

PROMOTING INFORMATION PRODUCTS AND SERVICES IN ACADEMIC LIBRARIES

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to describe promotion of information products and services in academic library environment. It discussed how academic libraries support higher education institutions through the provision of relevant books and journals in print and electronic formats and services, which have received limited use. It looked at what promotion entails from the perspective of marketing mix like advertising, public relations and publicity, sales promotion and personal selling. The functions of promotion in academic libraries to inform persuade and remind users to consult library resources and services to solve their problems. The benefits of promotion include increasing usage of academic libraries while the media used for promotion in academic libraries include handouts, fliers, brochures, bookmarks, posters and banners, newsletters, giveaways, instruction and workshops and word of mouth. It concluded that timely and successful deployment of the appropriate promotion tools will help to increase usage, enhance value, create awareness and change perception of the academic library in higher education institutions.

Keywords: Promotion; Marketing; Academic Libraries; Information Products and Services, Communication.

Introduction

Academic libraries support the research, scholarship and curricular needs of higher education institutions. They provide the patrons with information resources and services to meet the curricular needs of their institutions for teaching, learning, research and community service. Academic libraries' collection of information resources in both print and electronic formats are consulted for course work, teaching, learning and research in various fields of study.

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Other support services provided by the academic libraries include: digital reference services, circulation, literature search, compilation of bibliographies and webliography, inter-library loan, database search, CD-ROM search, Internet search, e-mail, current awareness services, selective dissemination of information (SDI), institutional repository, consultancy, alert services, bindery, photocopy, scanning and a host of others.

However, studies have found that these support initiatives of academic libraries have received limited use among students, faculty and staff of their institutions. In a study conducted by Barclay (2017), on the use of academic libraries in the digital age: what the numbers say, Barclay reported that:

Circulation of physical items (books, DVDs, etc.) in US academic libraries has been on a steady decline throughout the web era, falling 29 percent from 1997 to 2011. More tellingly, over the same time span and among the same academic libraries, the annual number of circulations (of books, DVDs, etc.) per full-time student dropped from 20 circulation to 10 (down 50 percent).

LaGuardia and Kennedy (2013:113) in a study in New York observed that “awareness and use of online databases have been disappointing.” In Nigeria, Okwilagwe and Ogbomo (2012:109) in a study found that “there was low level of utilization of scholarly electronic publications among lecturers in federal universities in Nigeria.”

Librarians have reasons to be worried about limited use of library information resources and services. This frightening scenario may have adverse effect on librarians' efforts to strategically position the library as the centre of all scholarly activities on their campuses. Duke and Tucker as cited by Smith (2011:334) noted that “the higher quality and more relevant services of an academic library must be communicated to demonstrate how they meet the needs of current users.”

Therefore, the objectives of this paper are to explain what promotion entails, its function, benefits, promotion mix and tools to show how they can be applied in order to increase usage of academic libraries products and services.

The Concept of Promotion:

Communicating with library users is a necessary condition for successful library

service delivery. Academic library community must be aware of the information resources and should be persuaded to consult the resources. Hence, there is the need for academic librarians to promote the library offerings to their community members. Kotler and Armstrong (2004:58) defined promotion as “activities that communicate the merits of the product and persuade target customers to buy it.” Promotion is simply employing creative ways to make library products and services visible (known) to users (Al-Bahrani, 2009 as cited by Ogbomo, 2012). For instance, if an academic library subscribed to a new database, it may not be used unless the academic community is well informed about the database availability, usefulness and accessibility. Once the users are informed and they responded by using the database, promotion has taken place. Promotion is used to gain library users' participation by encouraging them to take advantage of library offerings. Promotion allows users to have access to information about what the library collection is, and persuade them to take action. It aims to stimulate demand for information products and services of the library and consequently boost usage.

Functions of promotion

The functions of promotion in the library environment are to: inform, persuade and remind users to consult library resources and services to solve their problems.

Inform: This means the flow of information about the nature, type, benefits and use of library information products and services from the academic library to the students, faculty and staff. It means to create awareness of library products within the institution. No matter how useful library services and products are, they may not achieve success in the institution if users do not receive information about them. For instance, if an academic library plans to introduce 24/7 hours service to the community, it is essential to inform potential and actual users about the extension of service hours.

If this information is not communicated to users extension of service hours will not be beneficial to either the library users or the library itself.

