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Integrated Marketing On A Shoestring Budget: Strategic Planning to Build Value for Libraries and Enhance Service

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Introduction

With ever-increasing demands for libraries to market their services and decreasing budgets for advertising and publicity, librarians face the difficult task of planning for strategic marketing with little to no infrastructure or support, either financially or with adequate staffing. But, that's no reason to give up.

With a few key strategies and some integrated marketing techniques, even the most meager budget can support impactful outcomes. While there is no substitute for professional marketing services or paid marketing staff, a few simple "rules of thumb" can help.

Foundational Components

The foundation of any marketing strategy is branding. Components like the organization's logo, tagline, fonts, colors, and key messages build brand recognition and help to establish reliability and trust. This article doesn't cover the steps to identifying and systemizing brand development and delivery. Suffice it to say branding takes in-depth planning and above all, discipline. What is important is that a library has an authentic brand and uses it consistently.

At Josephine Community Libraries, the elements of the library's brand have been recorded in a style guide and a communications committee monitors its application. Because branding depends on consistency, making sure the components of the brand are always used is a key to success.

BARRIERS TO SUCCESS: Departments working separately can inadvertently leave one another out of the loop. For example, when a branch manager works to promote an event or program by building a flier or poster without using the most up to date components of the library's brand, the whole library system loses the opportunity for brand recognition. Enforcing the use of the brand's key components across the whole library system can be difficult, but the consequences of inconsistent branding are unmet goals.

RULE OF THUMB: Ensure consistency in branding across the library system.



Another foundational component for integrated marketing is the establishment of a communications platform. Both internal and external communications happen through an array of vehicles such as e-mail, website, television, newsletters, social media, handouts, etc. Some are more costly than others and require additional content development in order to execute successfully.

Here's a list of some communications vehicles utilized by Josephine Community Libraries:

- eNewsletter to all patrons
- Children's library eNewsletter
- Volunteer eNewsletter
- Press releases and earned media
- Public service announcements for broadcast
- Website and web pages
- Radio advertising and talk shows
- Television advertising
- Facebook
- Twitter
- YouTube
- Community posters and fliers
- In-library or event handouts and signage
- Newspaper and magazine advertising
- E-mails to patrons and donors
- Direct mail to patrons and donors
- Presentations and speakers bureau, etc.

The entire list of communications vehicles creates a platform. With consistent branding and thoughtful communication through established vehicles across the platform, a library system is able to build awareness about its services and ultimately build value for libraries. Limited marketing budgets will necessarily restrict a library system's communications platform and the subsequent audience engagement; however, prioritization and strategic allocation of resources is paramount.

BARRIERS TO SUCCESS: Targeted marketing saves an organization money and time. Libraries do not have limitless marketing budget and staff time. Selection of a smaller audience can help optimize the marketing dollar. Attempting to reach everyone in the library's service community may be costing the organization more money than anticipated.

RULE OF THUMB: Target specific audiences with key messages. Once branding is clearly communicated both internally and externally, the stage is set for integrated marketing. Integrated marketing can help an organization reach new audiences and better engage existing ones.

There are two main factors associated with successful integrated marketing.

1. Carrying out targeted marketing activities to communicate and deliver value.
2. Coordinating these marketing activities to achieve maximum effect (Joseph, 2011).

Integrated marketing is like a puzzle of flexible variables. Shifting one component, whether it is audience, program, or location will result in an increase or decrease in engagement. Putting the pieces of the puzzle together to generate the desired outcomes requires a foundation of consistent branding, clear communication to specific audiences, and strategic thinking (Joseph, 2011).



Engaging Library Patrons: Promoting an Existing Program or Event

One approach to integrated marketing is to start with an existing program or event and seek to build usage and engagement. In this case, the program is already developed, but the publicity and promotion may not be delivering desired results (Ratnatunga, 2005).

One such program at Josephine Community Libraries was Young Master Gardeners, geared toward pre-school and elementary aged children. The program provided hands-on earth science lessons with supplementary literature in alignment with the Josephine County Master Gardeners curriculum for adults. Much time, planning, and resources went into the development of the program, so it was disappointing to all involved when the monthly classes had low attendance shortly after its launch in 2011.

