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Being Earnest with Collections — Building a Successful Marketing Program at The University of Alabama

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This article highlights a new marketing program at **The University of Alabama** focused on promoting key databases and other electronic resources including eBook and streaming video collections. The program began over a year ago and has seen a few revisions along the way. This article will explore some of the key aspects of planning and implementation from the past 18 months. The key to any project of this magnitude is establishing goals for the program and ensuring that staff have the right tools and training. The marketing program has changed in response to library strategic goals and because the skill level of those involved has improved. In the past three months, the overall quality of program has improved greatly following the hiring of two students who had knowledge of how to use the software, and interest in developing high quality professional images. Now with development and refinement of the marketing program complete it is time to look back on the entire process, highlight some best practices, and alert others to the potential pitfalls to consider when beginning a similar initiative.

A new era began at **The University of Alabama** in the fall of 2015. Technical services operations formerly dispersed across two departments and one unit merged to form Resource Acquisition & Discovery. The two departments, Cataloging and Acquisitions, and the Electronic Resources Unit and all associated operations came together under one department. The new department head had the responsibility for conducting a detailed workflow analysis. The April 2016 edition of “**Being Earnest with Collections**” provided a summary of the goals and objectives of that project along with suggestions and best practices for developing and carrying out workflow analysis in technical services.

Tasked with improving discovery and awareness of library collections, the new department quickly focused on ways to promote resources to faculty and students. Discussions about the idea of marketing resources from the new department took place during the workflow analysis. It was felt that promoting resources might help improve the rate of return on expenditures for library resources, and that these efforts might result in more librarian-faculty interaction. Following on recommendations from the workflow analysis the new department set out to develop a marketing program with a focus on library resources. Given the potential size and scope, it was important early in the process to gather support for doing collection marketing and for managing it from Resource Acquisition & Discovery. It seemed logical to run this program out of the new department given that collection development is coordinated within this department, and the newly hired department head had implemented a similar marketing program at a previous institution.

This new initiative posed some challenges for the department. First, marketing library resources was not being done in any systematic manner in the library so new policies, procedures and staffing were necessary. The library has a Director of Public Relations who has a vibrant marketing presence for library services and special events. After discussing ideas for marketing collections from Resource Acquisition & Discovery, she gave her support to the new initiative. After consultation with various librarians and administrators, a new collection focused marketing program received final approval. The next step was to figure out what the new program was going to do and how.

Initial Goals for the Marketing Program

With approval secured and a general sense of where the program might be heading, the next step was to develop some initial goals. Change was beginning to happen following the reorganization of technical services. There was a general sense that the library had ample resources and yet users were not always aware of the richness of collections. Even regular library users were often surprised to learn of the vast electronic resources available to them. Based on this general sense the department moved to design and implement the marketing initiative to meet three goals including improving return on investment, raising aware of collections, and taking advantage of value added services provided by vendors.

Improving return on investment. Academic libraries are focusing now more than ever on demonstrating return on investment, and inte-

grating collections and services into the academic mission. Focusing on the collection, analyzing usage data, and measuring trends in cost per use provide valuable evidence of the library’s contributions to the larger institution. By establishing the new marketing program for collections at **The University of Alabama**, the library intended to raise awareness of resources to faculty, students and even librarians.

Raise awareness of new and existing collections. The library has been fortunate to have robust budgets over the past several years. This resulted in an expansion of resources that included several prominent digital collections. Some librarians felt that collections had grown so quickly it was difficult to keep up with new content, and changes to existing collections. New marketing efforts focused on various groups (faculty, students, and librarians) depending on the resource. The library would market new and existing resources with an eye toward improving name recognition and, when possible, focused on special features or enhancements to improve the user experience.

Take advantage of value added services provided by vendors. Managing the new marketing program from Resource Acquisition & Discovery made sense given that most of the interaction between the library and the vast network of vendors and publishers originated from this department. Vendors and publishers are often able to assist with marketing efforts. Vendors are in a position to provide images and text for marketing initiatives and they routinely visit campus to update librarians and faculty. Their expertise is a valuable asset libraries can use to help promote resources. The library had well established relationships with a number of vendors and publishers. These connections would serve as a valuable asset during the planning and implementation phase.

The Program Gets Underway

The marketing program launched with three specific areas of focus including, digital signs, blogs and social media. The marketing program, now in existence for 18 months, began with the hiring of a student employee who was working on a degree in advertising. Her initial goals were to develop a marketing presence and to focus on the three key areas. It was clear from the outset that marketing collections from the new department was going to be an advantage for the library. Previous connections to colleagues at several vendors and publishers meant that marketing professionals at these companies would be available to assist with guidance, feedback, and marketing materials. These connections resulted in a smoother start for the new marketing program. Having a marketing presence for collections was a positive, though time and experience would result in several changes in direction and the quality of the finished products.

