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Marketing Academic Libraries: Marketing, Mission, and Administration

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Marketing Academic Libraries — Marketing, Mission, and Administration

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In the first column in this series I discussed, in a general way, what marketing is and why academic libraries should take it seriously. I learned a lot from talking to folks from the **2013 John Cotton Dana Library Public Relations Award** winners, **Texas Tech University Libraries**, who provided me with some very good ideas concerning the relevance of marketing to academic libraries.

For this second column, I returned to the **Texas Tech** well to talk to **Donald Dyal**, the veteran Dean of the **Texas Tech Libraries**, who was kind enough to share with me some ideas about the relationship between marketing and library administration.

As we saw in the previous column, **Texas Tech Libraries** have used a variety of approaches to raise awareness among students of the services they provide. But, as **Dyal** told me in an email of March 18, 2014, this level of awareness is only a beginning. We in academic libraries need not only to raise awareness of library services, but we need, much more fundamentally, to make clear the relevance of the library to our students.

Why do we need to clarify our relevance for our users? Well, the **OCLC** report *Perceptions of Libraries, 2010*, for instance, asked respondents to tell them the first thing that comes to mind when they hear the word "library" — 75% replied, "books." When asked whether they were aware that libraries have electronic resources, nearly 60% were unaware of this fact. And finally, when asked about the trustworthiness of the freely available information they discover on the internet, 69% said that the information they find using search engines is just as trustworthy as the library's resources. (OCLC, 2011)

How, then, do the respondents determine if information they find online is trustworthy? Seventy-eight percent (78%) of respondents said that personal knowledge and common sense tells them what to trust; 22% go to a search engine; 16% will go to an expert in the field; 13% look for Websites with similar information; 10% will ask a friend; 3% go to Wikipedia; only 1% would ask a librarian… (OCLC, 2011)

Given librarians' belief that a primary value we bring to a community or university is expertise in information and providing access to reliable, well-curated, and trustworthy collections, the fact that 1) almost no one thinks to ask librarians about the reliability of information and 2) they regard the information they find on the open internet to be just as reliable as the information we supply in our collections, the library doesn't seem particularly relevant to many of our users.

The fact that respondents find search engines such as Google to be easier and more convenient to use than a library perhaps explains why 84% of respondents began their search for information with a search engine, and not a single respondent in the poll said that they begin their search at the library homepage. (OCLC, 2011)

This is all bad enough. But in addition to the fact that our users mostly regard freely available information discovered with Google to be just as reliable as our carefully curated collections, I also know, anecdotally, that many students — even students who work in the library — do their research on Google because they find the library to be a forbidding, confusing, and intimidating place. In fact, there's even a name for this reluctance among students to engage with the library: library anxiety. (Bailey, 2008)

All in all, it would seem that, before libraries concern themselves with promoting the beneficial resources and services we can offer to students, we need to address this more basic question: how do we present the library to students so that we seem relevant to their needs and interests? As **Don Dyal** puts it, how can we "build a specific persona or set of shorthand concepts that define 'library-ness' in a positive way?"

Dyal's question is a good one for library marketers to consider, even though, as we know, it's not exactly easy to change perceptions. Companies and political parties spend billions of dollars trying to change public perceptions, and it's hardly a foregone conclusion that even they will succeed.

So, while it's important that libraries begin to address how they are perceived by students, another question we might ask is who is responsible for this new initiative? It might seem that building a positive new library persona is primarily a matter for marketing, but marketing should never should be isolated from the rest of the institution of which it's a part. Successful marketing must be a part of the library's planning, related to the library's core mission, and in synch with the public relations and central activities of the institution. And this coordination and direction is the work of library administrators, not of the marketing department.

As **Don Dyal** says of this administrative task, "This is tough work, and one of the reasons many libraries do not engage is that it is risky. It could blow up. It could fail. Many library directors and deans of libraries…are risk-averse." The challenge, then, as **Dyal** sees it, goes beyond marketing to questions of leadership and institutional planning.

Assuming that the library wishes to change student perceptions of our value to them, what sort of persona do we wish to convey, and why? At **Texas Tech Libraries Dyal** says that they sought to convey in their marketing campaign the impression that "the library is a suite of services that you (the user) need. It's not about books, or document delivery or open hours, or even convenience — although each of those has to work. *What about 'library-ness' do we want everyone to get? — that it works, that it's friendly, that it's open and available to them, and ultimately, that it is the place (whether physically or digitally) that they want to be*." (Italics added).

"Library-ness," then, was associated in the marketing campaign at **Texas Tech** with efficiency, friendliness, openness, and a sense that the library is a positive and desirable place both in the building and online. There was no pushing of resources and services. There was no attempt to teach or instruct. The campaign operated at the level of impressions, of associations, and sought to put some distance between themselves and the old problems of library anxiety and the image of the library as solely a domain of print books in a physical building.

The Marketing Committee at **Central Michigan University** is thinking about many of the same things. Rather than continuing to promote only discrete services and resources, a couple of colleagues and I will be establishing a platform for marketing the library that will associate the library with youthful energy and a sense of fun, with student success, with our ubiquitously available electronic resources, and with the mobile devices on which they can be accessed. We want to convey to students that the library is for them, that it is friendly and open, that it is online and accessible on their mobile devices, and that we can contribute to their success.

Of course, this student-centered marketing plan is also related to the mobilization of our homepage, to the purchase of iPads for librarians, to the surveys and focus groups in which we seek to understand the information needs and research behavior of our users. The marketing plan is not isolated from the things we are doing to establish our relevance to our users. The marketing plan is meant to guide our ability to accomplish our central mission, which is to support student research and student success.

