

Becoming Anythink: Creating a Library Brand that People Love

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Abstract:

According to the Denver Post, the public libraries in Adams County were the worst libraries in Colorado in 2004. After a series of events including becoming a special taxing district, a successful ballot initiative that increased library funding and a start-up style reinvention of the library system, almost overnight, the library was a huge success. To communicate this new direction, the district clearly needed a new brand. The Anythink story is about a cohesive, structural reorganization that delivers sustainable, creative library services to a growing community. By focusing on the elimination of barriers, hospitality and informal learning, this library created the experience model. And that experience led to a brand that the community loves, a library that people can't live without. Welcome to Anythink, where everyone feels at home: part corner store, part community living room, cultural hub, book and media center and creative learning space. Reinventing the library shifted the staff and community perception of a 21st century library.

Keywords: Branding, Culture, Innovation, Libraries, Creativity.

Just a few short years back, Adams County libraries were some of the worst-funded libraries in Colorado. While the staff did their best to make the most of limited resources, and our customers felt a sense of loyalty to their libraries, the fact was that the Rangeview Library District needed help.



**You are not
just an employee,
volunteer or board member.**

You do not merely catalog books,
organize periodicals and manage resources.
You are the gateway into the mind of the idea people
who come to our facilities to find or fuel a spark.

Part **WIZARD**

Part **GENIUS**

Part **EXPLORER**

It is your calling to trespass into the unknown and
come back with a concrete piece someone can hold
onto, turn over, and use to fuel their mind and soul.

Across the world, funding decisions are forcing some libraries to close or reduce services. In November 2006, our community voted to increase library funding, which has provided the resources to create a fresh start for our libraries. Because of this support, Rangeview Library District was able to transform into Anythink and reinvent its library services.

Building the Anythink brand started before we even began thinking about a new logo. The district's leadership built four new libraries and renovated three buildings under a premise of designing libraries for people, not books. At the heart of this philosophy is our decision to create an experience model, which means everything we do at Anythink is based on creating amazing experiences for our customers. This influences the way our spaces

are designed, our interactive programming, our decision to go fine free, our move away from the Dewey Decimal System to WordThink, our staffing model and the Anythink brand itself.

The Anythink staff manifesto anchors the inspiration of the brand:

“You are not just an employee, volunteer or board member. You do not merely catalog books, organize periodicals and manage resources. You are the gateway into the mind of the idea people who come to our facilities to find or fuel a spark. Part wizard, part genius, part explorer. It is your calling to trespass into the unknown and come back with a concrete piece someone can hold onto, turn over, and use to fuel their mind and soul.

What is Anythink?

Hospitality

When you walk into an Anythink library, it should feel like a metaphorical hug. Hospitality is important to us at Anythink – as important as customer service. We want guests and customers to feel welcomed, supported and inspired. We train our staff regularly on hospitality, something you can feel when you walk in and are warmly greeted with a smile. Hospitality, as framed by New York City restaurateur Danny Meyer, is knowing someone is on your side. From finding towels for kids to dry off after a rainstorm to helping a senior

learn to self-publish a children's book written for his daughter, our staff understand that the key to our success starts with empathy.

Understanding barriers and then minimizing these barriers creates an environment for success. Anythink does not charge overdue fines, which eliminates the stress for busy people who merely forget the due dates on their materials. This essentially equates to a generous grace period of a couple of weeks. The interactions with staff are now focused on conversations about ideas, programs and great books to read instead of telling people they can't use the library because of fines.

In 2009, Anythink was the first library in the country to move away from the Dewey Decimal Classification System district-wide, replacing it with a word-based system we call WordThink. This new classification system uses words instead of numbers, empowering customers to find what they need without having to decipher the numerical code. This transition has empowered users to discover their materials independently. Children feel successful as they can find books that they want to read with ease. Research has shown that school libraries that use a word-based classification system results in children checking out more books. Using the library should be an adventure, not an overwhelming or intimidating interaction.