For the first nine months, most of the marketing output was from one student employee working under the direction of the department head. Her role was to research specific resources and develop digital signs, and write product descriptions. She also did some blogging and used social media to promote collections. She worked in collaboration with the Director of Public Relations to ensure that images and the overall design aligned with university specifications. She worked through existing channels to have the images distributed to various units on campus. The images were then available for placement as digital signs on monitors found in many campus buildings.

Early efforts focused on promoting resources and gathering feedback on the effectiveness of the various marketing efforts. It was important early on to determine rate of return for the marketing efforts. This feedback helped improve the program and guide future decisions.

Early Successes and Failures: Phase One

The marketing program began with three key strategies for reaching library users. Based on discussions held during planning meetings and the fact that the library had existing marketing efforts for services and events attention focused on using digital images, blogs and social media.

Collection images on digital signs. It became clear in the first few months of the program that digital signs were a successful way to market

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resources. Developing digital signs was cost effective and the monitors exist in prominent locations within many of the campus buildings. Having the student train on how to design the digital sign images also paid off in other ways. For example, other units in the library could request creation of directional signs thus saving them time and effort and reducing the number of people who needed to train on using the software. The skills needed for designing the digital sign images were also helpful in developing promotional materials for special collection focused events held on campus including training sessions hosted by publishers and a popular two-day publisher forum. Development of digital sign images was popular though it turned out that other ideas from the initial planning phase were not so successful.

Collection focused blogs. Early marketing efforts included blogs about key resources. The student regularly featured collection centered blog posts. The content for these blogs selected based on various criteria including usage data and relevance to key programs. The quality and focus of the blogs continued to improve. However, just as libraries are analyzing the costs and benefits of the resources it is also important to evaluate the effectiveness of marketing efforts. The blog posts were evaluated and it was determined that the benefits did not outweigh the amount of effort required to develop the posts.

Social Media Presence. The initial phase also called for a focus on social media. The thought was that using social media would align to the goal of reaching library users with exciting information about library collections. The marketing student was an active user of Facebook and Twitter and felt that she could take advantage of the existing library presence to push posts that would feature library resources. While the amount of time required for developing materials and content used in social media was far below that of creating digital images it turned out that the audience was just not there. Using various methods to evaluate the effectiveness of Facebook and Twitter for reaching library users it was clear that other options needed to be explored and it was about this time that the program would go through a transition.

A New Direction: Phase Two

The existing efforts took a turn when responsibility for the marketing program transferred to a full-time library assistant. The student employee who had played a key role in getting the program off the ground was graduating. Prior to her departure, she trained a library assistant who would take over the responsibilities up to about 15 hours per week. There was also a decision to hire a new student and expand the marketing efforts. The new student was already comfortable with some of the software and she would work collaboratively with the staff position to improve the quality and prominence of the marketing efforts. Along with expansion came a review of existing marketing efforts. The first step was to undertake a review of the program to determine how to best move forward.

Evidence clearly supported a change in direction from using social media and blogging as tools for marketing library resources. The amount of time spent developing the blog posts, and updating the social media presence was not providing an acceptable return. However, this turned out to be a minor setback in the early growth of the program. It was part of the learning process and the team took advantage of the feedback to hone in on specific objectives to drive future success. The program was still relatively new and the skills and experience working with digital signs was proving beneficial. Other ideas had surfaced for how to reach users and the result was a new positive direction for the marketing program built on skills and knowledge acquired during phase one.

The second phase of planning continued with more staffing and time to reflect on the past and future for the marketing initiative. It was clear from discussions within the marketing team and with other library units that there was support for and confidence in adding two new marketing options. The staff working on marketing continued to increase their knowledge and skills on how to develop marketing materials. It was clear that the focus going forward would be on developing and utilizing three marketing tools including digital signs, library homepage carousels, and full page digital marketing flyers.

Digital Sign Images. The development of digital images has become a primary marketing tool. Digital signs found throughout campus provide an efficient and effective way to introduce a resource with an eye-catching

image and brief description. The digital images reflect the character of the resource after much research on the content and features of the product. For example, the latest digital sign for **Mango Languages** features the “character mangos” that were created by Mango to advertise the resource. The marketing student assistants utilized these “character mangos” to create the digital sign image and engage fellow peers. Digital images are also ideal for promoting vendor events sponsored by the library. Other library units occasionally request digital signs to promote events thus making use of the skills within the marketing team.