Persuade: This means to motivate to change attitude and behaviour to achieve action. Persuasive promotion is designed to stimulate purchase, consumption or an action.

If users are not convinced about your product then you offer a persuasive guarantee that prompts the user to try to use or buy what you are offering e.g. free trial of a database after which you prompt the user to upgrade to a paid version.

Remind: This is the promotion strategy that is used to keep products and services in the mind of the consumers. Its purpose is to trigger a customer's memory. In the academic library, bibliographic instruction given to students who are not freshmen is considered a reminder strategy.

Benefits of Promoting Library Products and Services

The benefits of promoting academic library products and services are: increase usage, value, awareness and change perception.

Increased usage: When carefully designed and implemented, promotion will increase usage of library services and resources such as circulation, reference questions and inter-library loan. For instance Williams (2013) noted that:

One academic library in the United States wanted to promote their virtual reference service. The library created a Logo and "ask us" slogan. The slogan and logo were posted as screen saver on library computers... (And) related posters were posted on campus buses. These led the number of virtual reference questions received in 2005 to increase 156% over the comparable year, 2004.

Increase value of the library in the academic community: Promotion also aims at stimulating the public's interest, by inculcating an understanding of what the library is about and what it has to offer in support of the institution's mission. With promotion institutions' administrators, faculty staff and students will appreciate the value of the library to their scholarly endeavour. This satisfaction with the academic library may justify continued and/or increased financial support from the administration.

Increased awareness: An articulated promotion mix in the academic library marketing plan will lead to increased awareness of the library products and services among users. More administrators, faculty, staff and students will be informed about the relevant offerings of the library and consequently increase traffic to the library. One example of a successful marketing strategy is the University of Albany's LibraryPalooza (Anderson, 2012 as cited by Williams,

2013). Williams noted that the event is targeted at a certain segment of the user population-undergraduates. Promotional activities for the event include word-of-mouth, business cards and social media. The result has been an increase in the traffic in the library since the implementation of LibraryPalooza.

Change perception: Promotion develops a good behavioural change of the library in the minds of the users. The effective application of promotion through the implementation of the promotion mix is a strategy with strong potential to reverse negative impression of the library and build positive perception of value among users and institutional administrators (Almquist, 2014).

Promotion Mix/Methods

Promotional methods deployed by organizations (including academic library) to communicate with their potential and actual customers are advertising; public relation and publicity; sales promotion and personal selling.

Advertising according to Nwokoye (2000:211) is "any paid form of non-personal communication through the mass media about a good, service, or idea by an identified sponsor." In advertising, information about library information products and services is transmitted to a large group of users about the same time. The message should highlight the benefits of library products in resolving the users' information needs. In a university library local advertising media such as university radio, television, and campus newspapers should be preferred. Other advertising media on campus are; university web site, e-mail, social media, bulletin, banner and billboard.

Public relations are defined by the UK's Institute of Public Relations as cited by de Saez (2002) as "the deliberate, planned and sustained efforts to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organization and its publics." This means building good relationships between an organization (Library) and the community. The academic library main publics with whom it needs to build good relations are: the community at large, institutional administrators, faculty, staff and students. Others are government and its agencies, suppliers of materials and professional bodies. They can help to spread information about library's offerings and drum support for the library in terms of donations and finance. Therefore, librarians should aim at stimulating public interest, inculcating an understanding of

what the library is about and what it has to offer in other to encourage the well being of the library. An important promotional tool for public relations is annual report.

Publicity: The American Marketing Association as cited by Kayode (2014:225) defined publicity as “non-personal stimulation of demand for a product, service, or business unit by planting commercially significant news about it in a published medium or obtaining favourable presentation of it on radio, television or stage that is not paid for by the sponsor.” This may be seen as any unpaid form for non-personal presentation of library services to the consumers. Publicity may be achieved through news release, feature article, press conference, records, film and editorials in both print and electronic media like newspapers, radio and television.

Sales promotion according to Kotler and Armstrong (2004:467) is defined as “short-term incentives to encourage the purchase or sale of product or service.” Incentives are items of value (mug, biro, pen, bookmarks etc) which are added to an offer to encourage some overt behaviour response. Sales promotion (incentives) is offered to those who would otherwise be insufficiently motivated, indifferent or antipathetic to a proposed behaviour (Ogbomo, 2012:77). They are used to captivate the attention of customers to buy a product or service. Incentives academic libraries may use include giveaways and book marks.

