city beyond the chaos of today's buildings – therefore we created a street devoted to architecture

We enhanced our offer with movies and theatre performances, book launches and many other surprises.

Results

The whole area surrounding the library was transformed in a mini cultural wi-fi city, an urban chamber, tied together with vegetation and other street decorations which were designed by well-known architects. The streets were populated with book stands which were especially crafted for the fair, architecture exhibitions, outdoor lounges, creative workshops for children and street lighting that invited the visitors to step into the world of “Strada de C’Arte”, from 9 o’clock in the morning to 10 o’clock in the evening or later during the week-end.

The festival brought together a range of amazing events and more than 15.000 people who shared diverse perspectives, ideas and experiences. It meant thousands titles exhibited and more than 10.000 volumes sold by the 14 publishing houses which rented a book stand, 3 theatre performances, 1 concert, 1 public debate transmitted on television, 5 book launches, 4 movie projections, 6 creative sessions for children attended by over 600 children and their parents, 2 architecture workshops.

It was featured in more than 200 media articles and television ads, it attracted 40.000 likes and 900 shares on Facebook and the festival’s webpage <http://www.stradadecarte.ro> got an impressive number of hits.

The Libraries Night

The event was part of a national project and took place on the night of October 1st, between 18.00 – 4.00 and aimed to promote going to the library, reading for pleasure and the need for documentation.



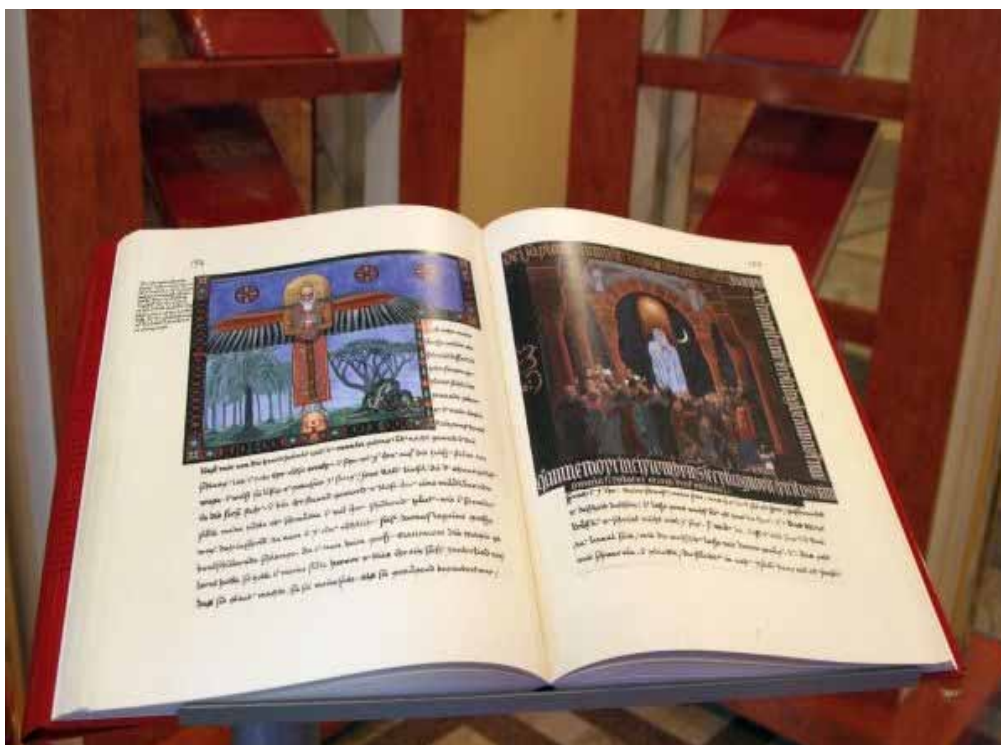
The Central University Library Carol I put together a special program in the main unit and visits in three library branches: Law Library, Literature Library and Foreign Languages Library. In the main unit, the library remained open for 24 hours. Besides the permanent activities like guided tours, 3D projections and book exhibition, the program started with a magical puppet show for children “Bremenstadt Musikanten” which brought joy and happiness for more than 200 kids who danced, sang and applauded creating the warmest of atmospheres.



The program continued with a debate about the relationship between young people and culture carried by a journalist, a contemporary writer and a sensitive poet who focused their attention on today's hot topics regarding young people and their relation with the culture.



The presentation of one of Jung's most important work, the "Red Book", offered the public a unique opportunity to learn about this wonderful and mysterious piece of art published in Romania in 2011.



Movies and theatre lovers had the surprise to be face to face with a well-known young Romanian actor and find out more about his vision, his career, life, dreams and failures.



The presentation of the paper dresses collection was maybe the most unusual event of the night: beautiful girls, students at different faculties, organized a distinctive fashion show.



The unplugged guitar & violin concert created a mesmerizing atmosphere.



The public enjoyed the guided tours and took time to read journals or to thumb through some books. Over 2000 visitors stepped in to discover the “invisible, magical” part of the library. The youngest was 2 years old and the oldest was 87 years old. The visitors took the opportunity to learn more about the library collections, services and history. The reading rooms hosted more than 100 readers during that night.



The feedback was impressive. The participants declared their admiration and joy and admitted that both the architecture and the documentary collections represented an unexpected surprise which will bring them back to the library, as readers and friends.



The Energy Forum

Energy is one of the hottest topics of this period of global crisis. Renewable energy, energy conservation and efficiency or other energy-related topics represent high interest issues for our users. In order to meet their needs, the third project consists in a complex energy platform which was created and launched in January 2012. It comprises the following:

An open access reading room with specialized collections – over 450 books, e-books and journals, 12 seats and 6 laptops, internet connectivity, unrestricted access to the subscribed, scientific databases.



An energy working room for debates, with 35 seats and 15 laptops, video projector and white board, internet connectivity and access to the subscribed databases.



INFO-DOC Services include a wide range of documentary activities performed by the librarians: conducting search & retrieval sessions on relevant energy search keys, gathering reliable print and electronic resources in the field of energy, classifying the resources by different criteria, managing a web-site hosting relevant data on energy resources, <http://www.energyforum.ro>, providing access to databases of research literature and web sources on energy issues, building bibliographic lists on different energy topics.

Energy Forum represents a gateway to energy resources, a valuable tool created as a response to the users' needs, be they students, professors or researchers, for fulfilling their expectations and interests.

The results of this new service register an increasing trend. More than 300 scientific articles have been downloaded, several bibliographies have been generated and sent by e-mail to the users and new books have been presented to the readers.

Conclusion

The three projects presented are success stories of the Central University Library „Carol I” Bucharest. Through these experiences we managed to open the library towards the community with the aim of transforming the old structure into an open, dynamic and more visible one in order to help our users to become part of the library, to surprise and to empower them, to demonstrate that the library represents a real force which could bring about beneficial changes in the educational & cultural landscape. In light of the wonderful results achieved so far, we are determined to continue our policy and uphold the good name and reputation given by its founding father, King Carol I, while at the same time stepping up the pace in order to be fresh and attract youth.

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