Library Homepage Carousel. The idea of using a homepage carousel came from librarians in Web Technologies and Development. It was a great idea and one that the new marketing team supported. The carousel holds up to six images displayed one at a time prominently on the library homepage. Each image is viewable for six seconds and then it rotates off and is replaced by the next image. Users can advance the carousel if they want to move through at a faster pace. Design for the homepage carousel images includes *hyper linking to the resource* so users go directly to the host site. There is a regular rotation schedule so that images only remain on the carousel for a week or two. New images are developed to keep the site fresh and occasionally a previously used image is returned to the carousel. For example, **Naxos Music Library Jazz** focuses on a clean design with few colors to align with modern, simplistic trends that will appeal to a college demographic.



Full Page Digital Marketing Flyers. Based on requests from library administration the marketing team began to develop digital marketing flyers. These flyers promote existing and new resources. Marketing flyers are full page, allowing for more details about the product. Often the full-page image includes highlights about content and may alert users to special features. For example, a recent flyer provided details about a mobile app. The marketing flyers include the library logo and personalized contact information for liaisons. Digital flyers are ideal for distribution to faculty and liaisons often make use of them as a way to promote specific resources. Marketing flyers were included in the new program specifically to assist liaisons with outreach.

The Current Marketing Program

The marketing program continues to move forward with a focus on improving quality and finding new ways to promote the images. Recently a second student was hired bringing the current staff level to one full-time library assistant with a split assignment in marketing, and two

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student assistants each spending approximately 15 hours per week. This staffing level affords the department the flexibility to market broadly and expand across all disciplines. The addition of the second student brought forward a new emphasis on design and resulted in a review of previously developed images. The older images are being revamped with a new modern look.

With a full team in place, the program will now focus on effectively using the three marketing strategies while reviewing existing resources to identify additional products to promote. It seems as though the program has found its niche and receives positive feedback on a regular basis. Having reached a point where the program is fully established, the team was able to reflect back on the process and develop a list of key factors that institutions might consider when developing a similar program. These factors include workflow, software, criteria for resource selection, strategies for target marketing, and quality control.

Workflow

- Select resource
- Research the content and features
- Get approval from department head to market resource
- Develop digital image with text
- Get approval from department head to use the image
- Get approval from Director, Public Relations
- Submit digital sign for campus distribution
- Develop marketing flyer
- Develop carousel image
- Write text for carousel image
- Post hyperlinked carousel image to website
- Track marketing efforts and rotate on schedule

Software

- Adobe Illustrator (digital signs and digital marketing flyers)
- Adobe Fireworks (carousel images)
- Adobe Photoshop

Resource Selection and Target Marketing

- Search for new resources or those with new features
- Marketing resources that support special themes
- Search SpringShare A-Z
- Visit vendor websites and the resource
- Focus on resources that will appeal to students
- Build images with graphic design in mind
- Focus design on target audience, faculty or students
- Keep an eye on trends including flatter aesthetics
- Avoid shadowy, multi-colored graphics
- Use current marketing images for commercial products and services as a guide

Quality Control

- Work closely with library and/or university marketing and public relations

- Adhere to marketing guidelines
- Place university logo in a prominent location
- Ensure staff have the latest software updates
- Highlight most important or key features of a resource
- Check links in library carousel on a regular basis
- Rotate images
- Create shared location for all images
- Check for grammar and style

Strategies for Success

- Utilize librarian and department liaisons to market the images
- Accept feedback and focus on continuous improvement
- Hire the right people
- Support ongoing software and design training
- Adhere to current trends in design
- Trust student employees to effectively market to their peers
- Promote the diverse resources across all disciplines

Marketing library resources is critical to help raise awareness of collections, promote usage and assist liaisons with outreach. This article has provided an overview of the marketing program at **The University of Alabama** and provided users with some best practices for establishing similar programs. There is no question about the importance of marketing library resources given the large percentage of the overall budget expended on collections. It is important though to determine where marketing will take place within the organization and to work collaboratively with other library and university units to establish goals and policies that will guide the process. Digital signs, homepage carousel slides and digital marketing flyers have proven to be effective for use in promoting library resources. Since its inception, the program has generated 65 digital signs, 69 marketing flyers and 81 carousel slides. Next steps will focus on reviewing existing images, making changes as needed to meet the new design specifications, and developing ways to measure the impact of the program through surveys and other means. Finally, it is important to have a good team in place that is highly motivated and willing to keep up with ongoing changes to the software with a focus on developing marketing materials designed with the target audience in mind. 🌍

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