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Developing a long-range and outreach plan for your academic library

The need for a marketing outreach plan

Are today's academic libraries poised to serve as essential centers of campus activities? Will they be relegated to the background of campus life? Will libraries be, at best, ignored collateral support services? What tools are available to help academic libraries reposition themselves to serve as new social commons? How can they secure funding amid competition for scarce resources?

Marketing can provide an arsenal of skills to assist academic librarians. The essential marketing document to assist libraries in designing their marketing activities is the marketing and outreach plan. Information used to compile this plan includes best practices at similar institutions, local data on user preferences and suggestions, successful library marketing strategies at other institutions, and an analysis of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats that challenge and support the library's plan to position itself as a leading information resource.

The structure of the plan outlines outreach, media, and marketing strategies for specific target audiences. These target audiences may include students and faculty at the home institution, as well as faculty and students at neighboring institutions and the broader community. The plan is based on delineating goals and measurable, time-centered objectives.

The goals of implementing the plan may include:
- increasing general awareness of the library;
- showcasing the library's collections;
- increasing traffic in the library as measured by on-site visits;
- increasing patron usage of the library resources as measured by circulation and in-house use;
- creating an ongoing excitement or buzz about the library through positive media coverage and hosting of high-profile events;
- increasing funds to support the library's collection and services;
- building outside partnerships, including active and supportive Friends groups;
- providing staff and the university community with up-to-date information about the library; and
- instituting a plan for continuous evaluation of marketing efforts.

Best practices

Increasingly, academic libraries must reconsider how they are viewed by students and faculty to ensure they remain a competitive and valued resource. Unfortunately, many are learning that they are not perceived positively by their core audience. Undergraduate students, in particular, can be challenging to reach. In addition, many users are unaware of the wealth of services and resources offered by their academic library.

While marketing for academic libraries is a relatively new concept, there are some aca-

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demic libraries blazing the trail in this arena. Below are several of the key elements that these libraries employ to create and launch effective marketing and outreach strategies:

• surveying users to determine current perceptions, expectations, and uses of the library;

• segmenting the user audience to target different groups with relevant messages that appeal directly to each;

• building buy-in from library administrators and funders to launch a marketing and outreach campaign;

• learning to tell the "library story" to ensure that supporters, frequent users, and all staff are on the same page communicating the same message about the library's resources, services, and value;

• focusing less on a laundry list of "here's our collection," and more on "here's what we can do for you":

• working with the college's public information and communications office to leverage expertise and resources to help spread the word;

• developing a branded logo, message, and tagline to generate a consistent theme that is highly recognizable;

• applying creative approaches to involve new students with the library, including welcome kits and promotional materials;

• assigning one or more staff members with the specific responsibility of marketing/public relations;

• outlining specific goals and measures of success to determine whether targets are being met; and

• developing measurable outcomes and feedback mechanisms that can help continually refine and improve marketing and outreach efforts.

Preparing the plan: Gathering user data

The library needs to prepare its marketing and outreach plan based on data gathered through user studies. These studies are generally surveys that gather feedback and information on use, preferences, enhanced services, suggestions, recommendations, and demographic data. Library staff will analyze the survey results to identify:

• characteristics of users, including their status (e.g., undergraduate students, graduate students, faculty, staff), college or department affiliation, age, and gender;

• frequency of library visits (e.g., number of visits per week or month);

• duration of library visits;

• equipment used while in the library;

• activities conducted in the library; and

• desired changes in library services, including any changes in library operation, increased access to current equipment, new equipment, and changes in use of library space.

Outlining strategies in the marketing and outreach plan

Prioritizing activities

The library's marketing and outreach plan can delineate immediate and ongoing activities, including the following:

• acquiring an e-mail marketing service and developing an e-newsletter with on-site and online signup;

• collecting text and ideas for targeted on-campus flyers; and

• exploring partnerships with local community organizations and large-scale events.

Immediate activities of shorter duration might include:

• Activities to take place during the first month:

1. conducting a professional photo shoot for engaging pictures of real people using library resources for use in future print and electronic materials.

• Activities to take place during the first two months (or longer if this is conducted as a contest with the library's public):

1. designing a logo and tagline for the library for branding;

2. purchasing a domain name to create a landing page on the library's Web site to track click-throughs on e-mail communication and marketing materials; and

3. seeking grant funds for promotional activities (such as those offered through ALA's National Library Week promotion).

• Activities that can take place after the logo and tagline are approved might include:

1. designing and printing banners outside the library building;

2. designing and printing signage within buildings to direct visitors to the library;

3. designing and purchasing promotional items with the new logo and tagline, starting with stickers or flyers for a teaser campaign; and

4. disseminating stickers campuswide as part of a 12-week teaser campaign to pique students' curiosity about the library. The stickers would include the library's domain name for the landing page created on the library's Web site.

• Activities to take place during the first four months:

1. launching an e-newsletter with a press release and other fanfare; and

2. investigating library participation in campuswide events open to the public to develop programs geared toward drawing more traffic to the library.

• Within six to twelve months, the library can engage in:

1. Exploring options for creating message boards or other collaborative spaces on the library Web site.

• Within 12 months the library will be:

1. developing materials and packages for new incoming students, and frequent-user cards and incentives for returning students and users;

2. beefing up content on the library Web site to include specific information on items in the collection and consistent media lists; and

3. creating an online survey to gather ongoing feedback.

