

Case study



# Launching the new Library of Birmingham



Photo: Christian Richters

Kate Feld interviews Sara Rowell,  
Partnerships and Marketing Senior Manager,  
at the Library of Birmingham



Published 2013.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 2.0 UK: England & Wales License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.0/)

Supported by



Supported using public funding by  
**ARTS COUNCIL  
ENGLAND**

Created and managed by



In partnership with



*It's not every day that libraries make the front page, but the opening of the new Library of Birmingham was one of the big culture stories of 2013. Sara Rowell, Partnerships and Marketing Senior Manager at the Library of Birmingham looks back on the run-up to the launch of the spectacular new building, which she's been working on in some form for the last nine years, and talks about what happens next.*

**Kate Feld:** Could you talk us through your thinking around the launch of the new library?

**Sara Rowell:** The Library of Birmingham has been a very long project, and our main emphasis prior to the opening was on successful public relations. The first thoughts about needing a new library go back at least a decade. Initially the council wanted to build on another site on the other side of the city, but after a change of political administration the decision was taken to build much closer to the site of the old Central Library and partner with the Birmingham Repertory Theatre (The REP). Because of the debate about where the new Library was going to be built, we were starting from quite a difficult position in terms of the public relations and marketing.

We needed to steer the media away from treating the Library of Birmingham as a topic of controversy and focus much more on the benefits: what it would do for the city, how it would transform the physical environment and how through the services we provide it would transform people's lives. We brought in specialist PR service providers to support the project and took a drip-drip approach to working with the media, working with them to develop interesting positive news stories and features, so that over time attitudes changed. By the time we opened there was huge anticipation and excitement about the Library of Birmingham – and a huge amount of positive coverage locally, nationally and internationally.

**KF:** What was the turning point?

**SR:** A big turning point was when we got capital approval in 2007, and people began to understand that the new library was really going to happen. And the other big turning point was when we revealed the design for the building and people could visualise what it was going to look like in its setting. As with all great architecture, some people love the design and others not, but it excites people and gets people talking. What's been really interesting is the reaction people have to the library space inside. Just about everybody who comes in for the first time looks up through the stunning rotunda atrium and says "wow."

In the run up to opening, the PR campaign put a lot of emphasis on the collections and how the library is opening up its resources in new ways, particularly digitally. Over the summer we brought in groups of journalists for preview tours of the building, with a carefully timed embargo, leading to excellent coverage just before and at the time of the opening. The PR campaign generated an air of anticipation which really set the platform for the opening (on 3 September, 2013)

**KF:** How did you approach the opening event?

**SR:** We thought very carefully about who we wanted to open the library and chose Malala Yousafzai (the Pakistani schoolgirl shot by a Taliban gunman in 2012 for speaking out about education for girls.) When she was injured in Pakistan she was brought to hospital here in Birmingham; she and her family have remained in the city and she's going to school



Photo: Christian Richters

here now. We could think of no-one better to represent what the library stands for, absolute democracy for learning and education.

We also felt it was important that the opening was a public event, so we held the opening ceremonies out in front of the library in Centenary Square. Thousands of people and the media gathered to watch and few can have failed to be impressed by the very powerful speech that Malala gave. As we opened the doors, the public entered to the sound of a group of Dhol drummers. Inside we had a unique brass band assembled to perform in our book rotunda space, which was an amazing spectacle and a fantastic way to kick off our Discovery Season, a four-month programme of events and activities to celebrate the opening. We had media coverage right across world for the opening, and we're sure this has had a really significant impact on visitor numbers, getting the Library off to a great start.

**KF:** Have visitor numbers met your projections?

**SR:** They have and we exceeded a million visitors before Christmas, putting us on track to welcome up to 3 million visitors during our first year of operation. So many people have come in who were library members long ago but hadn't been back for years, and we've had a great influx of new people wanting to join. And people visiting the city are coming in to experience the new building – including our two beautiful elevated garden terraces where people can admire the view and enjoy the green surroundings. We're also rapidly establishing the Library of Birmingham as a new venue for corporate events and our meeting rooms are in great demand.

**KF:** Are there any particular investments you've made in PR or marketing that you think were especially effective?

**SR:** Investment in additional carefully chosen PR support was really effective. It helped considerably to work with a firm that could provide specialist knowledge and connections, particularly in the fields of publishing, culture and the arts and the national and international media.

**KF:** How much of a budget did you have for the launch?

**SR:** We secured a significant grant from the Arts Council for our opening season, the Discovery Season, to launch the Library of Birmingham and without this we would have had to pare back our plans dramatically. We made an early application for the funding and we couldn't have achieved such a varied and exciting opening season without their support.

**KF:** A lot rests on the programming. At some point people who live there will stop coming in just to check out the new building, right?

**SR:** That's right, we want people to return again and again, so in addition to offering excellent services what we wanted to do with the opening season was position the Library as an important new destination for events and activities in Birmingham's cultural mix. The Discovery Season demonstrated the possibilities of our spaces and what a library can be in the 21st Century, which is very different from the way people traditionally perceived a library – it's a vibrant place for people to come, meet and enjoy new experiences, a great place to spend leisure time. It's about much more than books and reading, though these are still very much at the heart of the Library. Events and exhibitions help draw people in and encourage them to discover everything the Library has to offer, from support for new businesses and skills development to family history research and our extensive Music Library.

We launched our Cultures Season in January and we are already planning our summer season. We will continue to have a very varied programme and going forward will increasingly be working collaboratively with partners. We're getting a lot of approaches with proposals for events and activities here, because people have seen what this building is and what the artistic possibilities might be. The REP are a particularly important partner and we're exploring ways to look across our artistic programmes and join things up.

**KF:** Is there anything you wish you'd done differently or would advise people in similar circumstances to consider?

**SR:** As a public library, we inevitably have limited budgets for marketing. The project of delivering this library has pump primed our marketing, but when it comes to promotional materials and looking at our marketing strategy we've got to think very carefully. We ordered a print run of 10,000 visitor guides to start with and they were gone within 48

hours! We can't sustain the cost of this level of demand so we've had to look at alternatives. We are encouraging visitors to download the visitor guide to their mobile device and now have in production an audio-guide and a laminated hard copy of the guide that can be reused by visitors over and over again.

Working with partners on a reciprocal basis to cross-promote one another's events is a really important way forward for us. Talking with colleagues in other organisations, they're facing similar challenges on the cost of print and moving away from it, so it very much suits us all to work together.

**KF:** Social media and digital marketing becomes much more important then.

**SR:** It does, and we've invested in a number of digital channels. This includes high quality digital screens around the building - with such high footfall this gives us a fantastic opportunity to promote our activities at low cost. We've put a big effort into Facebook and Twitter and really getting follower numbers up and we now have much more of a critical mass to engage with. We've invested in a brand new website and an e-newsletter, and a mobile app as well. Having made the initial investment in these digital channels we can develop their usage further and add all sorts of new content at a relatively low cost.

**KF:** It sounds like you've thought quite carefully about creating a framework that is sustainable going forward and making the most of the money when you have it.

**SR:** We can be certain the future means continuing to work with constrained marketing budgets, and we do have to ensure that what we do is sustainable. The Library of Birmingham is already having a significant impact for the city and our challenge now is to maintain the momentum - hopefully our marketing strategy will enable us to achieve this.