



# The Geek the Library Theory

## Chapter 1

### Wegeekresearch

The comprehensive research study *From Awareness to Funding: A study of library support in America* found that increasing funding support for public libraries requires changing perceptions about public libraries from an institution that provides information to a critical piece of the community infrastructure that provides transformational opportunities.

This chapter features a recap of the study, including an overview of the library support segmentation, and the library funding drivers and supporter attitudes—all of which helped inform development of the strategy and creative approach for the Geek the Library community awareness campaign.

## Defining the challenge

Public libraries face a deepening challenge. Most U.S. public libraries report increased traffic—especially for computers and Internet access. The need for resources to help people find jobs and reeducate themselves is at an all-time high. Over 25 million Americans used public libraries more than 20 times in 2009, up from 20.3 million in 2006.<sup>1</sup> Over 50 percent of U.S. public libraries reported flat or decreased operating budgets in fiscal year 2010—with many anticipating further cuts.<sup>2</sup> Increasing competition for local funding has also led to chronic budget cuts for many tax-supported community services over the past few years.

The Geek the Library community awareness campaign pilot project was born out of the need to bridge the gap between increasing public library usage and diminishing budgets. The campaign provides an effective way for libraries to improve support, and grow awareness and mindshare in their local communities. Most U.S. residents cannot describe how their local library is funded and they are unaware that the majority of funding for U.S. public library operations comes from local tax receipts.

The campaign design, strategy and implementation were informed by the research findings of an advocacy research grant awarded to OCLC by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The detailed research findings are documented in the 2008 OCLC membership report, *From Awareness to Funding: A study of library support in America*.

## The research: an overview

The viability of a large-scale advocacy campaign to create an environment to sustain and increase funding for U.S. public libraries was put to the test. The goal of the research project was twofold: to understand the factors that drive, and limit, local library funding support; and to ascertain whether a national library support campaign could be effective at increasing and sustaining funding for U.S. public libraries by reaching and influencing the segments of the voting population that have the most potential to become committed library supporters.

1. American Library Association, “Libraries: Getting America Back to Work, A Legislative Proposal to Save Libraries and Help Job Seekers,” <http://www.ala.org/ala/aboutala/offices/wo/libraryjobs.pdf>.

2. American Library Association, “Libraries Connect Communities: Public Library Funding & Technology Access Study 2009-2010,” [http://www.ala.org/ala/research/initiatives/plftas/2009\\_2010/index.cfm#final%20report](http://www.ala.org/ala/research/initiatives/plftas/2009_2010/index.cfm#final%20report).

## Research hypothesis

*U.S. public libraries face similar marketing and advocacy challenges to those endured by other super brands. Lessons learned and successes achieved can be applied to increase library funding. Utilizing marketing and advocacy techniques targeted to the right community segments with the right messages and community programs, we can improve the state of public library funding.*

The research was designed to test the application of traditional market research, segmentation and targeting techniques to the library funding problem.

## Research objectives

- To create a market segmentation analysis of the U.S. voting population that identified which segments of voters are most likely to generate increased support for U.S. public libraries, and to uncover underlying library motivations and attitudes that are indicative and predictive of the level of support for library funding.
- To understand the attitudes and behaviors of elected and appointed officials about libraries in general, the library's importance to the community, and how those attitudes impact the officials' willingness to support local library funding.

## Research methodology

The quantitative study targeted two audiences: U.S. residents in communities with populations of less than 200,000 and elected officials in the United States. The study was intentionally designed to capture and analyze the attitudes, behaviors and opinions of residents in these communities. The quantitative survey provided data across a sample of 1,901 adults. The survey data for the total sample have a statistical margin of error of  $\pm 2.4$  percentage points at the 95 percent confidence level for the U.S. population ages 18–69 in communities of less than 200,000 people.

Additionally, two rounds of qualitative research were conducted to understand the attitudes and perceptions of the voters identified during the quantitative research as the most likely supporters. The qualitative research was also used to test messaging for a potential library support campaign. The research, published in *From Awareness to Funding: A study of library support in America*, indicated that an advocacy campaign targeting the appropriate audience with the right message could have significant impact on support for local library funding.

## Creating a library support segmentation

Much like other brands, public libraries face the challenge of creating an effective message, identifying the appropriate audiences, and changing perceptions in a way that might impact current and future behavior related to library support. Using a robust market segmentation methodology, the survey data were analyzed to create a Library Supporter Segmentation framework that categorizes and profiles segments of the voting population in relation to their level of commitment to public library funding support.

The segmentation analysis identified six constructs that are the key drivers of library funding attitudes and behaviors:

- Likelihood of voting favorably if a library referendum is on the ballot
- General voting behavior
- Stated barriers to using or supporting the library
- The library services they use
- Overall attitudes toward the library
- Perceptions of librarians

