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Asserting Librarian Expertise and Value in Strategic Marketing Efforts

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Abstract: This case study of librarian-led marketing efforts at a mid-size academic library examines workarounds to obstacles that librarians frequently encounter when taking on marketing for their libraries. These obstacles often stem from a combination of misunderstanding and/or misplaced priorities at both the unit and administrative levels. Challenges in this case study include a number of factors: no marketing strategy at the administrative level, a lack of understanding from colleagues generally, little time to complete tasks or improve marketing skills, and no dedicated funding. To address these challenges the authors embarked on an internal marketing campaign engaged extensively on social media networks and made creative use of additional freely available marketing tools. These efforts helped foster engagement with library personnel, services, resources, and space while building a brand image that aligns with the reality of what a modern academic library contributes to campus.

Keywords: Branding, libraries, marketing, social media, creativity

Introduction

Most academic libraries do not have a dedicated individual to market library resources to its constituents. For example, a review of the staff lists and organizational charts of 13 libraries at Boise State's peer institutions (<https://ir.boisestate.edu/data-and-reporting/peer-institutions/>) found that only three of those libraries have staff members with a title indicating communications as their full-time responsibility (Indiana University-Purdue University, University of Texas at San Antonio, and

University of Nebraska, Omaha). Who then performs the marketing at the other ten academic libraries? If they are like Albertsons Library at Boise State University, and many of its peers, it is likely that communications efforts, including the significant responsibility of maintaining the library's social media presence, fall to whoever can squeeze it into the rest of their daily work. At Albertsons Library two faculty members, the authors of this article, instigated and maintain marketing efforts as best they can under their own direction and understanding of the need to establish a contemporary library persona.

Based on 2017–2018 campus figures, the Boise State community consists of 25,540 students, 1,508 full and adjunct faculty, and total staff of 3,304. Boise State University is the largest university in the state, nestled within the capital city (2018 population estimate of 228,790), with over 200 areas of study with Nursing, Health Science Studies, Biology, and Computer Science programs topping for highest undergraduate enrollment figures. As the sole library on campus, our current mission is to lead in developing partnerships to “connect to resources, tools, and expertise any time anywhere. Create, experiment, explore, and innovate to solve problems. Cultivate diverse knowledge and skills for life-long success.”

As Albertsons Library's ad hoc marketing team, we embody the library's mission statement as we experiment and innovate to engage with our community to their benefit as well as our own. Like many academic libraries, our marketing efforts have emerged as an organic arm of overall outreach services rather than as part of a cohesive long-range strategic plan. In this article, we outline a framework to counter the marketing strategy void; showcase how we utilize current social media and advertising tools for successful engagement; and recommend stratagems to recognize and strengthen the value of ad hoc marketing efforts.

Making the Case for Marketing as a Priority

Research has established the essential importance of library marketing to create a brand that asserts the value of the academic library to the university and wider community (Chandratre & Chandratre, 2015). Without a concerted, ongoing communication effort the “library = books” image tends to prevail, much to the library's detriment in terms of financial or other support. Rowley (2013) found that “the library brand image suffers from a legacy brand image, lack of a coherent identity, and failure to communicate a new brand identity for the digital age (p. 61). Singh (2011) highlighted the importance of organizational branding for academic libraries to develop an image as a relevant institution contributing to student success on college campuses. The costs of marketing efforts are incurred in the time and expertise required to build a brand, as well as a financial investment in graphic design and professionally printed materials. Academic libraries generally have not committed financially or otherwise to these efforts, no matter how much they benefit the library, the campus, and its community. As Dempsey (2019) writes,

The greatest problem is that library budgets often are subject to the whims of...university administrators and organizational leaders. Too often, the people who oversee funding have little understanding of libraries today. A related issue is broad lack of buy-in not only of those stakeholders, but also from library administrators who don't fully appreciate what marketing really is and can do for the library, and therefore don't give it enough support. The many stories of refusal to better fund libraries or allocate money for marketing cannot be detailed here; identities must be obscured to protect the guilty. The question is, can we use promotional tactics to effectively educate and consequently change the minds of stakeholders who don't understand that funding libraries provides huge returns to the communities they serve? (p. 29).