Spaces for people

As uplifting public gathering spaces, our libraries contribute to a rewarding quality of life. As part of Anythink's experience model, special attention is paid to designing spaces for people. Spaces for people to play, learn, collaborate and reflect. Especially in public libraries, space is now used dramatically differently than in the past. Instead of planning space based on bookshelves, tables and chairs, we plan space for flexibility to support people of all ages wishing to work and learn together. Today, people use the library to record music, write and perform poetry, design graphics, experiment with crafts and teach each other how to make and fix things.

Treehouses

Treehouses are a recurring iconic symbol for Anythink. They represent a space where imagination reigns and where anything and everything is possible – an apt metaphor for our library. The inspiration of the treehouse is reflected in large tree sculptures where people experience a light-filled constellation of the night sky or sounds from a frog pond. These spaces create coves for children to immerse themselves in an imaginary world where they can invent their afternoon or dream up their future. In another library, the indoor woods connect with the outdoor landscape, creating a metaphorical forest of discovery.

Experience Zones

Like libraries, museums are moving away from being defined by their collections and anchoring their work on creating learning experiences. Anythink continues to draw from museums to create informal learning opportunities. Play, imagination, innovation and learning are all intertwined in these experience zones. Children and adults who actively play lead healthier, more fulfilling lives.

Puzzle it, play it, roll it, fall for it, think it, create it, delight in it. Interact. Be a kid. Play! Experiences that surprise at our libraries support informal learning. These activities are one way we create lifelong memories for our customers. They can be as simple as customers sharing what they love on a sticky note for Valentine's Day or dabbling with water color painting, or as advanced as creating a robot using Cubelets or interacting with a cosmic exhibition hosted by Discover Space.

Almost anything can be an experience or informal learning zone. Each spring, we host embryology experiences in partnership with our local 4-H. Our community watches as eggs in incubators develop over the course of several weeks, and then witness the excitement of chicks or ducklings hatching. Our staff creates programming and book displays around these embryology experiences, and the parking lot is always full on the days that the chicks are hatching.

One of our most successful experiences was accidental. In 2013, we hired goat herders to bring their goats to the library to "mow" our extensive natural grass lawn. Almost immediately, the goat herders turned into information professionals, answering every question under the sun about goats. Library staff quickly became goat experts as well. For days, people came to watch, pet and feed the goats, demonstrating that live experience zones can be the most rewarding.

The Studio

Expanding upon the library experience is the idea of participation. Nina Simon, author of *The Participatory Museum*, defines participatory cultural institutions as places where "visitors create, share and connect around content." At Anythink, we are working on creating partnerships with our community to provide active, participatory experiences centered on production and social interaction. Customers determine the scope and content of their own experiences and staff act as host, mentor or resource broker.

Customers learn soft skills such as critical thinking and problem solving as well as hard skills that lead toward mastery of an art or craft. Customers create content based on their interests, interact with tools, experts and activities that provide resources for participant-driven learning. As we work toward these goals, increasingly, the talent and leadership comes from the community.

Culture

In order to accomplish this shift in library services, growing a culture that supports creativity and innovation requires structure, a strong identity, continuous improvement and support, and clarity of expectations. This starts with our values:

- Compassion for our customers and each other
- Passion for our product
- Eagerness to learn
- Everyone is creative
- Optimistic attitude- we believe anything is possible

As we restructured our organization, we designed new jobs and descriptions, including guides, concierges and wranglers. We became a competency based organization, hiring and

evaluating based on 13 core competencies including problem solving, innovation, collaboration, compassion, customer focused, flexibility and continuous learning. We hire people who have attributes of our archetypes – wizard, genius and explorer. This motivates us to explore possibilities, celebrate adventure and discovery and replaces inertia with momentum.

Developing a culture of optimism and creativity requires constant attention. This requires consistent communication and careful use of language. We are a playful organization that works tremendously hard and you will discover people supporting each other, challenging each other, working and playing together. When you walk through our libraries, you will often hear laughter coming from our offices. We have two to three all staff training days each year, focusing on essential philosophies such as technology, creativity and play. In 2017, we will host an internal TEDxAnythink event that will celebrate the stories of our diverse staff.

We have a staff task group known as the Yellow Geckos. It is their task to organize fun experiences outside of work. This includes bowling nights, karaoke, bingo, films at Red Rocks Amphitheater, mystery dinners, hiking, snowshoeing and Texas Hold'em, a poker event that raises funds to support a local family during the holiday season.