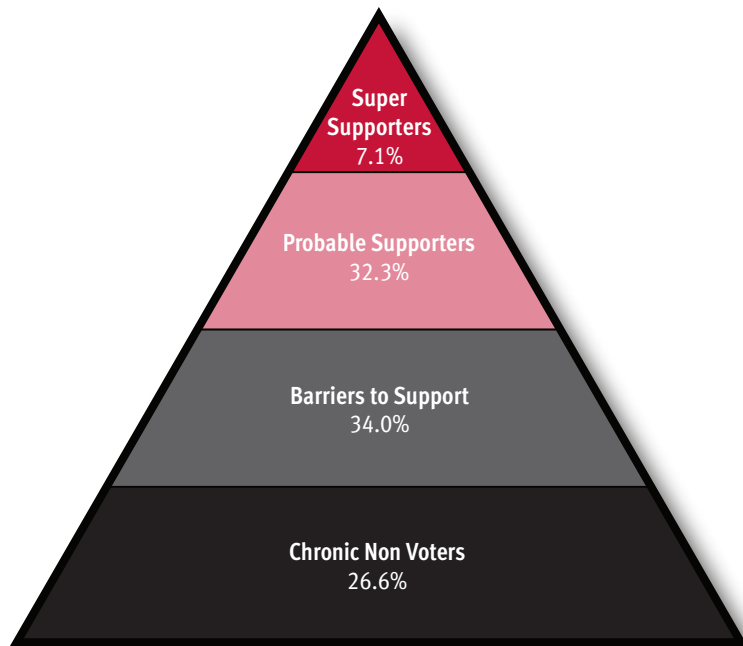
Library funding support is not driven by demographics, such as income, age, gender, race, political affiliation, etc. Voters' attitudes, perceptions and behaviors, not their demographic profiles, are the most important determinants of willingness to support increases in library funding. Library support is more about a mindset or an attitude than a traditional demographic profile.

A Library Supporter Segmentation Pyramid was developed based on the six identified constructs. Library supporters were categorized from those least likely to fund libraries at the ballot box (those at the bottom of the pyramid) to those most likely to vote in favor of a library referendum (those at the top of the pyramid).

Understanding, leveraging and delivering the appropriate message to these segments is a vital element of any successful awareness campaign. These findings provide the foundation for the strategy and the structure of Geek the Library.

## Library Supporter Segmentation Pyramid

Total respondents



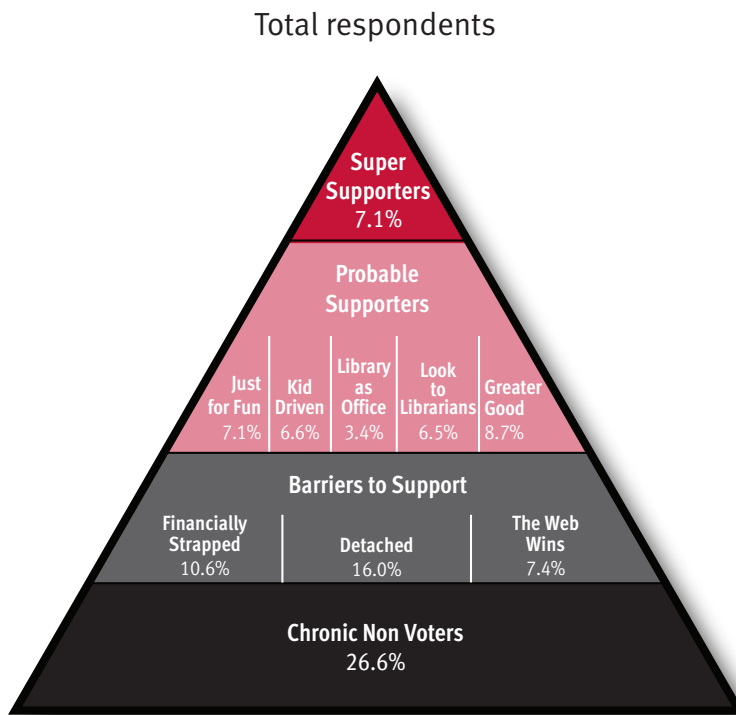
Population ages 18–69 living in communities of less than 200,000 U.S. residents.  
Source: *From Awareness to Funding*, OCLC, 2008

### The segmentation pyramid identified four distinct tiers:

- **Super Supporters:** Voters at the top tier of the segmentation pyramid. These are people who are most firmly committed to supporting a library funding initiative.
- **Probable Supporters:** Voters who are likely to support library funding initiatives, but are not fully committed.
- **Barriers to Support:** Voters who, for a variety of factors, have significant barriers to voting in favor of increased library funding.
- **Chronic Non Voters:** People who are not registered to vote or have a history of choosing not to vote in national and local elections.

Analysis of the middle two tiers identified variations and characteristics that were unique enough to merit further market segmentation. The Barriers to Support tier included three segments described as Financially Strapped, Detached and The Web Wins. The Probable Supporter tier was made up of five segments: Just for Fun, Kid Driven, Library as Office, Look to Librarians and Greater Good.

