

WESTCHESTER WEEKLY DESK

INSTITUTIONS; Newest Latte Flavor? Try a Library

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MOST afternoons Marie Rendina, a retired office worker, heads for Café Livre in the New Rochelle Public Library to enjoy a cup of coffee and a book. The book is no surprise; it's what you would expect to find in a library. But the latte and hazelnut muffins are signs of something new.

As Patricia Anderson, the library's director, explains it, "If Barnes & Noble can do this, we can, too."

Indeed, libraries today are increasingly taking their cues from retail outlets, and they are marketing their wares with similar goals in mind: to find and keep audiences.

The primary job of the library -- to serve as a center for information -- has not changed, said Todd Harvey, a partner with Beatty, Harvey & Associates, a Manhattan architectural firm that specializes in libraries. His company recently designed a library for Ossining, and is at work on plans for another in Greenburgh.

What has changed, Mr. Harvey said, is the premium that libraries now place on attracting patrons. That dim, cluttered, understocked image is getting a makeover.

Inside the New Rochelle Public Library, for instance, Café Livre serves breakfast, sandwiches at lunch and snacks at all hours in a wood-paneled book-lined room.

Elsewhere in the building, more space has been set aside for browsing and lounging. Knitting groups meet, speakers are scheduled, book signings are held, Web sites have been enhanced, and book clubs offered through the library traverse a broader subject matter. (The library recently received a grant for a Jewish literature discussion club.)

"We're increasingly looking at things with more of a business sense," Ms. Anderson said. In keeping with this trend, the White Plains Public Library recently opened the Trove, a \$2.9 million, 13,000-square-foot addition for children, on its second floor. Library administrators have described the site -- financed with city and private money -- as combining "the qualities of a traditional library with the pizzazz of a bookstore."

According to Sandra C. Miranda, library director, "As a library competing for grants and other funding, we absolutely must incorporate tactics from the retail world."

To that end, before starting work on what would become the Trove, library officials trolled Disney and Warner Brothers outlets and their Web sites for ideas and new marketing strategies. They ended up with an interactive learning space with video screens, a tree trail, a cave, a ship and a castle -- elements that Ms. Miranda described as combining elements from programs like "Sesame Street" and retail outlets.

In Greenburgh, where Beatty is drawing up plans for a 50,000-square-foot library building, Demita Gerber, the library's director, compared the planned institution to a department store:

"Like any department store, we want to appeal to different groups and ages. And like department stores do, while we want to attract new users and younger families, we have to keep our traditional customers happy, too."

Ms. Gerber described today's library patrons as "very busy people who like the convenience of lots of bells and whistles," and want speedier checkout times.

Not that such ideas are brand new. Mr. Harvey says most libraries built over the last five years have included cafes. And Ms. Anderson, pointing out that the New Rochelle library began offering a few snacks in the 1980's, said "the coffee-and-a-book concept" is no recent phenomenon.

More recently, though, with more and more potential library users heading to coffeeshop-cum-bookstore chains, the scope of library offerings has expanded.

In Ossining, where a 48,000-square-foot library is under construction, a special section for young adults is being created, Mr. Harvey said. It will include a screen for showing weekend movies and space for playing music and chatting, in an effort to fulfill a long-overlooked segment of library users: middle-school and older teenagers.

"We want them hanging out at the library," he said, "not just at the malls."

But as much as libraries are finding it profitable to emulate bookstores and borrow marketing concepts from other outlets, Ms. Miranda of the White Plains Public Library explained, they still need to remain true to themselves.

"There is still a list of things we say 'no' to," she said, "like food and coffee anyplace in the library, and staying open on Saturday night. But who knows what will happen?"