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Public Relations: Questions, Questions... Are You Offering Your Patrons What They Want? And Are They Aware of It?

Lisa Smith-Butler, Charleston School of Law

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Are you offering what your patrons want? And are they aware of it?

By Lisa Smith-Butler

Deciding what type of patron services to offer and how to publicize these services are questions that occupy and often perplex many law libraries today. Because the acquisition of information is expensive, libraries are expensive. Libraries, in comparison to other departments, require large staffs, lots of physical space, and large sums of money to operate. In an era of draconian budget cuts, the library is often the first and most obvious place in which to wield the ax, which creates enormous pressure to justify and defend a library’s existence, space, and budget.
To assist with this defense, many libraries are reviewing and re-evaluating their services. Libraries often initiate contact with people, alerting them as to how they can help acquire information that will resolve problems; answer questions; and enhance job, school, or personal performance. To justify staffing, space, and budgets, libraries are turning to an old-fashioned concept—marketing. Because libraries serve large populations, they can work with every person within an organization. They do this by providing services and outreach to all. Libraries are describing their services and telling others about them, demonstrating their value in order to thrive in challenging times. They are marketing their services, collections, and staff.

Addressing the Basics

Before developing or enhancing a marketing strategy, libraries need to answer several questions such as:

• What is your library's mission?
• Who are your patrons?
• How do you decide what services to offer your patrons?
• How do you publicize these services?
• How do you evaluate the effectiveness of these services?

How does a library decide its mission? When developing mission statements, a library should always keep in mind the goals of the parent organization. How can the library mirror or support these goals? Academic libraries frequently describe their mission as supporting the curricular and teaching needs of the faculty and students as well as supporting the research goals of faculty. Firm libraries explain their mission as assisting attorneys with cost effectively retrieving, as quickly as is possible, necessary information. Since each library is unique, each library's mission will be unique. If your library hasn't already crafted a mission statement, sit down with your staff, patrons, and administration to draft a mission statement that supports and enhances the mission of your parent institution.

As part of this mission creation process, libraries will need to focus on their patrons. Who are the patrons? In some instances, it is easy to decide who the patrons are. Academic law libraries have a readily identifiable audience of faculty, staff, and students at the law school and, often, university levels. Who else is included in that mix? Can pro se patrons use the library? Do the local bench and bar use the library? Can alumni use the library? What are the needs of each patron group? Which groups have priority when developing services? What expectations for each group can be satisfied? All of these are questions to be considered and answered as libraries focus on their patrons.

Once you know what a library's mission is and who its patrons are, how do you decide what services to offer? Do you simply continue with the services that you inherited when you arrived at your library? Have you updated these services? Do you visit other libraries and bring back ideas for services that intrigue and interest you? Do you develop services to answer questions that are asked over and over again by patrons? Do you ask your patrons what they want? Do you have the staffing, budget, and facilities to provide the services requested?

Deciding on a PR Strategy

Once you've answered the above questions, you must then decide how to publicize and promote your services. Do you post fliers around campus? Do you send out blast emails, or do you blog, tweet, or otherwise announce? Do you go into classrooms to teach subject research skills? Do you put up displays or send out newsletters? Do you offer research guides? Are your services posted on your library's web page? How do you alert patrons about your services? People must know what you offer. Services should be succinctly described and easy to locate. People frequently don't realize they want or need information until the issue has reached crisis proportions. When that happens, they want to be able to easily locate someone who can help them.

Evaluating Effectiveness

Next, how do you evaluate the effectiveness of your services? Do you survey your patrons annually? Do you survey patrons after a research session? Do you ask for suggestions? Do you talk one on one to students, faculty, staff, and attorneys? Always ask for feedback from your patrons to find out if you are offering services that they value. Marketing a library effectively is a process that takes thought and time. Once you have answered these questions, you must then decide:

• At which events should the library be present?
• What services will the library offer?
• How will the library market these services?

The library should be seen and heard throughout an organization. To have an official role in orientation for incoming students and faculty or new summer clerks and new associates sends a strong message that the organization values the library, its staff, and its services, viewing it as a partner within the organization. The embedded librarian is a relatively new concept that involves embedding or sending librarians to work with patrons where the patrons are located. Librarians can be embedded in the stacks, classrooms, or faculty wings, providing a visible presence, answering questions, and mingling with patrons. As librarians walk down hallways, they may discover that students and faculty alike will greet them with comments, questions, concerns, and needs. Make sure the library is involved with skills training and participates in it.

What services should be offered? Typically libraries are offering a variation on any of the following:

• Current awareness and information alerts
• Technology training or assistance to help patrons learn to use social media to communicate effectively and interactively with students or clients
• Information retrieval, helping patrons find answers to very specific questions

Lastly, the library must decide how to market itself. Effective marketing will ensure that the library's message reaches as many people as possible. To do this, look at a variety of mediums. Post fliers across campus or create brochures that describe services, hours, and the collection. Use a library blog, newsletter, or web page to discuss available services. Use a Facebook or Twitter account to update patrons about new services. Promote the OPAC and use it to alert patrons about new titles and special collections. Ask to be included in school or firm newsletters and electronic message boards. Offer research training courses to students, faculty, and attorneys. Offer assistance to people wandering around the library, the office, or the school who look lost or confused. Be available and present to help people locate the information or resources needed to resolve problems.

One of the most useful and memorable pieces of marketing that I have seen is a refrigerator magnet from my husband's university library. It has the name, phone number, and URL for the library's reference desk. It is easy to locate and succinct. It has made it through two houses in two different states. Every year when the school sends its letter requesting donations, he looks at the magnet and then writes a check. ■

Lisa Smith-Butler (sbutler@charlestonlaw.edu) is associate dean, director, and professor of law at Charleston School of Law in South Carolina.