## Library Supporter Segmentation Pyramid



Percentage of population ages 18–69 living in communities of less than 200,000 U.S. residents.  
Source: *From Awareness to Funding*, OCLC, 2008

## Identifying library funding drivers

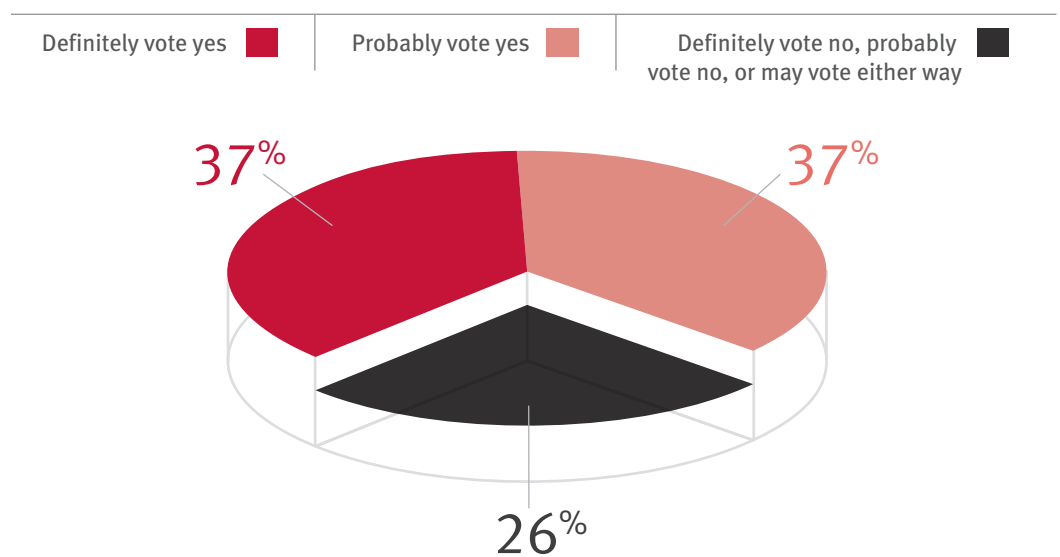
The quantitative survey identified a number of factors that drive, and limit, funding support of U.S. public libraries. These include information about the attitudes and behaviors of the respondents related to libraries, librarians, the library's role in the community, and respondents' willingness to increase taxes to support funding for libraries and other locally funded public services.

- **Most people claimed they would support the library at the ballot box—fewer are firmly committed to it.** Respondents were asked about their intent to vote if there was a library referendum, ballot initiative or bond measure during the next local election. A large percentage of respondents claimed they would either probably vote yes, or definitely vote yes, to increase funding for their local public library. After eliminating the respondents who were not registered to vote or showed a track record of not voting (identified as Chronic Non Voters), almost three quarters of the remaining voting respondents (74 percent) claimed that they would either probably or definitely vote yes; this group was evenly split with 37 percent saying they would probably vote yes for a library referendum and 37 percent saying they would definitely vote yes.

### Only 37% of voters say that they would *definitely* support the library at the ballot box

Total voting respondents

Respondents were asked: If there was a referendum, ballot initiative or bond measure for your local public library on the ballot, how do you think you would vote?



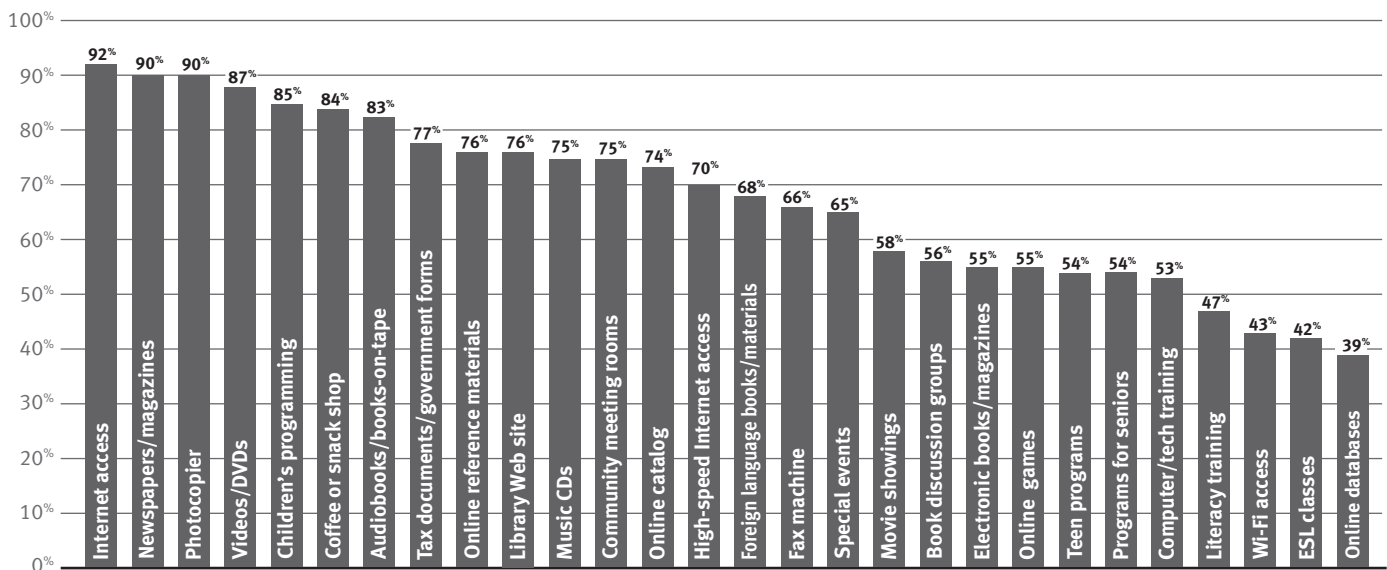
Source: *From Awareness to Funding*, OCLC, 2008

- **There is a lot that people don't know about their public libraries.** People are generally unaware of many of the services provided by their local libraries. They indicate awareness of traditional offerings: books, newspapers, magazines, videos/DVDs, etc., as well as services that provide public access computing and Internet access. However, they have much lower awareness of many of the value-added, community-focused programs, such as programming for seniors and teens, literacy training and book discussion groups. This lack of awareness may not be a deterrent for funding support. Unfamiliarity with the full range of library services does not dampen the positive attitudes about library funding held by Probable Supporters and Super Supporters.

