Marketing Then and Now: One Librarian's Journey

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Diane Sotak has accumulated 20 years of experience in academic libraries. Before that she worked on a variety of wildlife research projects in Alaska and Oregon. She has a B.S. in Natural Resources from the University of Michigan and a Master of Library Science from Syracuse University.

In the not so distant past, marketing was a department on campus, rather than a strategic approach used within the library. Today, the role of an academic library is subtle and varied. Frankly, it's complicated! Libraries are increasingly asked to prove their value by documenting their impact on student engagement and success. They need to continually reinforce their reputation as a dynamic entity that supports its community in many ways. A marketing culture within the library is essential to making the case, telling the stories and creating a presence. After years of "marketing" for the library, I'm still figuring it out. In case it is instructive, here is my journey so far.

Back Then

I started working at the University of Portland in 2001 as a Reference and Instruction Librarian. Our small staff wear a variety of hats, so in 2002, "marketing" the library became one of my responsibilities. At that time, my concept of marketing was really one of promotion. I busied myself with documenting campus publicity contacts and deadlines, and then creating and distributing materials.

Library publicity efforts were driven by the routine and the beneficial. Routine publicity synced with the academic calendar. Fall semester about to start? Promote course reserves services to faculty and welcome new students. Academic year ending? Congratulate the graduates and remind everyone to return materials before leaving for the summer.

The beneficial publicity sought to increase awareness of things we viewed as important: new resources, exhibits, workshops, and changes to services. Promotion was often the last consideration and boiled down to "XYZ is available, and it is good for people to know about; get the word out." I bumbled along, creating flyers, student newspaper ads, brief pieces in the University's weekly staff newsletter, and occasionally sending mass e-mails. I had limited design skills and clip art was my friend.

The silver lining was that centralizing marketing with one person also helped develop consistency in how the library and its services were described in University, campus, and library publications. These activities consumed a small portion of my total workload and laid the groundwork for future growth.

Evolving with the Times

Spurred on by a library strategic planning effort in 2010, I delved into the marketing and communications literature for guidance. It slowly sunk in that marketing is more than publicizing. It's the process of planning, designing, and executing communications. It's not haphazard, but intentional and a shared responsibility.

INTEGRATING MARKETING INTO PLANNING

With this new perspective, I drafted a planning tool for colleagues to use in the early stages of a project or initiative. Based on feedback, the template has been revised a few times to improve its utility. In its current incarnation it prompts people to identify:

- Contact person for the project
- Target audience(s)
- Communication goals (awareness, attendance, increased usage, etc.)
- Proposed timeline (includes project date and any dates for advance, launch, and post-launch publicity)
- Description for publicity (including images, logos)
- Communication methods (presents a checklist of communication modes available on campus, within the library building, and beyond campus)

This is when I get to shift to wearing the marketing consultant hat. I meet with people to discuss the prompts and have follow-up conversations to clarify details while I assist with planning and crafting of publicity. Due to the timeline aspect, it also serves as an initial project management tool. It requires people to think of a project in concrete terms early on, which can raise important questions about goals, implementation and staff resources.

This tool has been beneficial for budgeting time to provide marketing support to my colleagues. Of course, in an age of "nimble" and "responsive" communications there are still times that things happen "on-the-fly," but now there is a shared understanding of what it takes.

Empowering Others and Letting Go

A marketing culture takes time to cultivate, and I wrestled with how to involve others while being mindful of their main workload. Library staff members have always supported marketing efforts that intersected with their primary duties. Some years ago, I tried running a volunteer marketing committee with mixed results. It was great for generating ideas, but the nuts and bolts fell to me, so only a few ideas were realized. My time and energy were limiting factors and the committee didn't last long.

The chance to try again arose after a major building renovation in 2012-2013. The entire staff pulled together as we moved to an interim location for a year, and then moved back and reopened. The experience fostered more collaboration among staff and the "can do" attitude and commitment remains strong. The reopened building also ushered in a new phase of engagement with our community. Library use skyrocketed, and the building itself was a powerful marketing tool.

It was time to ramp up our communication efforts to capitalize on this newfound popularity, but more minds and hands were needed to strategize and manage the moving pieces. I made the case for appointing a Marketing Committee, and the Library Dean agreed. The

committee meets monthly and is comprised of people who often assist with marketing efforts as part of their work. It includes myself, the Library Dean, the Head of Public Services, the Administrative Assistant, and the Digital Initiatives Coordinator.

As chair of the committee, I arrange the agenda to maximize our face-to-face time. First we debrief on projects in the previous month. The debriefing includes staff feedback and suggestions solicited at other standing meetings. We discuss and document any changes to the recurring events. The other half of the agenda looks ahead to what is coming in the next few months. We begin discussing strategies, determining timelines, and identifying which staff will be involved.

Staff are also encouraged to take ownership of projects of interest to them. Two examples are a holiday fundraiser and Staff Picks for our new books shelf. I provided some assistance on the publicity side, but they handled the planning and logistics. Our student assistants have also been valuable allies. They enjoy creating whiteboard messages for our lobby, which we use to draw attention to an event or activity. We also get their input on wording so we can avoid library jargon. The Digital Lab Coordinator and student assistants use their graphic design skills to create slides for our entryway monitors, along with other materials.

Managing and Sustaining

With more people involved in the marketing effort, I tried to find a mechanism to track and coordinate our efforts. I explored using a shared calendar in Microsoft Outlook, but it can't automatically send e-mail reminders to specific people. The University just added Office 365, and it has a promising planner app that I've volunteered to test out with the Marketing committee. It could be the marketing management tool I have been seeking! A short demo of it is available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pAiEZskegzo.

I also investigated software for creating an annual calendar and have settled on Excel. Some of the others were intriguing, but were enterprise software not available to us. The Excel calendar maps out each academic year and is populated with our routine or recurring activities. As new things come up, they are integrated into the calendar, which is available to all staff. I rely on it to develop the monthly meeting agendas.

To make our marketing efforts sustainable, I created an archive of publicity and debriefing documents. This shared folder is available to all staff. It is also important to have back-up and prepare other people to step in and maintain the momentum, especially for communications that require accounts (i.e., social media).

Another aspect of sustaining a marketing effort is continuing to evaluate existing and new communication modes. For example, after exploring social media options, I opted to create a library presence in Twitter and Instagram as an efficient way to create an impression and humanize the library. Since the University has a very successful social media presence, I determined our time was better spent having occasional posts on their Facebook page, rather than creating our own. The next steps will be to assess the "reach" of our communication methods to find out which ones are most productive and worth the investment of time and energy.

Right Now

I'm still finding my footing and it turns out that marketing means wearing multiple hats: consultant, project manager, communications specialist. Time and skills are still limiting

factors, and marketing-related responsibilities consume up to a third of my workload. I enjoy connecting the library to its community, but as an amateur, I've longed to develop my understanding and skills. I'll finally have the time to immerse myself in this area when I go on sabbatical later this year. It's an incredible opportunity to reflect, learn and share while upgrading my graphic design skills. If you have questions or want to discuss anything library marketing, please get in touch.

Resources

The library marketing pulse is getting stronger! Here are some resources to help you keep your finger on the pulse:

The 'M' Word—Marketing Libraries: Marketing tips and trends for libraries and non-profits
http://themwordblog.blogspot.com/

Libraries Transform: An initiative of the American Library Association
http://www.ilovelibraries.org/librariestransform/
#librariestransform

Library Marketing and Communications Conference Group
https://www.facebook.com/LMCConference

Librarian Design Share: inspiration for library creatives
http://librariandesignshare.org/