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It Takes a Village to Raise a Tent: A Case Study in Pitching the Academic Library to Incoming Undergraduate Students

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Abstract

Rather than continuing to pursue formal inclusion in the University of Western Ontario's O-Week program, Western Libraries shifted its approach to library orientation for incoming undergraduate students by launching its very own orientation campaign in the fall of 2005. The following article details the planning process and subsequent launch of Western Libraries' inaugural system-wide library orientation initiative, the aim of which was to position Western Libraries strategically as a key contributor to 'the best student experience' at Western. The overall impact of the campaign, as well as its influence on future orientation initiatives at the University of Western Ontario are also considered here.

Keywords

academic libraries, first-year students, marketing, orientation, outreach

Introduction

With an FTE population of approximately thirty-thousand, the University of Western Ontario (Western) strives to provide "the best student experience among Canada's leading research-intensive universities" (University Secretariat, "Engaging the Future"). For the incoming cohort of first-year undergraduate students, approximately five-thousand of whom set foot on campus each year, that 'best student experience' depends upon successful transition from the secondary to post-secondary environment. Fortunately, Western's first-year students are in good hands with the University Students' Council (USC), the group charged with planning and overseeing Western's Orientation Program (O-Week) each year. By dedicating significant resources to its O-Week initiatives, the USC has developed a well-established and long standing tradition of successful orientation programming for incoming undergraduate students at Western.

As academic libraries play a key role in the undergraduate student experience, library orientation should undoubtedly factor into formal orientation programming on college and university campuses. Unfortunately, this has not been the case at Western. Despite its best efforts to cultivate partnerships with orientation planning staff each year, Western Libraries has yet to figure prominently in the official orientation program on campus. In order to overcome this challenge, Western Libraries shifted its approach to library orientation in the fall of 2005, launching its very own O-Week campaign for the Class of 2009.

Background

The University of Western Ontario's library system, Western Libraries, is comprised of seven service locations distributed across campus. Each location serves designated academic departments or faculties and provides access to resources and services which support the unique needs of their particular community. With numerous physical locations serving distinct user groups, providing system-wide library orientation that is both meaningful and relevant can prove to be quite a challenge. For this reason, individual library locations at Western often adopt their own marketing strategies and orientation initiatives. Examples of such strategies have included: multilingual 'welcome' signage placed throughout the first floor of the library; tours offered by subject librarians which are incorporated into faculty-based orientation; and an O-Week 'welcome desk' set up in the foyer of the library throughout September and staffed during peak hours (e.g. mid-day, mid-week).

While there is certainly a place for such location-specific orientation initiatives, 2004 LibQUAL+™ survey results indicated that the Western community at large was unaware of the valuable resources and services available through Western Libraries (Western Libraries, "Service Quality at Western Libraries"). In an effort to address this gap, Western Libraries established a task group to determine how to raise awareness of library resources and services. After conducting a thorough literature review (Appendix A), the task group identified the need to bolster the profile of Western Libraries on campus. The task group determined that in order to make visible the valuable contribution of Western Libraries to 'the best student experience', investment in system-wide marketing initiatives would be required.

Marketing and the Academic Library

The literature review conducted by the task group revealed quite quickly that no universal definition for the term 'marketing' exists in library literature. The American Marketing Association's definition however, is commonly cited in the marketing literature (Grönroos, Gupta and Keefe), and serves as an excellent benchmark:

"Marketing is an organizational function and a set of processes for creating, communicating, and delivering value to customers and for managing customer relationships in ways that benefit the organization and its stakeholders" (American Marketing Association, 2004).

Working from this definition, we would identify: students, faculty, staff and alumni as the customers of the academic library; the organization as the library system – in this case, Western Libraries and each of its seven service locations – and; stakeholders as any individual or group, on campus or off, with which the library has or would like to cultivate a relationship.