## Awareness of services provided by the local public library

Total respondents

Respondents were asked: Below are some services or types of information that public libraries may or may not offer. For each one, please indicate whether or not your local public library offers this.



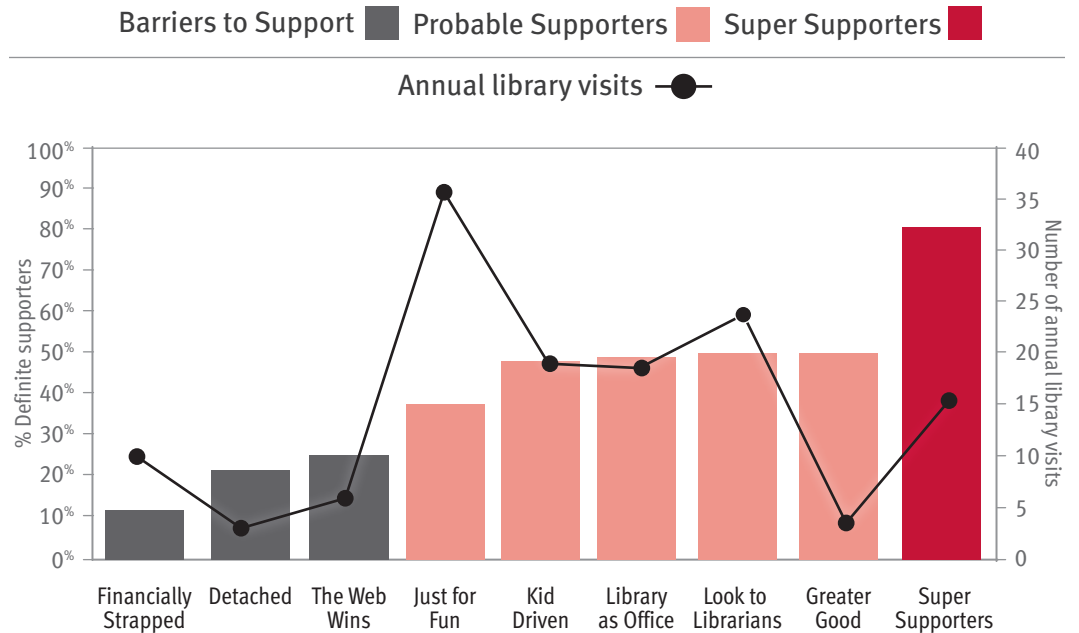
Percentage of total respondents who said their local public library offered the service.  
Source: *From Awareness to Funding*, OCLC, 2008

- Library support is only marginally related to visitation.** Advocating for library support to library users focuses effort and energy on the wrong target group. In fact, the research showed that frequency of library visitation has almost no relationship to a person’s willingness to support the library at the ballot box. Super Supporters show the greatest commitment to library funding support—almost three times the average—yet their frequency of library visits is only slightly above average. And the Just for Fun segment are the heaviest users of the library, but the least likely of the Probable Supporters to definitely vote to fund the library.

## Library visitation and *definite* library support by segment

### Total voting respondents

Respondents were asked: How many times have you visited your local public library in the past 12 months? If there was a referendum, ballot initiative or bond measure for your local public library on the ballot, how do you think you would vote?



Percentage of total voting respondents who would *definitely* vote 'yes' for a library referendum.  
Source: *From Awareness to Funding*, OCLC, 2008

• **Perceptions of the librarian are highly related to support.** Passionate librarians who are involved in the community make a difference. Survey respondents rated the librarians at their local public libraries across a number of attributes. Analysis of the responses shows that a strong positive rating for the librarian across five of these attributes has a strong influence on library funding support. Attributes of the ‘Passionate Librarian’ are:

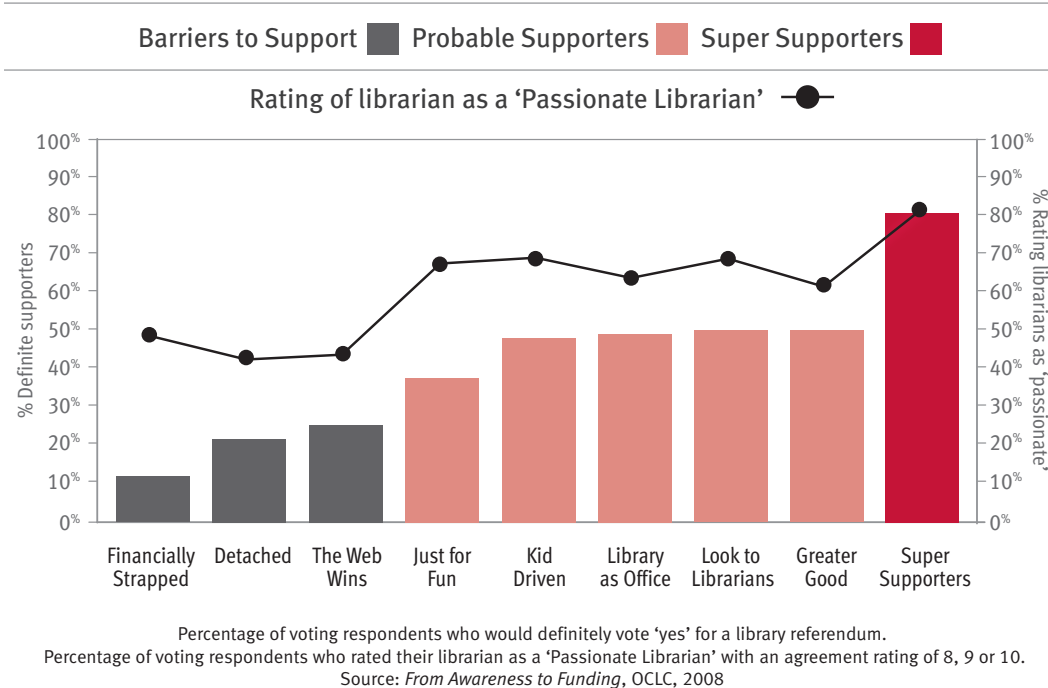
- True advocate for lifelong learning
- Passionate about keeping the library relevant
- Knowledgeable about every aspect of the library
- Well-educated
- Knowledgeable about their community.