Personal selling is a type of interpersonal communication which brings to a prospective buyer's attention, information that will satisfy a need with the hope of purchase. Kayode (2014:231) defined personal selling as “the oral presentation in a conversation or discussion with one or more prospective purchases for the purpose of making sales.” Personal selling in academic libraries includes instructional session/bibliographic instruction/user education, workshop, orientation, library tour, and welcome events.

Promotional Tools

There is an array of promotional materials that academic libraries can deploy to create awareness, increase usage and value among users. Matthews (2010) described the following as promotional tools in an academic library.

Handouts, fliers, and brochures: Handouts, fliers, and brochures are the most common promotional pieces that libraries produce, communicating topics from explanations of policies and services, to announcements of events and workshops, to descriptions of resources. Fliers are a primary communication channel and are often found bundled together at service points and entrance-ways or strategically placed throughout the building

Bookmarks: Bookmarks are another library staple. Because libraries are in the book business, users practically expect us to offer bookmarks. These items are often printed on heavy stock paper, sometimes full-color and glossy, and are stacked at the circulation desk, conveniently available when users check out a book. Typical information adorning bookmarks include the library's website URL, phone number, e-mail address and instant messenger name, floor plans, collection information, call numbers, service point locations, and fun facts.

Posters and banners: These posters are versatile and can be used for highlighting services, announcing new resources, and promoting events. Compared with handouts or fliers, posters have a much more dramatic effect, creating a greater sense of spectacle and legitimacy; a high-quality poster will guarantee at least a causal glance.

Newsletters: Newsletters provide an effective way to keep users informed about updates and changes to the library. Although these types of bulletins have largely become digital communications, printed copies are still effective. Placing these periodic updates at the circulation desk, near the front door, or even in the bathroom stalls can result in surprisingly wide readership. Copies might also be delivered to on-campus students directly through their dorms. Separate newsletters are also commonly produced for faculty and alumni audiences.

Giveaways: Everyone loves getting something for free, whether it's a food sample

at a grocery store or pen at a conference. Libraries offer an abundance of freebies including T-shirts, pens, calendars, key chains, magnets, stress balls, USB drives, water bottles, coffee mugs, rulers, compasses and Frisbees. These items typically include a library logo along with the website URL and contact information. The objective of these promotional pieces is to remind students of the library and to encourage them to make it a part of their regular routine. Discounts don't necessarily have to be food related, but might also include free printing or photocopying, overdue book forgiveness, or other incentives during specific days and times. Giveaways, discounts, and other offerings are a great way to generate positive exposure and to get people talking about the library.

Instruction and workshops: Instructional sessions are a central part of an academic library's mission. Teaching students how to navigate the databases, to locate books, and to select and cite appropriate information is a core component. While many of these sessions are embedded in the classroom, supplemental workshops and subject-based instruction classes are often held in the library throughout the semester. Aside from research orientations, classes on using software, multimedia programs, and specialized resources and equipment will often spark interest.

Campus newspaper: The campus newspaper is probably the most accessible media platform available to you. In marketing terminology, advertising is the coverage that you pay for, while public relations are what they will print for free. Both of these options are viable. Libraries are filled with newsworthy content: events, displays, renovations, new databases, leisure materials, and coverage of services. Any time there is something new be sure to send a summary to the editor. While not everything will make it into print, it is easier for the newspaper staff when concrete story ideas are submitted to them directly. To increase the chance of publication, be sure to include informative text, contact information for potential inter-viewers, and any related photographs. Occasionally buying a one-half- or one-quarter page ad allows you to promote several items together; this investment also indicates your support of the newspaper, potentially opening possibilities for future cooperation.

Campus television: Campus television is another way to promote the library. These stations tend to broadcast an eclectic mix of programming, including

movies, student-created shows, and college sports. Some stations play music while campus news and events scroll across the screen. When you send information to your campus newspaper, also send it to show the producer to keep them informed about the library. Additionally, the library might explore sponsorship of its own weekly programme, as well as the possibility of creating commercials that promote library resources and services.

Campus radio: Campus radio stations also present a promotional opportunity like television. These stations tend to offer a wide mix of programming. The majority of airtime is dedicated to music broadcasts; however most stations air public service announcements (PSAs), which are perfect for libraries. If your station does not offer PSAs, then thirty-second advertisements are probably affordable. In addition to music, many college radio stations feature talk show segments. Keep radio staff informed about the library. Also consider the possibility of producing a weekly library-sponsored programme.