Because academic libraries had little, if any, competition in the information business for much of their history, there simply wasn't a need to promote library resources or services to the campus community. Today, however, students and faculty can choose any number of alternative sources to acquire information for their academic work, which is why "effective pro-active marketing of the library's unique abilities to provide professional, focused, personalized ... resources and services [is] critical" (Dillon, 133). As an 'organizational function' and 'set of processes' however, effective marketing initiatives require much more than stand alone strategies, such as catchy slogans or witty ad campaigns. In order to succeed, communication, marketing and outreach initiatives must be folded into the strategic direction of the organization.

Though marketing had not been viewed as a key priority for Western Libraries prior to 2004, O-Week seemed the perfect opportunity to demonstrate the value of strategic marketing and, ultimately, for Western Libraries to shift its approach to promoting library resources and services. With this in mind, in the summer of 2005, Melanie Mills and Marisa Mitchell, outreach librarians from each of the two largest libraries on campus, and members of the aforementioned task group, conceived a plan to revision Western Libraries' approach to first-year undergraduate orientation.

The Planning Process

Fixed in their belief that a system-wide, strategic approach to marketing Western Libraries' resources and services was vital, the two librarians pooled their knowledge and experience and began developing a marketing proposal for O-Week 2005.

In order to garner the support required to realize their vision, much of the planning process needed to take place well in advance of presenting the final proposal to library administration. Sourcing local suppliers, negotiating pricing and delivery dates for project materials, and perhaps most importantly, detailing how the project would be executed (e.g. project administration, budget and timelines) all needed to be thoroughly researched and carefully presented. Initial contacts with campus and community

stakeholders were established and documented, and all anticipated costs were outlined in a working budget to demonstrate project feasibility. Once the preliminary planning had been completed and all necessary information gathered, a final marketing proposal was prepared.

The Pitch

The 'Western Libraries and O-Week 2005 – Marketing Proposal' (Appendix B) was delivered to library administration in early July 2005. The proposal included: a detailed project description which outlined both the nature and scope of the project; background information, such as the rationale for the project; a project detail, specifying project goals and objectives; an identified target group; an outline of both available and required resources, such as staff, equipment, facilities and supplies; and last, but not least, a detailed budget with a breakdown of all anticipated costs. Within a matter of days, the University Librarian and other members of library administration provided their response to the proposal, offering unanimous support for the project. Six short weeks later, Western Libraries launched its inaugural O-Week campaign.

The Project

'*Just Try to Graduate Without Us!*' served as the theme for the Western Libraries' O-Week campaign in 2005. The main goal of the campaign was to raise the profile of the library during orientation week, positioning Western Libraries as a key contributor to 'the best student experience' in the minds of incoming undergraduate students. Increased visibility on campus would be paramount. Erecting a big top tent in the heart of campus, staffed with friendly, welcoming volunteers from across the library system was the strategy of choice. By pitching a huge tent in a prominent, high profile location, Western Libraries was able to reach out to incoming undergraduate students while at the same time demonstrating its desire to increase its involvement in the campus community.

To ensure that the campaign was made visible across the library system, as not all students would have an opportunity to visit the O-Week Tent, participation by library staff in each library location across campus was sought and supported. The O-Week slogan, along with the Western Libraries logo, was imprinted on two-hundred t-shirts which were then distributed to every library staff member (full and part-time, public service and behind-the-scenes). Library staff were encouraged to wear their t-shirts throughout O-Week. Whether working at one of the library service desks, waiting in line at the local coffee shop, delivering instruction to undergraduate classes, or in the case of the University Librarian, seeing to official University business (such as attending Senate), Western Libraries staff could be spotted in their stylish O-Week tees across campus throughout the first week of September.