### The ‘Passionate Librarian’ and *definite* library support

Total voting respondents

Respondents were asked: Please rate the librarians at the public library in your community on the following traits using a 10-point scale, where a 10 means ‘Describes them extremely well’ and a 1 means ‘Doesn’t describe them at all.’

If there was a referendum, ballot initiative or bond measure for your local public library on the ballot, how do you think you would vote?

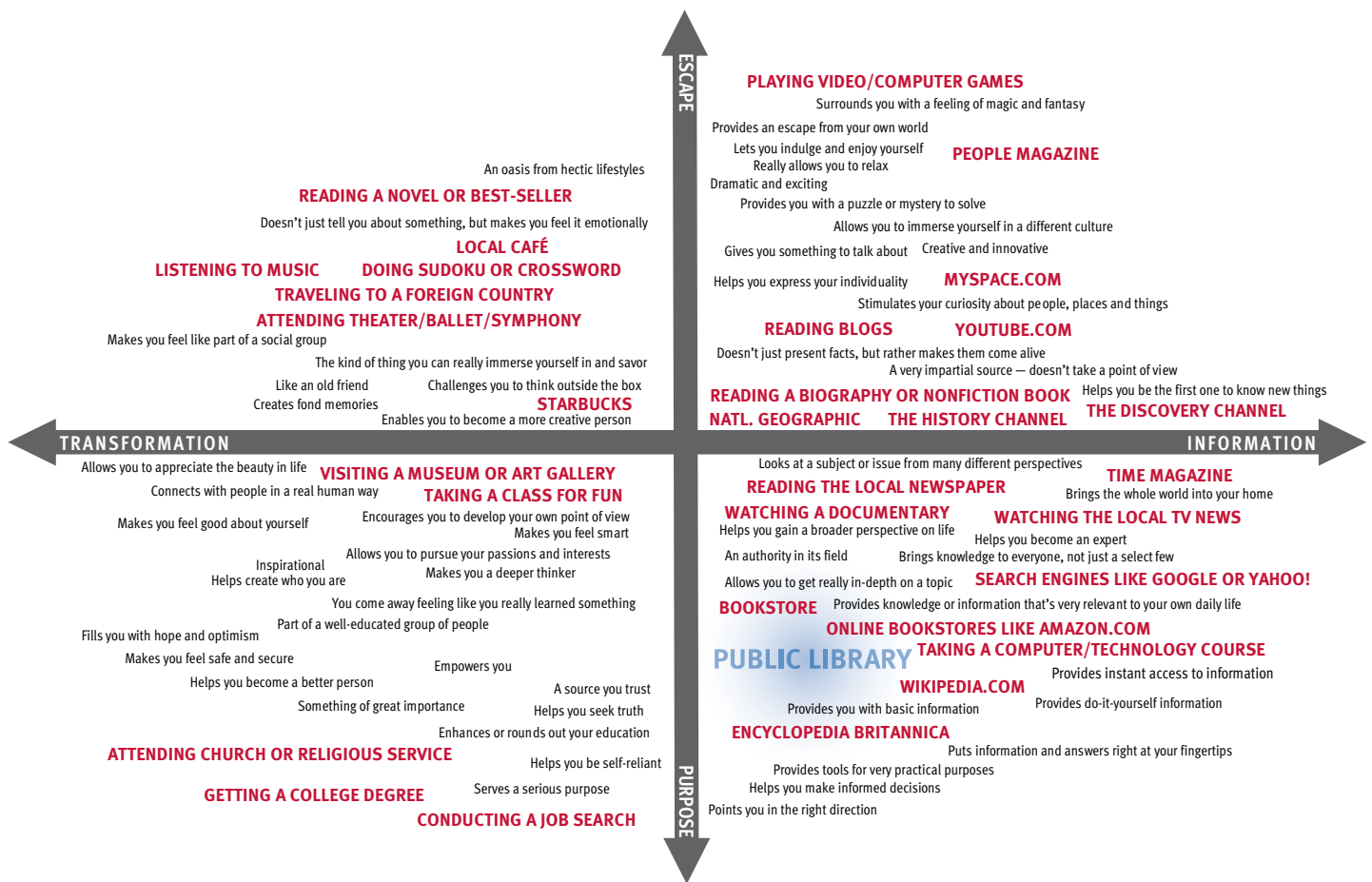


- **The library occupies a very clear position in people’s minds as a provider of practical answers and information.** The public library’s strong associations as a place for information may not only limit the library’s ability to gain mindshare and market share with information seekers, but the current positioning may also be one of the factors hampering the success of library funding initiatives. People’s perceptions about the library’s ability to transform lives, rather than its role as an information provider, is what drives financial support.