Library website: The library's website is the most valuable digital real estate that you own. With its multipurpose function, though, it can be -challenging to design. Your website has to be everything to everyone: a research utility, a calendar, a guidebook, a policy manual, and a directory. Users visiting the site have a wide variety of needs, and therefore the web presence has to be flexible and accommodating. Your website should also serve as a chief promotional portal; it is a virtual billboard introducing users to new products and services. Ideally the website's messaging should progress along with the semester. Highlight computer access, printing, and other basic features during the first weeks. At midterms, advertise resources and research assistance. As finals approach, emphasize extended hours, study spaces, tutoring services, and study break events.

Announcement e-mail lists: Announcement lists are a quick way to distribute information to users. Individuals interested in receiving library news and updates can subscribe to receive periodic electronic messages; this is an opt-in press, not spam, since students are permitting us to send them informational content. Unlike the discussion lists familiar to many librarians, these announcement lists are intended to be one-way communications. Keeping the library in the user's inbox can have a positive effect; recipients are reminded of the library, and the, message

often sparks related questions and desire for services. E-mail lists can also be developed for specialized groups, such as resident assistants, tutors and teaching assistants, faculty, and student government leaders, permitting more customized messages.

Blogs: Blogs combine the features of message boards and e-mail announcement lists; new topics are regularly posted and readers are able to respond. While many libraries have ventured into the blogosphere, most of them simply use the software as a mechanism for pushing out news and forgo the conversational aspect. A key characteristic of blogs is that users can subscribe to alerts, notifying them whenever new information has been published.

Blogs have also dynamically changed how organizations share information. Instead of one person releasing content, a cross section of staff can post updates from their respective areas: circulation staff can update policies, reference librarians can share research tips, and the systems department can report database problems. Blogs allow for a more global voice of the library to be expressed.

Podcasts: While blogs, announcement lists, and message boards widen the delivery of text-based messages, podcasts do the same thing for audio content. Think of a talk-radio show developed by librarians for their user community to download; that's a podcast. Numerous academic libraries have launched these types of programs, which typically include such content as research tips, library and campus news, event and workshop announcements, guides or tours, poetry and short story readings, music, highlights of new items added to the collection, and interviews with students, faculty, and other special guests.

Social networking sites: Social networking websites have received a lot of media attention, with Facebook and MySpace leading the way. Millions of people, many of them college students, log in to these websites daily for online social interactions. These sites are designed to connect users with a wide range of applications, and many librarians have jumped in, using the software as an outreach tool. Pushing the library into social networking websites allows us to repackaging our content and to present the library in a manner that is more familiar to students. By belonging to the social Web, librarians become more visible, approachable, and relatable to users.

Word of mouth (WOM): Last, but not least, word of mouth (WOM) is arguably the most powerful building block of academic librarians' communication strategy. Despite the librarians best efforts and all of the channels mentioned above, nothing can surpass hearing information from a friend. Rusticus (2006) as cited by Jotwani (2014: 166) noted that "it is more credible than other marketing techniques because only 14% of people believe what they see, read or hear in advertising." Also, Nielson (n.d.) as cited by Wagner (n.d.) reported that "92 % of customers say they trust recommendations from friends and family above all other forms of advertising." Word of mouth' works on two levels: expert and peer. Expert channels are formal and include professors, advisors, teaching assistants, and resident assistants. These are the official voices that advocate for how students should use the library. By contrast, the peer group is very informal, including friends, dorm mates, and classmates. These conversations typically reflect how students do use the library. It is important that we consider both avenues, since each offers advantages. A professor encouraging students to use a particular database carries the weight of authority, while a friend raving about an easy way to get full-text articles is also quite convincing.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Promotion entails communication with library users to inform, persuade and remind them to use the academic library services. Promotion in academic libraries brings about increased usage of the library's information resources and services, creates awareness, enhances value of the library and changes the perception of the library in the academic community. Handouts, fliers, brochures, bookmarks, posters and banners, giveaways, newsletters, instruction and workshops, library websites, e-mail, social networking sites and word of mouth are the media used by academic librarians to promote library products and services in their institutions. Academic librarians should avail themselves of the appropriate promotion techniques to resonate the value of the library as the hub of all academic activities in academic institutions.

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