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Library Dilemma Revisited

When I first started out in the corporate world, a professional lifetime ago, one of the most meaningful orientation messages to me was projected onto a screen from an 8 ½" x 11" transparency using an old-time, overhead projector. When did you last use such a transparency, or its flatbed projector? That gets to my point today – technology “A” phases out, technology “B” in; corporation “A” goes out of business, “B” in, often.

On that transparency were the names of fifty companies. The presenter asked if we recognized any of the names. I recognized most of them. Others in the audience did as well. The presenter then told us that 47 of the 50 were no longer in business. That point stuck with me throughout my whole career in corporate R&D, and it sticks with me now as a Library Board Trustee and Foundation Director. Libraries are corporations too, with their own old-time technologies and ideas.

I wrote an essay for this column a little over a year ago about this “Dilemma”; it is #66 in the archive at <https://www.murrysvillelibrary.org>. It cited Clayton Christensen’s book “The Innovator’s Dilemma” (1997), about the optical disc industry, which I still highly recommend. I wrote this then: “The trap is that one-time innovators of industry tend to become complacent and defensive of short-term self-interests; they become oblivious to and resisters of innovation. Innovations elsewhere inevitably displace their once-lucrative markets, and/or snap up the new ones, eventually.”

It is not that public Libraries have not transformed themselves. They really have, with electronic cataloging, wi-fi inside and outside the building, more comprehensive programming for all ages including virtual programming, and providing access to e-books, as examples from the recent past. They are even now adding on, with Power Library upgrades, standards-based STEM programming, teen programming, digital literacy initiatives, and planning a medical awareness resource center. Some are initiatives that I have touted to you in this column when writing about Murrysville Community Library, Delmont Public Library, and Greensburg Hempfield Area Library.

So why worry about the Dilemma? It is because tweens, teens, and young adults live on the Internet, not usually in libraries, for everything. They turn into adults with that habit (or addiction). They are not necessarily driven first by the value of informed sources or the beauty of great prose and poetry.

To put this all another way, designing a new logo for the WLN Library card would be about rebranding, and maybe a worthwhile thing to do. It is not, however, about directly facing the Dilemma, which again is to make sure that public Libraries, like all corporations, keep redefining themselves by their actual services and products. In the case of the WLN, that means being ahead of the Internet wave and other less clear waves.

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That is the story that Clayton Christensen tells in “The Innovator’s Dilemma.” You can put a hold on his book, or any book, at your WLN Library, 24/7, from home or anywhere. This month marks the 15th-year WLN anniversary of that “24/7-from-anywhere launch,” as well as of the countywide card that branded it!

Charles B. Greenberg
Board Director, Murrysville Community Library Foundation