**SWOT Analysis: Los Angeles Public Library**

In order “to improve library services and envision their library’s role in the city’s future,” public library administrators “avail in a continual planning process,” points out Disher (2010, p. 63). Using the SWOT Analysis—a widely popular method that affords library managers with the opportunity of establishing organizational priorities and developing sound strategic plans—library managers can plan effectively for successful fulfillment of libraries’ primary mission in serving their patrons in the continually changing environment. Even though they cannot predict the future, by careful assessment of the public libraries’ internal strengths and weaknesses, as well as external opportunities and threats, public library administrators can anticipate the upcoming changes and be proactive in adapting their activities and solving potential problems. This paper provides a brief SWOT analysis of the Los Angeles Public Library.

**Strengths**

*Collections and indexes.* Dedicated to providing free and easy access to information, ideas, books, and technology that enrich, educate, and empower every individual in the city’s diverse communities, Los Angeles Public Library offers a wide range of library services to the public. The Library’s indisputable traditional strength is embodied in the wealth of print and electronic resources contained in its collections and indexes:

- Catalog: over 6 million books, audio books, periodicals, DVDs, and CDs
- Photo Collection: over 80,000 photographs, with emphasis on Southern California history
• LAPL Indexes: Indexes maintained by LAPL’s own librarians covering various fields from autographs to cookery and obituaries to theater (Los Angeles Public Library, Collections & Resources); etc.

*Online services.* In addition to the traditional services, due to personal interest in digital services, I see the LAPL’s strength in the relatively new development—online services and e-Media. In the 2007-2010 Strategic Plan, in order to succeed in its core mission, the library was charged with bringing technology’s benefits to everyone: “Customers will have access to technology that connects them to the world of information and enables them to communicate with others, anywhere at anytime” (Los Angeles Public Library, 2007, p. 11). As a result of the successful strategic plan implementation, anyone with the library card can now access the library’s growing collection of e-books, movies, music, databases, and other media through the library’s website. The library digital services include, among others:

• Online Research and Homework: up-to-date subject information from journals, dictionaries, encyclopedias, statistical resources
• E-Media: e-Books, e-Audiobooks, e-Videos, and mp3 music downloads
• Web Resources: librarian-chosen Web sites for answering questions; links to most popular Web search engines; etc.

In addition, the library maintains an Online Learning section, offering a wide range of interactive online courses on career, technology, personal development, writing, and publishing subject areas (Los Angeles Public Library, Online Learning). The section features an Online Instruction Center “ed2go,” the LearningExpress Library, Testing & Education Reference Center, Universal Class, VerbaLearn, and online foreign-language learning opportunities via
Mango Languages and Powerspeak Languages. New to the Wordpress blogger community, I was especially happy to see the Wordpress website publishing course, on ed2go.

Community and charitable support. The Library enjoys the support of the local public which has passed the bond measures to sustain its services. In addition, Los Angeles Public Library receives strong support from the Library Foundation of Los Angeles—an independent fundraising organization working to complement the city funding. The Foundation closely partners with all 73 Los Angeles Public Library branches, having raised over $80 million for the Public Library (Library Foundation of Los Angeles, *Who We Are*).

**Weaknesses**

The Los Angeles Public Library might need to improve several areas in its work, in particular:

*Strategic planning.* The Library’s most recent strategic plan expired in 2010 (Los Angeles Public Library, 2007) and the institution appears to be in critical need of a new strategic plan. Without carefully planning for the future, the Library may find itself in a *Zeitnot*\(^1\) when addressing new and inevitable developments in its working environment.

*Facilities.* In addition to the Central Brach, the LAPL currently maintains 72 regional and community branches. Whereas majority of them, more than 90% according to the LAPL 2007-2010 Strategic Plan, offer contemporary building structures fit to provide both traditional and innovative, technology-based services, several branches remain in critical need for expansion and renovation. The North Hollywood Regional Branch, located in my neighborhood, for example, while awarded a status of historical monument and having undergone several

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\(^1\) From German Zeitnot (“need of time”) – a German chess term meaning time pressure, or literally “time emergency,” according to [http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=zeitnot](http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=zeitnot)
expansion and renovation efforts, due to its small size (15,000 sq. ft.² per 210,000 local neighborhood population³) and antiquated equipment has long exhausted its full potential in serving the local community.