## Emotional and intellectual rewards for the public library

Total voting respondents

Respondents were asked: Please rate how well the words or phrases describe the selected brands/categories/activities using a 10-point scale, where a 10 means ‘Describes it very well’ and a 1 means ‘Doesn’t describe it at all.’



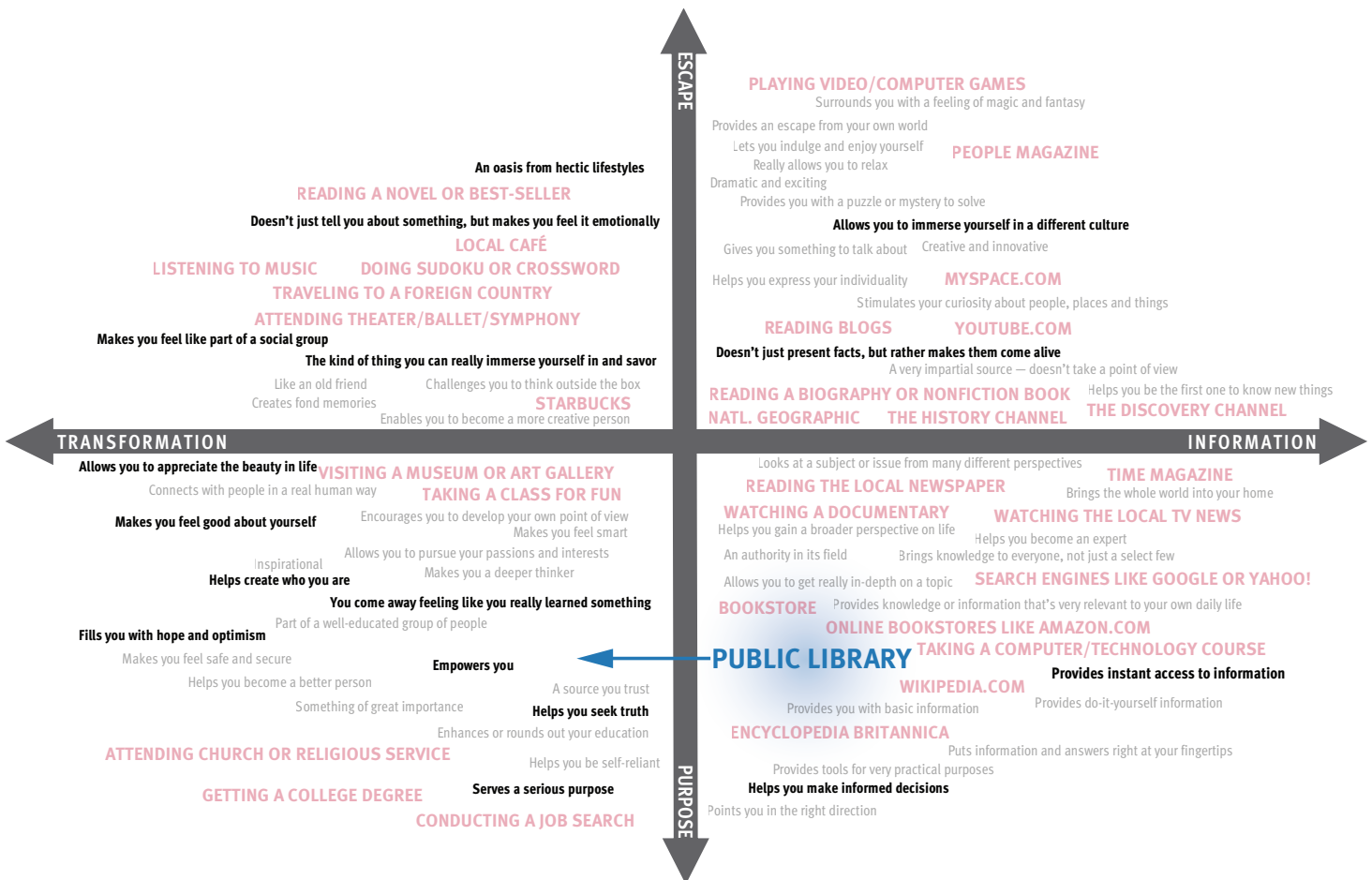
Source: *From Awareness to Funding*, OCLC, 2008

- **Belief that the library is a transformational force in people’s lives is directly related to their level of funding support.** Aggregation of results across all survey respondents indicates that the public library is viewed as a service that provides the emotional and intellectual rewards of ‘purposeful information.’ But a review of results of those voters who said they would definitely vote in favor of a library referendum provides a very important distinction. The degree to which the public library was perceived as transformational is significantly higher among the most committed funding supporters (voters who said they would definitely vote yes for a library referendum, ballot initiative or bond measure).