Consequences of this lack of understanding may be dire as budgetary pressures whittle away at library resources, services, and personnel. Germano and Stretch-Stephenson (2012) advocate for integrating library marketing as an essential aspect of strategic value planning by academic libraries. Robinson (2011) also makes the case that a marketing orientation is the only way that libraries can remain viable in the future. At Albertsons Library we understand the importance of building a brand through marketing, but like many of our colleagues at other academic libraries, we often have to battle for the respect, self-determination, and/or resources to do so. Getting buy-in from administrators and colleagues alike, educating and enlisting the help of coworkers, making best use of freely available marketing tools, and sharing our marketing successes broadly have helped us move forward with our marketing efforts, and may help our fellow ad hoc marketers do so as well.

Getting Buy-In

Given that library marketing is so valuable, it is surprising how often this work is misunderstood or undervalued, the expertise and experience needed not always respected by administration or colleagues, or simply glossed-over through an assumed librarian's sense of responsibility. Experts in business marketing offer insight into why these internal stakeholders may not support marketing efforts: "They don't believe there's a need to change long-standing practices or don't believe that marketing can make a difference... They're afraid they'll be asked to do something that they're unable or uncomfortable doing... Or perhaps they have motivations that run counter to marketing priorities" (Frederiksen, 2018, May, para. 4-8).

Whatever the motives for resistance to marketing efforts, getting buy-in is a crucial component in countering that resistance. Cooper (2019, 1 Feb) recommends a consultative approach wherein the marketing professional listens well and often to colleagues. He further advises that marketing professionals take time to explain what marketing efforts mean at both a personal and institutional level. Librarians Hallmark, Schwartz, and Roy (2007) stress the importance of using data,

establishing partnerships, setting goals and planning assessments to help ensure buy-in for marketing efforts, particularly for persuading library administrators. As Hariff and Rowley (2011) noted, "Library managers and leaders have a pivotal role in developing the brand, acting as brand champions, and fostering a culture that will allow staff to promote and nourish a strong brand" (p. 349). Without support from all departments at all levels within the library, those tasked with managing marketing efforts face an uphill task that can eventually lead to burnout.

Educating Colleagues

Another important, and perhaps never-ending aspect of academic library marketing, is educating colleagues on the skills required to create engaging, meaningful marketing materials. Dabbling in amateur photography, writing, and graphics is fun and relatively easy, so it is attractive to those with ideas and time to spare. However, we have found that random efforts at random times by untrained staff do not always align with our institution's brand and marketing designs. Strategic development of effective campaigns and materials takes time, training, and care, so well-meaning efforts at signage, photography, or other marketing projects inevitably require vetting of some kind by an experienced communications professional. We have managed to avoid some potential resentments by guiding efforts beforehand when possible. In our experience educational opportunities for staff who want to contribute to marketing efforts should be ongoing and targeted to their interests to help sustain their contributions while teaching them the skills they need.

We have found it helpful to include data from other libraries and marketing professionals to make our points when instructing colleagues interested in contributing to marketing. Conducting training in collaboration with outside professionals also assists in establishing the credibility of our methods. At Boise State we rely on marketing education and support through the University's Communications and Marketing department in the form of regular meetings with other marketing professionals on campus. Those meetings sometimes include content from outside specialists who provide insight into branding, photography, social media best practices, as well as other marketing tools and ideas which we use in training our colleagues. Profera, Arthur and Tierney (2014) also suggest collaborating with publishers in your marketing efforts. Professional promotional staff from publishers have a vested interest in making sure the promotion of their products is top-notch, so why not enlist them in your marketing instruction?

Educating library staff who are willing and able to take on some of the library's communications broadens our reach and provides a picture of our library from a range of perspectives. Because marketing is a long-term, day-to-day effort, we recruit volunteers to take on marketing tasks only if they are committed to regular, ongoing contributions aligned with our branding strategy. Marketing opportunities are myriad, as are the skills needed to engage, so if assistance from colleagues is not possible, marketing librarians may have to consider which communication channels are within their abilities as well as their resources. As Frederiksen (2018, May)

says, “do fewer things, but do them better.” At a minimum, identify one social media space in which your community is involved, and stake your claim as a relevant, engaged institution.

Do Better with Less

Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook have been mainstays of the librarian-led marketing efforts at Albertsons Library starting in 2008. Social media accounts are generally free, reliable, and already established in the cultural mesh of online social interactions. They offer the potential to amplify the library persona and its reputation, as well as gaining strategic insight into our community, while aligning with the “do fewer things, but do them better” approach.

