SPEC Kit 306

Promoting the Library

September 2008

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

Research libraries expend considerable effort to be perceived as vital to students, faculty, and researchers. They continually promote their potential to enhance teaching and learning, to facilitate research with appropriate resources and expertise, and to gain credibility in a world that competes for the information consumer's attention. But exactly what promotional activities and objectives are today's research libraries pursuing? Who organizes them, how are they evaluated, and what challenges do they face? This survey sought to answer these questions and provide an overview of the promotional efforts that ARL member libraries are working to achieve. This SPEC Kit also reproduces samples of promotional materials, position descriptions, and marketing plans that research libraries are currently using.

This survey was distributed to the 123 ARL member libraries in February 2008. Eighty-seven libraries completed the survey for a response rate of 71%. The respondents were primarily US academic libraries, 74% at public institutions and 20% at private institutions. Six percent of the respondents were Canadian academic libraries, all public institutions. Three national libraries also participated in the survey. All of the responding libraries indicated that they currently engage in some form of promotional activities.

Organizational Models

Sixty-four percent of the responding libraries indicated that they have at least one library staff member with "promotion" as part of his/her position description. Example position titles include "Communications Manager," "Development and Outreach Librarian," and "Marketing & Communications Specialist." These positions typically report to library administration and are charged with strategic planning, media relations, and guiding the communications vision. However, they are usually not involved in the day-to-day promotional activities of their libraries.

The survey responses indicated that day-to-day promotional activities are handled by a wide array of committees, task forces, and ad hoc groups. These teams tend to be interdepartmental and focus on hosting events, developing print and Web materials, fundraising, and other outreach-related duties. Similarly, respondents also indicated that individual departments and branch libraries typically produce their own material to increase awareness and explain particular services.

Skill Sets

With research libraries committing staff time and resources to promotional efforts, additional skills are required in the library workforce. Survey participants indicated that most of these skills are available internally and that they place the most emphasis on writing and message crafting, Web design, public speaking, and graphic design. Survey respondents also indicated that other skills, such as event planning and coordination, digital media design, and media relations, are valuable to their organizations.

The responding libraries also rely on institutional departments outside of the library for promotional support. More than a third of the survey participants reported using other units on campus for photography and video editing, print production, and graphic design. Nearly 60% of the respondents stated that they outsource the production of large-scale projects, such as brochures, posters, and booklets.

Budget

Funding for promotional activities varies greatly among the responding libraries. Forty percent reported having a designated budget for promotional activities, while 60% indicated that they fund projects as needed. Of the 34 respondents who indicated that they have a designated budget for promotional activities, 22 reported specific budget amounts. The minimum amount reported was $2,000, the maximum was $88,500. The mean was $28,750 and the median was $26,750. (One respondent reported a budget amount of $1,800,000, which we excluded from our summary calculations because the reported amount is far beyond the budget range reported by the other survey participants.)

Twenty of the research libraries provided a detailed breakdown of their budget allocations, revealing that they spend the most on print services ($15,500 average; $11,000 median). Other budget items include food ($7,917 average; $2,750 median), giveaways ($4,826 average; $2000 median), and paid advertising ($4,646 average, $3,500 median). Of the 51 respondents who indicated that they do not have a designated promotion budget, 32 provided estimated promotional expenditures. The minimum reported was $500 and the maximum reported was $150,000, with a mean of $27,400 and a median of $17,000.

Priorities & Objectives

Survey participants were given a list of 12 promotional objectives and asked to indicate which ones apply to their organizations. Most indicated that nearly all 12 of the objectives apply to their institutions. Participants were also asked to select three of the 12 objectives that they consider high priorities in their libraries. This process generated 181 responses. Sixty percent of these responses indicated that an awareness of reference assistance and specialized support is a high priority. The other objectives rank as follows: awareness of library print and electronic collections (55%), awareness of displays, exhibits, presentations, lectures, or other events (46%), awareness of fundraising or development initiatives (36%), the library's value to the organization (30%), awareness of training and instruction (28%), awareness of the library Web site and contents (26%), awareness of special or targeted collections (23%), library study space or work areas (23%), orientation for new users (23%), awareness of equipment and technology (16%), and awareness of library policies (10%).

Determining Activities

Survey participants were asked to indicate how they decide which promotional activities to pursue. Eighty-three percent of them indicated that they pursue promotional activities upon the introduction of new collections and services, while 81% indicated that their promotional activities are guided by their strategic plans. Participants also reported that they use many user-centered strategies for gathering information to guide their promotional activities, such as user observation (66%), feedback from advisory groups (56%), surveys and polls (51%), and focus groups (49%). In addition to these methods, 74% percent of the libraries indicated that they develop activities sporadically as needs arise. Several of the participants also noted other methods of determining which promotional activities to pursue, including the campus calendar of events, institutional priorities, special events, and usage statistics.

Major Characteristics of Promotional Activities

Library promotional activities share a number of important characteristics. These include the use of taglines and slogans, the need to target specific audiences, the need to convey messages across numerous communication channels, and the need to evaluate

their effectiveness. This section summarizes these characteristics in the activities described by survey respondents.

Taglines and Slogans

Thirty-five percent of the survey participants reported that their libraries use taglines or slogans in their promotional efforts. Most of these are associated with reference services and incorporate the keyword "ask" into their formulations. Variations include "Even if it is Rocket Science, Ask a Librarian," "Save time, Ask a Librarian," "ASK for research help," "Ask A Librarian," and "Ask a Question."