## Perceptions of the public library held by people who will definitely vote in support of library funding

Respondents who would definitely vote yes for a library referendum

Respondents were asked: Please rate how well the words or phrases describe the selected brands/categories/activities using a 10-point scale, where a 10 means ‘Describes it very well’ and a 1 means ‘Doesn’t describe it at all.’

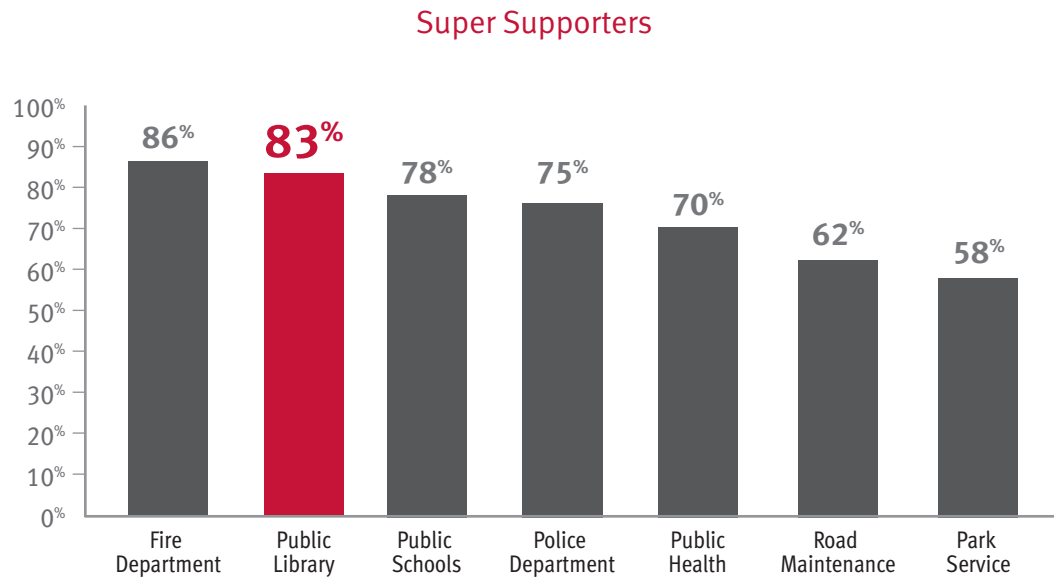


Source: From Awareness to Funding, OCLC, 2008

- **Increasing support for libraries may not necessarily mean a trade-off of financial support for other public services.** Increasing funding support for libraries in the Super Supporter and Probable Supporter segments does not necessarily lead to a decrease in support for other locally funded public services. In fact, placing the library in the consideration set with other key local services can increase the level of awareness and importance of the interrelationship with other local services.

A side-by-side comparison of the willingness of a voter segment to increase taxes to fund local public services, including the public library, shows that a willingness to fund one service is often similar to their willingness to support other local services. For example, the most committed library funding supporters, Super Supporters, show a strong intent to vote yes in support of library referendum: 83 percent agreed strongly that they would be willing to raise their taxes to fund the public library. Community support from Super Supporters does not just include support for the public library. In fact, Super Supporters of libraries are also ‘super’ in their financial support of other locally funded public services.

### Over half of all Super Supporters indicated they would support a tax increase for each of the public services surveyed



Percentage of Super Supporters who indicated they would support a tax increase for each of the public services surveyed.  
Source: *From Awareness to Funding*, OCLC, 2008

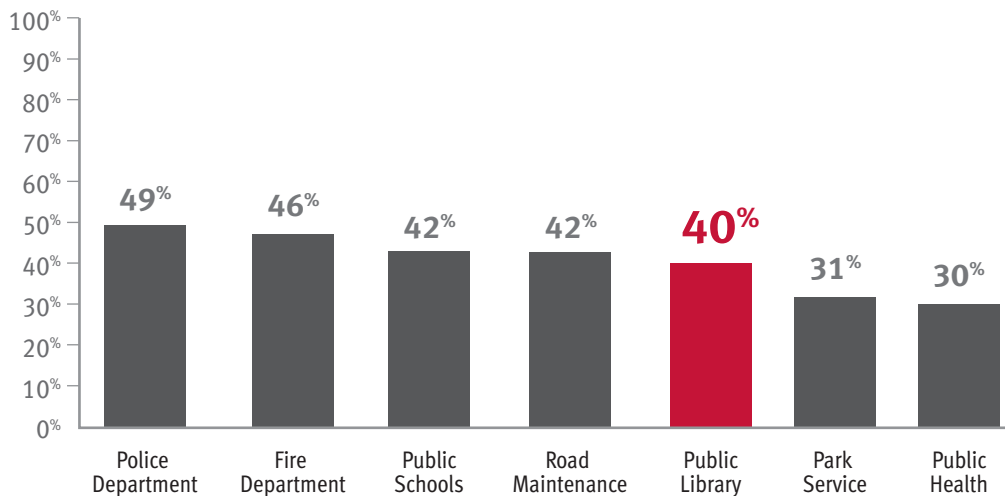
- **Elected officials support the library—but are not fully committed to increasing funding.** Elected officials are similar to Probable Supporters in their overall attitudes about public library support and funding. However, positive associations do not necessarily translate into support for funding increases.