Tech-savvy librarians recognize the outreach potential these tools provide as their advent afforded much of the world’s population with the ability to connect to their community locally and across the globe. In 2011 Facebook had over 845 million active monthly users (Associated Press), and Twitter 100 million active users (Mangalindan) respectively. At the end of 2018, Facebook grew to 2.32 billion monthly active users (Facebook Newsroom) and Twitter grew to 321 million users (Statista). Instagram did not make an appearance until the latter part of 2010 (Instagram), and then only available through iOS. In 2012 the app was made available for Android users and had already over 30 million users on iOS (Tsotsis, 2019).

Librarians at Albertsons Library have been committed to a nurturing and dynamic presence in these social media environments, and have seen a return on the investment of their time and creativity, including: a higher follow/follower count; continued engagement via conversations/retweets; greater visibility/outreach on campus-wide social media directories; and expanded use of library resources and services.

Twitter. Twitter works well with Albertsons Library’s mission to “Connect to resources, tools, and expertise any time anywhere” due to its responsiveness, affording librarians the ability to field all manner of questions and conversations when needed. Our library account was created in 2008, two years after Twitter developed into a viable worldwide network, and currently has 3,704 followers. One principal librarian is responsible for managing the account, with two other librarians on hand to cover absences. By being connected with Twitter through aggregator sites like TweetDeck we can seamlessly check ongoing events, post or retweet content from our campus partners, or address questions as needed and throughout the day. The give and take of information can be a treasure trove of useful resources, and we share what we deem relevant, authoritative, and useful to our followers. We are also fastidious with how we approach each conversation with professionalism and empathy. We consider all exchanges through social media as opportunities to not only meet an information need, but also make an ally in the process.

Figure 1. Video tweet informing the campus community of annual balloon rally near the campus.

B Boise State Library
@BSULibrary

Tomorrow: Spirit of Boise Balloon Classic! Colorful balloons will dot the skies above #BoiseState! Frm 2016: landed safely on the quad. ^MC