Hundreds of new and returning students, faculty and staff visited the Western Libraries O-Week Tent on concrete beach (the University's concourse) and received valuable information about library resources and services. Staff promoted the library website by handing out purple silicone bracelets with the words 'Western Libraries' imprinted on one side and the library's web address (www.lib.uwo.ca) imprinted on the reverse. The wristbands were an instant hit with undergraduate students, so much so that residence sophs were requesting them by the dozen to distribute to their student groups. Western Libraries pens and Post-It™ notes were also distributed. In addition to bookmarks advertising library hours, pamphlets promoting library workshops, and campus maps which included information about each service location, Western Libraries playing cards, temporary tattoos, 'Welcome to Western' buttons, and, of course, candy, rounded out the list of freebies that were made available to students who visited the O-Week Tent.

Additional supplies ordered for the tent included: a 2'x 6' vinyl Western Libraries banner (that could also be used for future initiatives), several helium-filled balloon bouquets to place in and around the tent, and water for tent volunteers. Prizes for library staff were also ordered and awarded at random to staff spotted wearing their Western Libraries O-Week t-shirts both in the libraries and across campus.

Results

Thanks to the unanimous support offered by library administration, and with the overwhelming enthusiasm demonstrated by library staff across campus, the Western Libraries O-Week 2005 campaign was a great success on all accounts. The O-Week Tent was visited by hundreds of incoming students during the first week of September 2005. In the Tent alone, several hundred information queries were received by Tent volunteers from members of the Western community.

Table 1: Number of Questions Asked by Visitors at the O-Week Tent

Nature of Question	Number of Questions
Library Related (e.g. hours, locations, services, etc.)	624
Non-Library Related (e.g. directional, other campus resources/services, etc.)	113
Total	737*

* N.B. The above statistics represent only those visitors who interacted with library staff (e.g. asked a question). Visitors who did not interact with library staff (i.e. those who

simply came into the Tent or stopped to take information or to receive a free giveaway) are not recorded above.

Feedback received from students, faculty and staff from the Western community was very positive. Undergraduate students who had no affiliation with the library offered to volunteer in the Tent in order to encourage their peers to learn more about Western Libraries, while staff and leaders from other units on campus offered words of encouragement and inquired about the initiative. In the library community the reaction was just as positive. At the local level, nearly all library staff participated in the campaign in one way or another, while across Ontario academic librarians began contacting Western Libraries to ask about the initiative. Unsolicited articles published in campus newspapers and on the University's website (www.uwo.ca) also indicated a positive response to the initiative, and served to further bolster the profile of Western Libraries during O-Week.

Lessons Learned

Overall, the Western Libraries O-Week 2005 campaign was a great success. Though the hard work of library staff certainly carried the initiative, the support of library administration was without question the single greatest contributor to the project's overall success. Presenting a detailed proposal with project goals and objectives that reflected Western Libraries' strategic direction, following the 2004 LibQUAL+™ survey results, facilitated the nimble response from library administration that was required to get the project off the ground. Rationale that clearly articulated the need to shift away from location-specific, ad-hoc approaches to library orientation, and to move toward system-wide, coordinated strategies, helped to position O-Week as the ideal platform for Western Libraries to try a new method of marketing its resources and services.

Another key element to the overall success of the '*Just Try to Graduate Without Us!*' campaign was the tremendous show of support offered by library staff, who were both encouraged and provided with the opportunity to participate in the initiative. Colleagues and supervisors alike were willing to adjust their own schedules to facilitate staffing an additional service point during that first week in September. Creating an opportunity for library staff to meet and work directly with colleagues that they would not likely have had an opportunity to work with otherwise, resulted in a team-building experience on a grand scale. For all involved, the 'village' of Western Libraries felt just a little smaller during O-Week 2005.

In addition to the immediate successes achieved, elements of the planning process from the inaugural O-Week initiative have been beneficial in planning subsequent marketing initiatives at Western Libraries. Carefully documenting the O-Week 2005

campaign – from its inception as a marketing proposal, through to its completion, as detailed in a project summary – has proven incredibly valuable in subsequent years. The marketing proposal, for example, has served as a skeleton for future marketing projects at both the library, and system-wide levels, while the project summary (which intended to reassure library administration that the resources allocated were managed carefully, and that the project's initial goals and objectives had been met) proved valuable in assessing the campaign's overall success. Western Libraries now has a strong foundation to build upon for future library orientation marketing strategies.