Activities two and three, above, would be ongoing and continuous. Long-term strategies will build on the success of these initial efforts in marketing and include the broader outreach to other institutions, the community, and the media.

Estimated budget for initial activities

The library's marketing activities will be tempered by available funding. A marketing budget of $10,000 would fund the following activities:

• ($2,000) Hire professional designer to create logo and banner artwork for indoor and outdoor signage;

• ($1,000) Hire a professional photographer to create high-end photographs of real people using library resources for use in marketing materials;

• ($3,000) Subscribe to an e-mail marketing service to create, launch, and track e-newsletters. Expense is for a one-year subscription that includes basic services and monthly e-mails to more than 5,000;

• ($1,000) Print four large outdoor banners (350 dpi, four-color "billboard" sized printer prints on heavy weight 14 oz. nylon reinforced banner material). The cost per banner is approximately $250.

• ($500) Purchase two indoor signholders for interchangeable inserts for internal signage. The cost per signholder is $250.

• ($400) Create and print inserts for signholders to rotate on a regular basis. This amount reflects the cost of eight signholders costing $50 each.

• ($400) Printing custom stickers for a 12-week teaser campaign; cost for 2,000 stickers.

• ($750) Promotional items: printing 500 promotional mouse pads with the library Web address and new logo/tagline. Each mouse pad would cost $1.50.

• ($500) Promotional items: Print 200 promotional 12-CD holder cases (denier vylon case) with library Web address, logo/tagline. Each CD holder case would cost $2.50.

• ($240) Promotional items: Purchase 200 custom "stress balls" with library Web address and logo/tagline. Each stress ball would cost $1.20.

• ($375) Promotional items: Purchase 500 tri-highlighters with library Web address, logo/tagline. Each highlighter would cost $0.75.

Ongoing measurement

For all activities to be successful in the long-term, the marketing and outreach plan should remain flexible and dynamic. Although the plan provides an essential road map for outlining outreach goals and how to achieve them, it should grow and change as approaches are measured and studied. In this way, unsuccessful ideas can be removed and abandoned, and successful ideas offering the most "bang for the buck" can be enhanced and broadened. To do this, it is critical for every marketing and outreach activity to include a method of measurement and evaluation that is built into the front-end of the activity before it takes place rather than later as an afterthought.

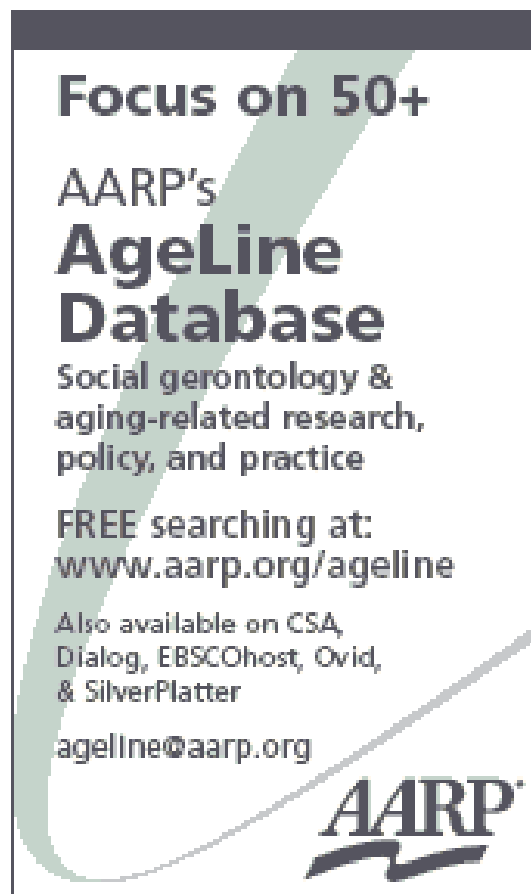Measurement and evaluation can include the following approaches:

1. gathering user feedback on the success of library events through a short entry form for a prize drawing;

2. gathering details on how users learned about the library through online and print sign-up forms for the e-newsletter;

3. analyzing opens and click-throughs for the e-newsletter to determine information of use and interest;

4. regularly surveying users through easy and interactive questionnaires at different library access points;

5. analyzing Web site traffic to specific pages or domain names created for targeted marketing and outreach activities and promoted through marketing materials and promotional items;

6. including special offers through advertisements (print and online) to determine and analyze response rates related to specific advertising venues; and

7. determining who is coming to the library and why with first-time visitor questionnaires that can be turned in to library staff for assistance with specific services or resources.

Gathering this type of information not only provides an invaluable method for refining outreach approaches, but also illustrates the value of conducting marketing and outreach activities in the first place. For example, if surveys show that 20 percent of first-time visitors heard about the library from a welcome kit produced for new students, then the cost of that material can be justified. Furthermore, if surveys show that most first-time visitors returned because they subscribed to the e-newsletter and read about upcoming events or new and exciting additions to the collection, then that activity can prove its worth.

Taken a step further, the library can begin to determine a return on investment for each of its marketing and outreach activities. The return on investment can be in the form of new users, increased usage of library materials, increased return visits to the library, or any other measure to determine if outreach efforts are indeed serving the goals and objectives of the plan.

For goals and objectives to be effective, they must be measurable; and any plan that does not outline how activities will be measured will struggle to gather that data later. ♫