



## Idea Store Strategy: Quick Guide

### Idea Stores – the story so far...

In 1998 the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, having seen users of its public libraries drop to 18% of the population (against 55% in the UK), asked itself a fundamental question: do we still need libraries? The question turned into a major marketing research project, in which people said that they would use libraries, as long as they were more relevant to their needs, with an improved offer of books, information and spaces. Some of the findings were not surprising, but the most important one was that people wanted libraries to fit their lifestyle, open longer hours and be located in such a way that borrowing a book could be as easy as buying bread or milk - the choice of location on a high street, therefore, was crucial. The quality data from the research prompted the council to work with Bisset Adams, a London-based architect and branding studio. After two years of close collaboration and public involvement, a new concept was born, one based on widening participation in library and lifelong learning, as well as access to information..

The core values at the heart of the concept are:

*Engage*            *Empower*            *Enrich*

These can be summarised as finding innovative ways of attracting, and once attracted, capturing, new audiences (*engage*); once engaged, it is important to listen to their needs and facilitate active participation (*empower*). This is achieved through simplifying some routine functions, so that staff can be more engaged with the public and act as facilitators, rather than custodians of book collections. A good system of self-service RFID units and strong, simple signage solutions are essential in this respect, together with a more liberal approach, because the forbidding formality of traditional libraries contributes to the exclusion of non-traditional users – so this new concept threw away the rule book, and any negative signage (no food, no drink, no mobile phones, etc.) was forever banned. Those who anticipated a descent into total anarchy and anti-social behaviour were disappointed, because a strong sense of civility prevailed, one based on mutual respect and consideration for others.

Open, flexible spaces, with lots of glass and natural light, cafes with lovely views over cityscapes, and the opportunity to enjoy a yoga or salsa dance class (or any of the 1,000 courses offered yearly) contribute to a quality experience (*enrich*). These core values apply equally to staff, in a holistic approach that is not typical of a municipal service. A key finding in the research also indicated that people responded well to real customer care and a 'retail feel', so the commercial model is the inspiration here too, albeit the purpose remains to deliver a free, not for profit, public service. The physical manifestation of this can be seen as soon as one enters an Idea Store, which looks very much like a quality book shop, with strong graphic imagery, popular books and core collections attractively presented with the covers face-on, and friendly staff floorwalking, rather than sitting behind an intimidating counter. But the similarities end here, because what makes Idea Stores very different from a book shop are its customers: a true representation of the

melting pot that is Tower Hamlets, with its 50% non-white residents, men and women, young and old, covering the socio-economic spectrum of the capital.

The collaboration with Bisset Adams resulted in a long-lasting service strategy and robust brand guidelines (still valid 11 years on), followed by the design of Idea Store Bow, opened in 2002. This was a refurbishment of an existing council property that met the location criteria and out of a rather non-descript building, the architects created an exciting, imaginative, flexible place, with a strong sense of purpose, now beloved by the community.

The second and third Idea Stores, at Chrisp Street and Whitechapel, were purpose built and designed by David Adjaye. The branding was developed further through imposing and recognisable buildings with coloured and see-through glass that made a strong impact in the area, and communicated the desire to be open, transparent and truly welcome to all. Once established a strong brand identity through the first three stores, the fourth, located in the busy Canary Wharf shopping centre, was simply a shop fit out. Similarly to what happens when retail expands, the economies of scale began to pay off – this was definitely the store that was easier to accomplish. In May 2013 we opened our fifth site, Idea Store Watney Market, again designed by Bisset Adams. The main innovation at this store is that we have introduced other services, such as a One Stop Shop - a customer facing service point dealing with local residents' enquiries relating to housing, benefits and many other council services. While the idea of combining different services under one roof is not particularly new, the strong Idea Store branding here means that the services are truly seamless, and the experience for users, whether they come into the building looking for library, learning, information or any other services, is greatly enhanced.

There are many factors that make Idea Stores stand out among modern libraries: the core services (library, learning, information) are seamlessly integrated, staff take their customers 'all the way', rather than passing them from specialist to specialist. The buildings manifest this approach too, by mixing learning and library spaces, so people attending a class can often find books supporting their learning immediately outside that class. Widening participation policies and liberal attitudes mean that the whole community now participates. But if there is a single key factor in the success of Idea Stores, it is that as much effort was put in the concept as on new buildings. We often see under-performing library authorities think that the crisis can simply be resolved by a new building (usually very expensive), without thinking that behind that crisis there is much more than a building. The problem is that not only old books are loaded onto removal vans, but also the same attitude and obsolete approach that were the real cause of non-participation, so the library might look new and polished, but it smells of old. Inevitably, the initial success fades away, and where the architect created space and airiness, the librarian will stick posters and unnecessary hand written signs; where an empty space was deliberately created, chairs, tables and furniture of all types will appear, creating a visual cacophony that has nothing to do with the original vision. In defence of librarians, they are not normally involved in the creative process, and their simple advice that would deliver effective and efficient solutions is often ignored, at a high cost. In the case of Idea Stores this not happen - the on-going happy marriage of creative minds, taking the best from architecture, design and service innovation, is the key.