Research libraries also use taglines or slogans to raise awareness of their libraries, in general. Example taglines and slogans from this category include "Be brilliant," "Connect for Success," "Get Connected to a World of Knowledge," "The Library. It's Yours. Use It." "Get it done," "Great minds think alike," and "Embracing the Future." Several of the respondents also indicated that their taglines and slogans build on the American Library Association's "@ Your Library" campaign, such as "Brew Ideas @ Your Library," "Big changes @ the OSU Libraries," "Open House @ Your Library," "You're @ the Library," and "Research Help @ your library."

Audience

Fifty-one percent of survey participants reported that their promotional campaigns target "all library users," but promotional campaigns also target specific user groups. Participants indicated that their campaigns commonly target undergraduates (56%), faculty (48%), graduate students (45%), and alumni or potential donors (36%). When asked to identify "other" audiences that their promotional campaigns target, respondents listed groups such as international students, parents, and distance learning students.

Communication Channels

The placement of the marketing message is important to the success of a marketing campaign; you want to be sure that your message is seen. To under-stand the placement of library messages, the survey divided communication outlets into three categories—Library Channels, Campus Channels, and Web 2.0 Technologies—and asked respondents to indicate all of the channels that they use for their promotional activities. This section summarizes the findings of all 181 high-priority objectives.

"Library channels" are the communications channels over which library staff has full control. According to the survey data, the library Web site is the most frequently used channel (96%), followed by flyers and brochures (82%). Other commonly used channels are posters (68%), targeted e-mails (61%), and library events (55%). Less commonly used channels include classroom instruction (34%) and library discussion lists (20%).

"Campus channels" are those locations and media outlets that are affiliated with the institution but that are generally outside of the direct control of library staff. Campus newspaper articles were the most frequently indicated outlet for sharing library information (52%). Campus calendars (35%), campus newspaper advertisements (34%), and campus Web portals (30%) are also frequently used. Survey participants also indicated that they use campus residence halls and dorms (23%) and campus student centers and dining halls (15%) to distribute their promotional messages. Other less commonly used campus channels include faculty or student electronic discussion lists (14%), campus radio (16%), campus television (14%), departmental Web sites (13%), and course management systems (10%).

"Web 2.0 technologies," such as blogs, wikis, and social networking sites, are also used by libraries to share information. Blogs (32%) and social networking sites (27%) are the most frequently used technologies. Less commonly used are podcasts (9%), videos (8%), wikis (8%), social bookmarking (3%), and virtual worlds (3%).

Survey participants also reported that they use other outlets to deliver their promotional messages. These include bookmarks, plasma TV monitors, bus stops, giveaways (pens, magnets, sticks, Frisbees,

etc), bulletin boards, faculty meetings, newsletters, magazines, and pamphlets.

Evaluation

Only 34% of the respondents indicated that they have evaluated their promotional activities. LibQUAL+, surveys, focus groups, Web traffic, usage statistics, observations, and unprompted user feedback were the most commonly reported assessment metrics. When asked to describe which promotional activities they found most successful, participants indicated that giveaways, flyers, and campus newspaper articles and advertisements are the most effective ways to reach users.

Challenges

Just as there are many ways to promote the library, there are many challenges associated with these activities. One hurdle that many participants shared was deciding what to promote and how to craft an appropriate message. Respondents also remarked that reaching the appropriate audience could be difficult—some campaigns aim for the widest visibility possible, while others focus on narrower segments. Staff time, costs and funding, production, design work, skill sets, and assessment were other challenges that many of the participants specified. Finally, several internal factors materialized, such as gaining support or buy-in throughout the entire organization, as well as updating, communicating, and collaborating across library departments.

Conclusion

Promotional activities are now a necessary part of a research library's strategic plan. Rather than asking, "Do we need to promote the library?" librarians are asking, "What kinds of promotional strategies best target specific segments of our intended audience?" In other words, now that research libraries must compete with other information providers and spaces on campus for the attention of their users, librarians are focusing on promotional activities that target users across a variety of communication channels.

While each ARL member library is unique in terms of its staffing, budget, and production capabilities, each one faces similar challenges to achieving its promotional objectives. Research libraries are experimenting with new technologies and communication channels as a means of communicating with their users. These experiments reveal the extent to which libraries must adapt their outreach efforts to their local academic and campus cultures—what works for one library will not necessarily work well for another. Furthermore, because many of these marketing and promotional initiatives remain experimental, librarians have not yet reached a consensus about how to assess their effectiveness.

Although it is true that research libraries have begun to target specific segments, or categories of users, the responsibility for coordinating those campaigns remains distributed throughout the library. Just as various departments within the organization provide users with a variety of resources and services, the librarians and library staff working in those departments engage in a wide array of promotional activities: Reference librarians tend to promote databases and instructional assistance, archivists and special collection librarians emphasize unique holdings and primary source materials, and development officers typically target alumni, potential donors, and university stakeholders.

In short, library promotions is thriving and will continue to grow. Librarians are adopting new techniques and seeking new opportunities to interact and share information with their users. For this progress to continue, a more consolidated effort must guide the communications effort. Furthermore, dedicated budgets, better assessment, and media related skills are crucial for the advancement of the marketing effort. However, perhaps the single most important aspect that is necessary for better promotions is a shared vision and buy-in among library staff. Without everyone working together on the same page, research libraries cannot expect to be effective communicators.