

JOHN RYLANDS LIBRARY - MANCHESTER, UNITED KINGDOM

Key words: place | building capacity | organisational change | leadership | partnership | data | community rooted | by habit | by choice

Synthetic data sheet

Full name	John Rylands Library
Address	150 Deansgate, Manchester M3 3EH, UNITED KINGDOM
Legal Status	University Library
Years of establishment	1900
Website	http://www.library.manchester.ac.uk/
Social Media	Facebook, Twitter, Youtube
Area of activities	Library
Kind of activities	Research library with 1.4 million items in its collection
Total amount of budget	2.40M £
Number of employees	50

Data refer to 2015/2016

Background information

The John Rylands Library (JRL) is part of the University Library, which in turn is part of the University of Manchester. Enriqueta Ryland created it as the result of a large donation in memory of her husband, John Ryland, who was a millionaire textile manufacturer in Manchester from the Nineteenth Century. Enriqueta described it as a '*gift to the people of Manchester*' and it opened to the public in 1900. Although it is now part of the University, it maintains this emphasis on public service and in recent years has significantly changed its approach, making a deliberate effort to engage with a wider and more diverse public.

The library is famous for having a Gutenberg Bible and the earliest known copy of St John's Gospel – known as the *St John Fragment* as well as all four folios of William Shakespeare and several important 19th century facsimiles of the First Folio.

JRL is especially interesting in its AD because of the transformation over 7 – 9 years, progressing from a prestigious but rather dusty and old-fashioned institution to a well-loved public organisation. Between 2001 and 2016 its attendances have more than doubled and it has become the number one attraction in Manchester on Trip Advisor.

It has an AD Plan, which is ...

... A long-term and organisation-wide commitment to identifying audiences (both existing and new), and ensuring that these audiences can access and understand our collections and building.

This (above) is an extract from the 'John Rylands Interpretation Strategy' produced this year (2016), demonstrating a commitment to procedures and policies that are based on an audience point of view.

In terms of their AD plan, they segment their audiences in this way:

- Core Audiences – identified through research into current attenders and itself broken down into further segments (partly using Audience Spectrum)
- Keep Warm Audiences – these are their occasional users and of these they particularly target families and international visitors (cultural tourists)
- Developmental Audiences – those who have a propensity to engage but are not currently engaging much or at all – these they aim to engage through specific campaigns such as through community engagement or formal education programmes

This helped them to move from a view, which held that people '*would just come*' to a proactive '*strategy of engagement*'.

An important part of their strategy includes engaging schools in their work and over a five-year period they have had visits from all the schools (5-18 years old) of Greater Manchester. This means 4000 visits from school children each year and especially important are young people at Key Stage 5 (16-18 years old).

What do they want? Goals and achievements

In recent years, JRL has had a significant change in policy in relation to its users, audience, and visitors. In 2007, there was a redevelopment and new build for the site, which prompted the management to rethink their approach to the public and the purpose of the place.

It's about putting audiences at the heart of what we do

The influences on the library for change were several. There was a change in funding policy by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), which meant that it wanted its research to have a more demonstrable 'public impact', and there was also a new president of the university (Nancy Rothwell) who emphasised the importance of Manchester University looking outward. This led to staff changes, which in turn had a cascading effect, with people coming in who recognised the opportunity to do things differently.

The mission changed over time so that in fact the whole public facing aspect of the organisation was re-formulated, looking at the overall offer rather than being purely a research institution for academics and trying to integrate a wider public into its approach.

Absolutely crucial for JRL and the way it works is that the vision and aims are known, understood and owned by all staff. In this way they have transformed their operation and everything / everyone is measure against the delivery of four main engagement goals, finally defined in 2016 as:

**Catalogue – Case studies – Study on audience development -
How to place audiences at the centre of cultural organisations**

- **Openness**, offering an inclusive welcome and access for all, actively listening to our audiences in order to inform how we open up our collections now and in the future
- **Connecting**, stimulating connections between people, ideas and knowledge that reveal inspiring stories to deepen our relationships with each other and with the past
- **Encouraging**, inviting audiences to engage with us in a way that has a meaningful impact and empowers them to access culture and knowledge
- **Challenging**, using innovative approaches to evoke responses which enrich and educate our audiences and our staff

Staff are asked to work to these principles, to see the opportunities within a '*non-hierarchical*' spirit and with the '*permission to think differently*'.

When it comes to the programme, the curators are asked to work with '*the power of the object*' as well as answering the question '*why here, why now?*' so that it is always relevant to the JRL and its connection with Manchester.

How do they do it? Making it happen

This is not about AD schemes but instead a fundamental approach from the whole staff.

AD is an investment. There are no quick wins.

They try to engage people on their own terms – recognising how people think about books or documents. One of the first such experiments was a Harry Potter event, which was so popular they had to turn people away, something which had never happened before at JRL.

Harry Potter might appear to be on the more popular side of literature and not especially connected to JRL but it was indicative of an approach that was accessible and open but which still has educational value and depth. An example might be *A Clockwork Orange* the original novel having been written by Anthony Burgess who was born locally. It was somewhat controversial as it had huge replica male genitalia on display in JRL, which attracted a great deal of attention though apparently it was displayed with due care and attention to its literary significance.

At the heart of JRL's success as they see it, is a staff that is committed to the aims of the organisation. There is an 'engagement team' that is responsible for the liaison with the audience, including the programming, exhibitions, retail, communications, public events and education operations. User engagement is not seen as something separate to the overall mission of JRL but fundamental to its existence.

A major part of this development has been about not being precious. The collection is frequently on display and the whole public, not just those who might be thought of as

best 'qualified' like academics and students, can access it. They describe it in this way: *'we are a working library'*, which means using its assets, being accessible and public but not pretending it is something which it is not.

However, these changes happened within the comfort zone of the library's users, keeping and improving its important attributes such as the reading room and using different days and times such as Sundays when there previously hadn't been much activity. They are keen to emphasise that JRL's assets belong to the people, not the curator.

JRL has also put in place several physical / building changes which were both practical and symbolic as a statement of access and welcome to the institution. For example, a lift made the collection accessible to less able people as well as to visitors more generally, an important statement as it is an old library with lots of steps. They have also created a new entrance which is modern and accommodating in its style; a place to welcome visitors, buy merchandise and serve food and drink (at the adjoining café), creating an *'intuitive entrance and route in'*. This is something they want to continue to improve as it could still benefit from clearer signage, information and directions.

Alongside this, JRL also felt it important to change the exhibition and display spaces as they were previously dark and unfriendly. This was developed alongside 'journey mapping' – tracking how people moved through and used the space. As a further progression, JRL has now created a new interpretation strategy (as noted above), which states that

We believe we can improve the experience of visitors and strengthen relationships with new and existing audiences through effective interpretation.

... and by interpretation they mean

[Revealing] the stories and significance of our collections and building, allowing visitors to learn about the world and themselves.

They received advice and support from an external agency – All About Audiences (which became The Audience Agency) and then The Audience Agency itself which provided guidance about what to do, who to target and how. They can quote their key Audience Spectrum profile groups for example, knowing how these fit into their plans. This also influences their programming and helps them target a new public, bringing different elements together, producing new activity for new audiences, so it could be said they are one of the rare organisations that works successfully in the difficult quartile of New Product for New Audiences in the Ansoff Matrix.

Interview: Yvette Jeal - Engagement Manager; Rachel Beckett - Associate Director

Interviewer: Jonathan Goodacre – The Audience Agency (UK)