Opening the Comments Box: Using Flip Charts and Floor Plans at the University of Maine

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Purpose

Imagine the possibilities . . . as our library’s marketing committee developed its new campaign, we discovered an opportunity to incorporate methods similar to those described by Nancy Fried Foster and Susan Gibbons at the University of Rochester where they had adapted methods from the field of anthropology.

Committee members—representing roles as diverse as circulation, public relations, reference, technical services and archival staff—had already selected the word “imagine” as the focus for the year. In addition to developing a series of posters, the theme was extended to allow for new approaches in gathering feedback from library users.

Floor Plans

Students were presented with colored pencils, blank paper, and an instruction sheet that started with the phrase: “Imagine that you could redesign any space in the library.” The resulting 25 floor plans were analyzed for common themes and compared with the comments being gathered on the flip charts.

Flips Charts

This part of the project involved placing easels and colored markers in prominent places, encouraging users to offer a response to the phrase: “Imagine making a difference in the library. Tell us . . . what’s your favorite place in the library? What should we do to make all areas as appealing as your favorite?” This invitation began a dialogue that resulted in over 1,000 comments in an academic year. Many others touched on topics as diverse as the library’s hours, web site, and ideas for future displays and marketing campaigns. Only on rare occasion did staff remove a page early because of graffiti or profanity; the vast majority of comments were constructive.

Results

A full list of comments was compiled as “raw data.” In this form it is apparent that many comments sparked a reaction from others, beginning an exchange between them, as in these sample comments:

- Create an area to showcase books that are staff favorites.
- Also have an area for student favorites.
- Build community.
- This would be so fun!

Comments were tallied and ranked by total. Over the full year:

- 23% of comments were related to the building’s hours
- 15% to temperature
- 10% to needs for computers and technology
- 4% to comfortable seating
- “More art” and “more plants” were suggested more often (14 times) than suggestions for renovation (7 times).

Library administration responded to as many comments as possible, adding additional seating, making repairs to equipment, adding power strips and making adjustments to hours of operation. Students began responding on the board with thank-you messages. The library has continued to receive commendation from various student groups for the library’s comment boards, including a resolution of thanks from the Student Government Services Committee.

Conclusion

Although this project was library-wide, it could easily be adapted to gather archival user data. This project also represents ways in which archival staff can participate to encourage an institution-wide effort.

Unlike surveys or comment cards, this method allowed for dialogue between the comments. The open nature of the board and the sheer number of comments received contributed to our ability to contextualize each suggestion.

This project, which required only basic office supplies, allowed for user-driven change, and served as a valuable communication tool at the University of Maine. In a 2006 article, Michael Casey and Laura Savastinuk emphasize that the essence of creating a “2.0” environment is not actually the use of technology; the heart is user-centered change.

Citations:


This project was developed by the Fogler Library Marketing Team for the Imagine Campaign: Gretchen Gfeller (chair), Desiree Butterfield-Nagy, Michael Carrington (student intern), Kjerste Christensen, Stephen Fadel, Brad Finch, and Jerry Lund. Poster design by Kjerste Christensen and Desiree Butterfield-Nagy.