Of course, the most valuable lessons to be learned come from those elements of project planning and execution that could be improved upon. Allowing adequate time for planning is vital, especially over the summer months when many key stakeholders may be away from campus for long periods of time. Placing product orders, booking campus space, and ensuring the availability of necessary facilities and equipment all require plenty of lead time (and room for adjustment). Planning should begin at least three months in advance. Coordinating staff schedules to volunteer at an additional service point during the first week of the academic year also requires a great deal of time and energy and involves co-operation at many levels. Sending out a call for volunteers well before the summer hiatus, when most library staff leave campus for summer holidays, is highly recommended.

Perhaps the greatest lesson learned from the entire experience is that of collaboration. Western Libraries O-Week 2005 campaign was conceived by two librarians who work on opposite sides of campus serving completely different user communities. With their shared passion for marketing, willingness to combine their knowledge and experience and to devote significant time and energy toward a shared vision, a system-wide approach to marketing at Western Libraries was achieved.

Conclusion

"If no one knows about [the] library and how it can help its community meet its goals, the library will not – and should not – continue to exist" (Siess, 15). Today, Western Libraries remains a force to be reckoned with when it comes to marketing library resources and services to the undergraduate community at the University of Western Ontario. Western Libraries takes a proactive role in its communications, marketing and outreach initiatives, and four years after launching its inaugural O-Week campaign, still invests significant resources in this important aspect of library operations. Although the theme may vary and those involved may change from one year to the next, the goal to raise Western Libraries' profile through a system-wide approach to library orientation was realized in September 2005 and continues to thrive today.

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Appendix A – Task Group Bibliography (May 2005)

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Appendix B – ‘Western Libraries and O-Week 2005 – Marketing Proposal’ (July 2005)

Submitted by: Melanie Burnard (English & Outreach Services Librarian, The D.B. Weldon Library) and Marisa Mitchell (Clinical Outreach & Special Projects Librarian, The Allyn & Betty Taylor Library).

Project Description

In order to enhance the first-year experience for incoming undergraduate students at Western, and to raise the profile of Western Libraries on campus, we propose that Western Libraries set up an information booth on concrete beach during O-Week 2005. The ‘Western Libraries Information Booth’, which would be staffed by volunteers from across the library system, would be located just outside the former entrance to The D.B. Weldon Library (adjacent to Quotes Café). This prominent, high profile location would place Western Libraries alongside other campus and student services booths which are set up for the duration of O-Week throughout concrete beach, thus aligning Western Libraries with other key campus and student services groups.

Although staff assigned to work in the ‘Western Libraries Information Booth’ would certainly be encouraged to answer any campus-related questions posed by booth visitors, the main purpose of the booth would be to promote Western Libraries as a friendly, welcoming campus resource for first-year students. Disseminating information about the library system, promoting key resources and services, and most of all, letting students know that we’re here to help, would be the main objectives for staff working in the ‘Western Libraries Information Booth’.

To attract passers-by to the ‘Western Libraries Information Booth’, we propose that the booth (which would be comprised of a tent, tables and chairs) be decorated with clusters of balloons, include adequate signage – namely, a ‘Western Libraries’ banner – and be staffed by enthusiastic library personnel wearing customized Western Libraries t-shirts. Ideally, all front-line staff, both those staffing the Information Booth and those working at service points throughout the library system, would be provided with a Western Libraries t-shirt to wear for the duration of O-Week 2005. A consistent, library-wide approach such as this would send the message to students across campus that each of Western Libraries’ seven service locations are warm, welcoming environments.