At the time of the survey, the majority of surveyed elected officials (74 percent) indicated their libraries had enough day-to-day operating funds. The library is often not a top priority for elected officials; they are managing a long list of important public services that are in need of financial support and many face increasing pressure by their constituencies to limit local tax increases.

## The library places in the bottom half of the list of public services that elected officials are willing to support with a tax increase

### Elected officials

Respondents were asked: For each service, please rate how much you agree with the phrase “I’d be willing to pay more in local taxes to better fund this service.” Please use a 10-point scale, where a 10 means you ‘Completely Agree’ and a 1 means you ‘Completely Disagree.’



Percentage of elected officials with an agreement rating of 8, 9 or 10.  
Source: *From Awareness to Funding*, OCLC, 2008

## Understanding supporter attitudes

Qualitative research provided more context about the attitudes, perceptions and beliefs about libraries, librarians and library funding of the two main market segments: Probable Supporters and Super Supporters. While both groups hold many similar attitudes, a comparison of these two groups highlighted a difference in intensity in their emotional connection to the library and their commitment to library support.

Super Supporters are more likely to view the library as holding a transformational role in the community and less likely to question the need to provide ongoing support. Super Supporters are also proactive in articulating their support. Probable Supporters share the belief that the library can change lives and see the library's role in bringing the community together, but are more likely to see the library's role in practical, less transformational terms.

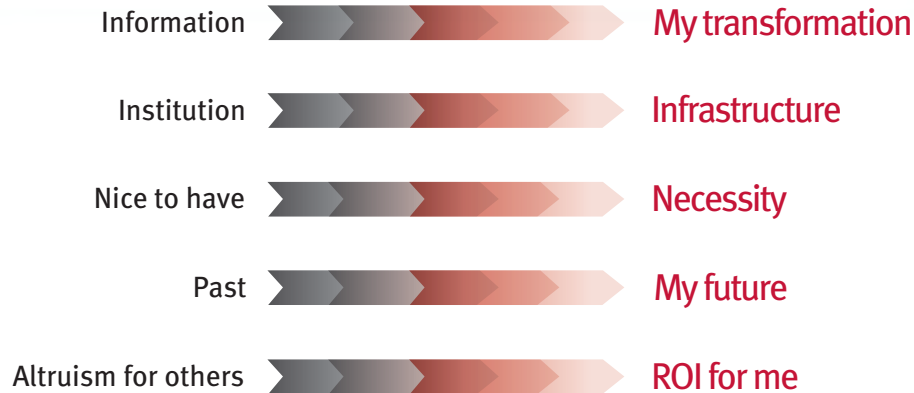
Focus groups showed that even the most avid library supporters have concerns about the relevance of the public library in today's world, and their favorable vote in support of funding initiatives cannot be assumed. While Probable Supporters and Super Supporters have a strong emotional connection to the public library, that connection is latent and is exhibited only when asked directly. The research indicated several barriers that any library support marketing campaign would need to overcome, including the lack of awareness of how local public libraries are funded.

The positive emotional connections that Probable Supporters and Super Supporters have with libraries are not always sufficient to convince them to increase library funding. The research indicated a need to appeal to both the heart and mind of the potential voter, positioning the library as an important part of the community's infrastructure that plays a key role in providing equal access to resources vital for thriving in today's digital world. To make the case for funding and to have long-term impact on local funding for public libraries, a successful campaign would have to change common public perceptions about the library, and its value to individuals and the community.

The library must be repositioned as a vital part of the community infrastructure—now and in the future—that provides transformational opportunities, and a tangible return on investment for individuals and the community as a whole.

## The library needs to be positioned as a vital part of the community infrastructure

The library must be repositioned. The library can no longer be viewed as an historical institution that is ‘nice to have,’ but rather as a vital part of the community infrastructure.



**Information:** The library is one of many sources of information. It could potentially be replaced by a combination of bookstores, schools, coffee shops and the Internet.

**Transformation:** The library is not about ‘information,’ it is about ‘transformation,’ for people and my community.

**Institution:** The library is an institution sometimes associated with an out-of-date building, aged materials and limited accessibility. (The library has limited hours, the Internet is available 24/7.)

**Infrastructure:** The library is not an outdated institution. It is a vital part of community infrastructure.

**Nice to have:** Availability of so many other options for information and learning make the library a ‘nice to have’ service, rather than a necessity.

**Necessity:** The library is not simply a ‘nice to have’ service—it is a necessity. It provides equal access to technology, helping bridge the digital divide.

**Past:** The library is an important part of supporters’ lives, but they question whether it is still relevant for their children and grandchildren.

**Future:** The library is not a nostalgic building or set of programs. The library provides services and infrastructure for the future.

**Altruism for others:** The library is less important to them, but it is important for ‘other people’ in the community.

**Return on investment:** Library funding support is not based only on a vague sense of altruism, but based on a real economic return for individuals, families and communities.

## Summary

The research made clear that an effective library advocacy and marketing campaign in support of increased library funding must ensure that the library is repositioned as both a unique and essential part of the community infrastructure. It must attract attention and have stopping power. The library cannot be viewed as a place of information that's 'nice to have,' but as a 'must have' that's as important to the future as the past. An effective campaign must present today's library as a place of possibilities and as a critical asset—for individuals (to find jobs, reeducate themselves and enhance literacy) and for the community (access to technology, continued education and economic benefits).