Technology. Visited by 12,700,000 users annually, the LAPL currently offers only 2,300 public computers (Los Angeles Public Library Facts 2012). This data, incidentally, was presented as strength in the LAPL 2007-2010 Strategic Plan (Los Angeles Public Library, 2007, p. 8, §5). I, on the contrary, consider the 2,300 / 12,700,000 computer access ratio extremely low. In order to truly help its users bridge the digital divide, the Library needs to expand the number of computer stations for public use.

Programs. Creating a literate city was listed in the LAPL 2007-2010 Strategic Plan as one of the main strategic goals (Los Angeles Public Library, p. 16). Whereas the Library has made significant progress in this program, having established 21 adult literacy centers since November 2009 (Library Foundation of Los Angeles, Adult Literacy), this number represents merely under one third of the overall LAPL user community. More growth is needed in order to cover all 73 regional and community branches.

Opportunities

Demographic factor: Population diversity. In addition to the opportunities featured in the LAPL 2007-2010 Strategic Plan—information access, technology as added value, public place, reading for success, and partnerships—I view the diversity of Los Angeles population as a tremendous opportunity for growth. Some of the diversity-focused programs may include: nation celebration events; expansion of print and web collections in various languages spoken in Los Angeles.

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² Source: M2A Architects
³ Source: Universal City North Hollywood Chamber of Commerce
Technology: The second digital divide. To ensure the public library thrives in the evolving media landscape, the Los Angeles Public Library implements technological innovations that support the digital services, such as website upgrade, wireless access replacement, and PC and printer upgrades. Technology enhancement, however, is only part of the digital inclusion equation. “Broadband Internet access is essential but access alone is not enough. Basic computer skills and high-level cognitive skills for finding, evaluating, ethically using, creating, and sharing information also are required for digitally inclusive communities. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) estimates that 66 million people in the United States lack basic digital literacy skills,” states the ALA’s Digital Literacy Task Force in the 2013 Report (American Library Association, 2013, p. 3). In order to address this issue, the LAPL could augment its existing Adult Literacy program, e.g., with the new, Digital Literacy, component, helping residents master the skills of using computers and digital information.

Service awareness. Development of new programs and services also requires raising awareness of these services. The recent survey of the Pew Research Center’s Internet & American Life Project on library services found that only “about a fifth said they know most or all of what services are available; and almost a third said they knew not much or nothing” (Schwartz, 2013). The LAPL could address the lack of awareness by developing outreach and community awareness programs, including city-wide survey of library services awareness, thus turning it into another growth opportunity.

Threats
“Although threats are indeed external things beyond your library’s ability to control, your strategic plan still needs to identify them so that your organization develops alternative plans to address them if or when they occur,” argues Disher (2010, p. 69).

Financial instability. Financial instability will remain a primary threat for library operations. In 2010, for example, Mayor Antonia Villaraigosa “convinced the City Council to close the city's central and eight regional libraries on Sundays, then slashed $22 million from the 2010-11 budget and closed all 73 libraries on Mondays beginning July 19. Library officials say as many as 15,000 youths -- plus an untold number of adults -- have been turned away every closed day this summer,” according to LA Weekly (Wilson, 2011). Whereas Measure L that passed in 2011 had reversed the $22 million cut, it will take years before the LAPL fully recovers from the 2010 budget reduction: “Measure L requires the city to gradually direct additional funds to the Los Angeles Public Library over the next four years without raising taxes until the 2009 funding levels are restored,” report Public Libraries (2011).

In order to address the threat posed by financial constraints, the LAPL has planned to investigate the feasibility of a bond to fund the construction, expansion, and/or renovation of library facilities identified in the Facilities Master Plan and to identify potential funding opportunities (Los Angeles Public Library, 2007, p. III-1). Expanding community partnership for fundraising opportunities and seeking alternative sources of funding could be also helpful in addressing this threat.

Additional threats. Additional threats include: competition from other public institutions for funds, competition from other information providers; such as bookstores and e-book retailers; etc.
By taking advantage of the SWOT analysis, the LAPL could truly increase its potential of improving local communities, bringing the benefits of technology to all residents, helping students succeed, supporting lifelong learning, and creating a literate, culturally aware city.

References