Staff had faithfully utilized library branding to support promotion of the program, but attendance remained low for months. They used a variety of communications vehicles. From press releases and earned media to in-library handouts and eNewsletters articles, they publicized the program in all of the traditional ways. With continued low attendance, the Master Gardeners were ready to cancel the program altogether—ultimately wasting resources and time.

Library staff met and discussed the target audience, identifying families with young children as the key market or audience. They decided to try two new vehicles that could reach that specific audience—e-mail and social media. Utilizing the existing list of children's library eNewsletter recipients and the Facebook audience of primarily women with children, they created an eBlast, or single subject e-mail, about the next program. They also promoted the program on Facebook with consistent branding and the same program description. It worked, almost too well.

The next class was full, with more than 20 participants. Program organizers were happy, if not a little overwhelmed. Then, something surprising happened. The following month, using the same vehicles mentioned above, 40 attendees showed up to the class. Program organizers were unable to deliver the quality of program planned due to classroom management issues. The trend continued for several months until children had to be turned away due to over attendance. Finally, library staff decided to stop promoting the program on Facebook to limit marketing, and attendance settled back down to 20 participants.

RULE OF THUMB: Use more than one communications tool to reach an audience. Choose communications vehicles that fit the audience.

In this case, the flexible variable in marketing was the type of communications vehicle. By choosing multiple communications vehicles geared toward the specific audience most likely to benefit from the program, library staff boosted attendance. In retrospect, articles in the newspaper and the eNewsletter targeted too broad an audience, and the promotion of Young Master Gardeners was lost in the noise of advertising. A more targeted approach, combined with integrating multiple communication vehicles, yielded a better outcome.

The Josephine Community Libraries Young Master Gardeners program is still well attended today, and has been replicated in one of the rural branch libraries five years later.



Reaching a New Audience: Enhancing an Existing Program

Another approach to integrated marketing is to identify an audience and develop a program or event to engage them. This is different than promoting an existing program, as it allows for new program development or program enhancement, calling for some strategic planning.

In 2012, staff at the Grants Pass branch of Josephine Community Libraries recognized patrons' need for additional technology support. In this case, the technology program was not meeting the needs of the audience and needed enhancement. Patrons would bring extension cords to the library and drape them across the isles to reach a table where they could work. This posed a tripping hazard to other patrons browsing the library's collection of books and materials.

Staff met several times over the course of a few months to identify the audience's behavior and reconfigure the space to streamline the library's technology services. The reconfiguration of space required shelf shifting, new furniture, additional wiring for Internet stations, and signage utilizing library branding. Staff developed a new project and sought grant funds to pay for the necessary capital improvements to implement this program enhancement. A year and a half later, the Grants Pass branch was able to offer new seating for 15 more patrons using personal technology. The library sent a press release to celebrate the success of the program citing support from grant funders.

From this program enhancement project, a new and unforeseen audience emerged. Tutors and students began utilizing the new space with personal laptops for study, an audience or market that had been unserved by the previous space. Because the library's new space was consistently full, advertising and publicity were not required, but could support further growth in the program if capacity allowed.

RULE OF THUMB: Think about gaps in the library's market. Develop programs for new audiences, not only existing ones.

In this case, the flexible variable in marketing was the service or program. By identifying the audience in need of service, reconfiguration of library space helped connect the target audience to the service most likely to benefit them, boosting participation and growing the market. In retrospect, library staff could have banned the use of extension cords and eliminated the problem. A more targeted approach, combined with filling a gap in service, yielded a better outcome.

Conclusion

Consistent branding and a clear communications plan to achieve desired outcomes is important to getting started in integrated marketing. The first step is to understand the library's brand, the key messages, and the audience to be reached. By utilizing foundational components of branding consistently across the communication platform, libraries can leverage multiple communications vehicles to increase impact and deliver successful outcomes.

Carrying out different marketing activities and coordinating them for maximum effect doesn't have to cost a lot of money (Ratnatunga, 2005). Some communications vehicles are less costly than others. As long as the audience remains the central focus of the plan, less expensive vehicles like e-mail and press releases can produce measurable results, such as increased program attendance and greater awareness of library services.



There are many different approaches to library patron engagement and marketing. From promoting an existing program to enhancing a program in order to reach new markets, libraries are rich with opportunities to employ marketing techniques and enhance strategic planning. The key to integrated marketing is piecing the puzzle together to fit the library's audience and budget. By diligently applying the simple principle of consistency, any library can optimize its resources to build awareness and value. 

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