Don Dyal knows that this sort of marketing can be tough sell in many libraries because it is attached to a plan of transformation and innovation, which is not always on the top of librarians' lists. "That should not dissuade proactive folks from owning it," says **Dyal**, "but it will daunt the reactives — or even turn them off completely." But marketing is part of managing change in our profession, and for library administrators who want to enmesh their institutions in an ethos of student success, a successful marketing campaign plays an important part.

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as accustomed to continuing resources as the library is. The number of years a department is prepared to support a resource should be addressed at the outset to be sure they understand the facts of yearly budgeting and inflation. At first we didn't contact the department until the renewal notice or invoice arrived, but that didn't leave the departments much time to consider if they wanted to continue support. If they didn't continue support, there was the possibility that the library would need to cover the cost instead. In the current fiscal year, emails were sent to each department with usage data about the resources, estimated cost for each resource, and a request for confirmation of continuing support. We received all positive responses, but we also learned that one department would only agree to one more year of support. It was good to have warning.

The number of people that need to be involved and informed is growing: subject specialist, decision maker in the academic department, administrative/accounting person in the department, administrative/accounting person in the library, electronic resource librarian, and the dean of the library. One person should be designated as the coordinator of the process, who will follow the process through each stage. For tracking purposes, and as a contact list, we have developed a spreadsheet. In addition to names and emails, we also track when the transfer was complete and when the invoice was ready for payment. We wanted to be able to easily distinguish the money spent on these resources so we created a separate fund code. Eventually, we also created a separate code for the library's portion of shared costs.

As our materials budget barely keeps up with inflation, and as institutional funds are pushed to cover that inflation, the library will only be relying more heavily on financial support from other areas of the university and from endowment growth. The acquisitions and continuing resource departments will need to be even more careful to be certain the library is using the funds we have correctly and wisely.

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Oregon Trails — Literary Snob

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Just recently I finished reading my first eBook, *"W" is for Wasted* by **Sue Grafton**. It was not a bad experience, but the book is an extremely easy read, a virtual skim. It was a convoluted, riveting story and despite the needless descriptions of clothes, automobile retrievals, and such, I enjoyed it. The fact that I couldn't tell how close I was to the ending was a minor irritant.

I also have several eBooks on philosophy on my iPad. One advantage of an iPad or any computer or tablet is that I can have both the Kindle and the Nook applications without their proprietary hardware. In a pinch I could even read them on my Android smart phone, not something that I am likely to do, but there it is anyway.

In my bookcases there are hundreds of books, retirement reading, that I have gathered over the years, books with physical identities that speak to me in ways that a computer icon can't. eBooks are, in effect, scrolls that were made obsolete by the codex. Some people are convinced that the codex is obsolete and that the electronic scroll is superior because it takes up no shelf space, the fonts are adjustable (instant large-print books), and the text can be read without overhead or bedside lighting.

But the eBook in some ways does not really exist until all of those zeroes and ones are translated into graphic characters that make sense to us. And when our machine is not turned on and we don't have a table of contents, a catalog of those eBooks, they are out of sight and out of mind — an important concept with real consequences. And in an extreme way, you don't really own an eBook. If you borrow one from a public library, it can never be overdue so if you have not finished it and the due date draws near, you'd best renew it lest it disappear even as you race to the finish. It is simply gone. You have saved a trip to the library but you have also lost an opportunity to browse the stacks or the catalog for old favorites or new adventures.

Had I a thousand eBooks (I can't imagine owning a hundred much less a thousand), I couldn't trade them at a paperback exchange or sell them to a second-hand bookseller. The bookseller may buy my books for a few cents on the dollar but the books are off my shelves and available to another reader, a kindred spirit, and so on *ad infinitum* or as long as the paper and binding last, and that depends ultimately on the type of book and the associated reader or collector.

I collect books. Some collections are of authors that I particularly enjoy. I also build collections on subjects that happen to strike my fancy. Tastes are acquired and lost, interests change, but the books are immutable. Even when the reader comments in the margins, the original voice remains. The author has the advantage of time, space, inspiration, learning, imagination, zeal, and drive, things that supported the effort it took to write the book. Second guessing, even educated, erudite questioning, is mere child's play.

eBooks, I am told, can be annotated and that could be an advantage to a scholar, researcher, or reviewer, but the effort seems greater and the efficacy of it, as opposed to a marginal note on a physical page, seems less than I am comfortable with.

I make marginal notes on the page and then note on the end paper the page number and other notes or quotations as I see fit. Some of the notes go into a commonplace book. Of course commonplace notes can come from eBooks, too, and can even be housed on one's computer or the Cloud, but for me, writing with an old-fashioned fountain pen provides an organic connection between physical book, physical notebook, and writing instrument. What you are reading now first appeared as a hand-written entry in a journal.

I still write letters and postcards every month to family and friends and when I get a friendly admonition at a family reunion, to wit, "Tommy, I love getting your cards but I can't read your writing," I take great pains when writing her next card or letter to slow down and mix my printing and cursive into an orderly, legible italic of sorts. Now she simply calls me to acknowledge receipt and by other comments, I can tell that she could read my writing.

One's handwriting, legible or not, is a window into one's personality, one's very soul. I took a German course from a professor who had us write something for her at each class meeting. She would supply us with unlined paper and told us that she could tell a lot about us by how straight or crooked or slanted our lines were. I believed her then, and I believe her now. The handwritten mail that I receive is not only welcome, that familiar handwriting provides a personal, intimate connection with that person that an email does not. Even a typed letter is preferred over an electronic missive because once you get to that familiar signature, all is well. The handwritten letter is a part of the author and provides an artifact that I can touch. As I read it, I commune with the correspondent in an intimate, spiritual way. I can save that artifact for a later re-reading, a reminder of the ties that bind.

I feel the same way about the books on my shelves and on the shelves of libraries and bookstores and of friends and acquaintances.

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