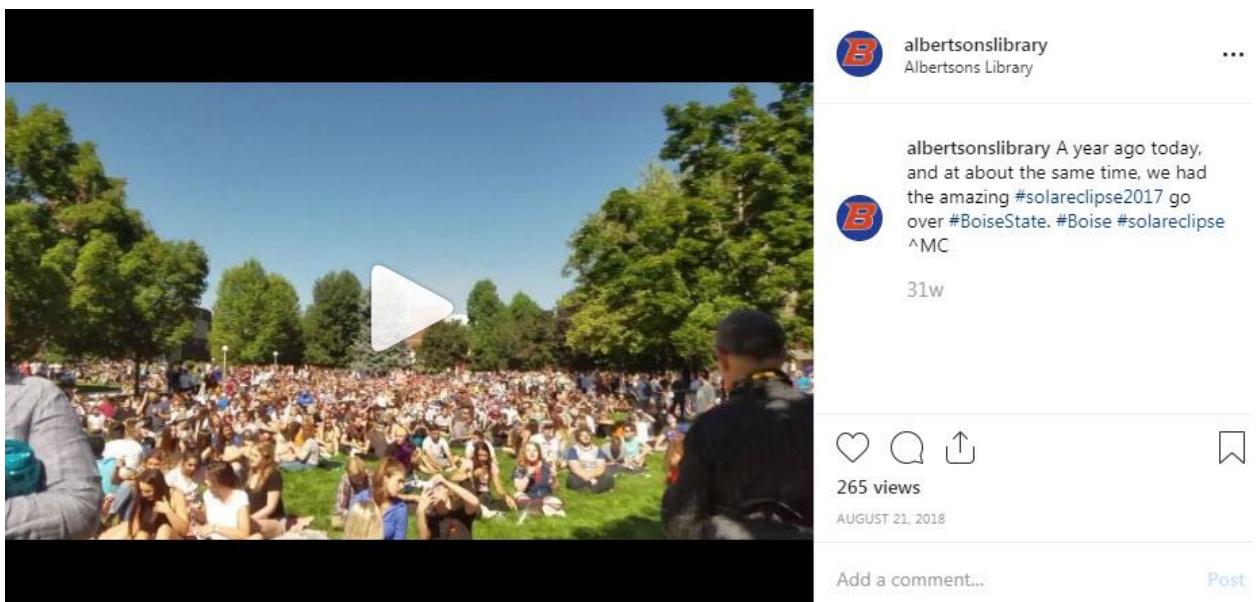
11:24 AM - 29 Aug 2017

5 Retweets 15 Likes

5 15

Instagram. Instagram is a photo microblogging platform that one principal librarian and an intern manage. We typically post one to two pictures a day and have 1,064 followers. Libraries would do well to participate in this medium to showcase photographs and videos of their campus (buildings, offices, landscaping, unique environs) and to market a library's surrounds and resources. It provides additional insight to prospective students and parents with a visual or video record of life on campus. Instagram's array of photo filters can enhance even the most mundane photograph, which can go a long way to portray library offerings in interesting ways without spending a lot of effort. We couple photos with user-centered hashtags to connect with a specific event, place, or time which can bring attention to library events or marketing efforts.

Figure 2. Instagram video of students gathered on the central lawn to watch the full solar eclipse of 2017.



Facebook. While recent research has asserted that 12–17-year olds are abandoning Facebook for more visually oriented social media (Facebook Is Tops, 2018), this social media tool remains a safe bet for communicating with your older students, parents of students, faculty, staff, alumni, and community in general. We use it to convey timely information about not only the library, but campus events and happenings, and the greater community. It helps us instill a brand image as an institution that provides credible information from people committed to our community's success. Facebook also affords us important analytics to assist our understanding of what resonates with our community.

Beyond Social Media. At Albertsons Library we replaced the default screensaver photos on all public and staff computers with JPEG versions of slides with library messages created using PowerPoint. The slides communicate the many user-centered resources, spaces, and assistance provided for the Boise State community while inculcating a brand image in the minds of viewers.

Figure 3. Promotional desktop screensaver slide to promote reference services.

Don't believe everything you find on the Internet

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or
Call (208) 426-3301

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It is an effective approach as staff throughout Albertsons Library have received positive feedback of the slide show's attention—grabbing messages. For example, a student approached staff in the library's Special Collections and Archives to ask to see the collection on Gay Life that they saw on a slide celebrating Gay Pride Month. Community members have approached staff at Access Services to check out technology or inquire about the library's MakerLab they noticed in the slide program. Further evidence of the slides' effectiveness are requests from campus entities that want to include their slides in the library's computer commons.

Another creative, engaging, and inexpensive method of connecting with our library users can be found in the library's bathroom stalls. We installed plastic flyer holders on the doors in each stall, and each month feature a new informational series focused on the services offered in the library and across the campus. Our captive audience has responded to these "Toilet Talk" flyers with comments

and questions about the featured items and services. The flyers have also afforded us collaborative opportunities as other entities on campus realize the value in this marketing method. For example, the library was approached by a graduate student in community health who wondered if we might advertise support offered by campus organizations to students who experience food and housing insecurity. We created a flyer that showcased the university's food pantries and additional support offered by the Dean of Students office. While the flyer information focused on services outside the library, it worked to enhance Albertsons Library's reputation for being a student-centered institution committed to our community's well-being, an essential aspect of our brand. We forwarded the flyers to the Dean of Students office to share with the rest of campus and to ensure the Dean's awareness of our efforts.

Be Your Own Advocate as Well as the Library's

Celebrate your marketing successes loudly and broadly within the library, on campus, and out to your users. Forward communications that recognize your efforts to your supervisors. Incorporate your efforts into your job description, curriculum vitae, and annual evaluations in terms of their effort and impact. Establish how your work is supporting the strategic goals of the university as well as the library. Enlist allies within the library as well as across your campus community to speak to the essential nature of the marketing you are responsible for and undertake regularly. In accumulating allies and evidence of our successes we have been better able to negotiate support for our continued marketing efforts.

Ultimately, the return on investment of engaging with your users online and other spaces they are comfortable in can be tremendous. The return is insight into your users and their needs; an adaptive realignment of your library's image with the realities of what you offer them; and the potential to build new relationships into library champions. The cost is at least one person's dedicated time, energy and creativity. On the whole, as librarians our main purpose is to facilitate, enrich, and inform the lives of our users/researchers/students through our creativity, shrewd marketing efforts, and social media acumen. It is a collective and creative capital that should be supported and respected.

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