We are an organization that gives itself permission to tackle big problems, to be candid about our shortcomings and to expect our staff to champion their innovative ideas no matter what their position.

Too often, people mistake the concept of brand with a logo. I have described our brand by highlighting some essentials of our organization. The values, personality, and style of Anythink are distinctive. We systematically invented an organization that cohesively presents its brand through the way we present our spaces, our graphics, our sense of hospitality and our quest for excellence. Anythink is defined by these elements, but the true spirit of the brand is deployed by the staff. The compassion, generosity, empathy and optimism of the staff creates a unique Anythink experience.

We are redefining what a library means for our community in Adams County. Our county is one of the most rapidly growing in Colorado. Over 70 percent of our population is under the age of 50. Our customers are predominantly young families with children in a community without many cultural and educational amenities.

When our team began designing the library structure, systems and spaces, our decisions were made in support of our community. We continue to create libraries that support the spirit of our community. It became evident early on that the brand of the Rangeview Library District did not reflect the enthusiasm, energy and passion of our library.



RANGEVIEW

LIBRARY DISTRICT

In 2008, our Board of Trustees had the courage to issue an RFP for the rebranding of our library. After years of poor funding, the image of our library was negative. People came to our libraries to quickly check out materials in small, dark and dingy buildings, but the experience wasn't pleasant. Many of our customers visited neighboring libraries or simply didn't use the library at all. The Rangeview brand was confusing at best, and carried negative connotations in our community. People either didn't know what or where Rangeview was or knew the library as an old, worn-down system.

As we were inventing a 21st-century library, we needed a brand that would capture our fresh optimism and energy. We found the talent that believed in us as much as we believed in ourselves – Ricochet Ideas, with creative director John Bellina and graphic designer Tasso Stathopoulos.



This team took the time to understand the DNA of our organization. We were disrupting library conventions and inventing a fresh way for people to interact with information. Through a series of meetings and exercises, it became apparent that we needed a new name. It was a huge leap to move away from the word “library,” but because we were inventing a new kind of library, the invented name of Anythink resonated. Anythink stands for anything you want to know, or think about – anything you want to do or become. Anythink means anything is possible. It also connects with the basic democracy of public libraries: We are open for anyone and everyone and we protect the freedom to read anything you want. The

doodle reflects the beginning. Every idea starts with a spark of thought, a sketch, a doodle. After much vetting and some apprehension, Anythink was born.

Introducing the brand started with our Board of Trustees. Reviews were mixed – some loved the idea, and some didn't like the idea at all. One board member reflected: "This is radical, revolutionary and risky. Why wouldn't we do it?" We continued the internal rollout of the brand, one branch at a time. The staff loved the brand and gave us so many suggestions as to how we could help launch this new idea with our community. We spent close to half a year with an internal launch of the brand. The staff felt a part of something important, something that was more than a promise or a dream. The idea of becoming Anythink became a powerful reality. We weren't going to be a forlorn library anymore; we were going to be a powerful force in our community. The idea of helping people go out into the world and discover things they didn't know, didn't understand, couldn't find, or figure out – that's the spark. That's the reason we become librarians; partnering with people to help them fulfill their hopes and dreams is at the heart of Anythink. The library really is a space that is so much more important than just a place to check out a book. We strive to be that place that people cannot live without. We strive to be a place that empowers our community to dream big, to take risks and to create something, Anythink.

We think using libraries should be a great experience. When you walk in the door, it should be filled with great books, movies and music. It should be easy to find the things that you are looking for, as well as surprising you when you find things that you didn't even know existed. We do everything possible to help you feel smart in our libraries, not intimidated. We are merging the comforts of the traditional library with innovations of the future.

Welcome to Anythink, where everyone can feel at home. We are part corner store, part community living room, a cultural hub, book and media center, and a creative learning space.

Whether you need to use a computer, find some great books to read to your children, watch a movie, find a recipe for tonight's dinner, or finish a term paper, we are partners helping you to succeed. Anythink is a place where you can meet your neighbor; explore your community, or the world. Anythink is a place where you can learn gardening, create a video, write a poem, invent your next business, or teach your community how to brew beer. Anythink is a place where we open doors for curious minds.