Lastly, we propose that purple, silicone bracelets (similar to the yellow ‘Livestrong’ type) with the words ‘Western Libraries’ are distributed to booth visitors. Not only are these bracelets trendy and popular, they would serve as a lasting and effective promotional tool for Western Libraries as first-year students would be keen to add this hot accessory to their growing collection of purple paraphernalia.

Background Information

In the past, marketing initiatives – such as orientation tours for first-year students - have largely been undertaken by individual library locations, especially in larger libraries such as Taylor and Weldon. While this strategy is ideal for specialized groups (e.g. incoming graduate students in a particular program), it has not worked particularly well for the first-year constituent, as these students often do not know what faculty they will be joining or which library they will end up using. As such, we believe that it is time to consider a library-wide approach to first-year orientation.

Another challenge for Western Libraries in years past has been a lack of formal representation in the official O-Week calendar, which is organized by the University Students' Council (USC). Attempts to open the lines of communication between O-Week organizers and Western Libraries have been largely unsuccessful to date, and Western Libraries can no longer allow this to circumstance to hinder our orientation objectives. A high profile, high impact marketing initiative, such as that proposed herein, will allow us not only to reach out to undergraduate students, but also to demonstrate our desire to increase our involvement in campus activities such as O-Week.

Project Detail

Goal #1: To enhance the first-year student experience at Western.

- Objective 1.1 To project a warm and welcoming image of Western Libraries to incoming first-year students.
- Objective 1.2 To introduce new undergraduate students to university Libraries (and Western Libraries in particular) in a safe, non-intimidating way.
- Objective 1.3 To reduce anxiety among first-year students regarding library research and 'information overload'.
- Objective 1.4 To let students know who we are and how we can contribute to a positive academic experience at Western.

Goal #2: To increase Western Libraries' profile on campus during O-Week.

- Objective 2.1 To demonstrate that Western Libraries is actively involved in the campus community.
- Objective 2.2 To take a proactive role in orientation activities by going out into the heart of campus (e.g. concrete beach) where the students are, rather than waiting for them to come to us.

Goal #3: To promote Western Libraries' resources and services.

- Objective 3.1 To highlight key resources and services that will help first-year students make the adjustment to university level research (e.g. Resources by Subject, The Assignment Calculator, Chat with Us Online, etc).
- Objective 3.2 To distribute information about Western Libraries to new students (e.g. library location maps, bookmarks with library hours, etc).

Target Group

Incoming, first-year undergraduate students at Western.

Methods

The primary methods for achieving the goals and objectives of the 'Western Libraries Information Booth' will be:

- the development of a coordinated, system-wide approach to first-year orientation for Western Libraries; and
- the financial and administrative support to fully realize the 'Western Libraries Information Booth' for implementation during O-Week 2005.

As the aim is to carry out the 'Western Libraries Information Booth' for O-Week 2005, a timely response by the Library Leaders Group (LLG) to this marketing proposal is of the utmost importance. If at all possible, a reply received by Monday, July 25th would be most appreciated.

Staff/Administration

The 'Western Libraries Information Booth' will require a minimum of two, and perhaps as many as four staff members from 10 a.m. – 4 p.m. for a total of four days (Tuesday, September 6th – Friday, September 9th, 2005). Melanie Burnard and Marisa Mitchell will oversee scheduling and will assist in staffing the Information Booth for the duration of O-Week. Volunteers from across the library system will be invited to participate in this Western Libraries orientation initiative.

Available Resources

The following, existing Western Libraries resources could be used for the 'Western Libraries Information Booth':

- Existing Western Libraries' pamphlets/handouts ('Welcome to Western Libraries' handout, map of library locations, library bookmarks, etc).
- Western Libraries' Display Board
- Western Libraries' tattoos and pens which were produced for previous marketing campaigns
- A whiteboard from The D.B. Weldon Library
- A table and chairs from The D.B. Weldon Library
- A laptop with wireless access

Required Resources

Facilities

- Electrical supply to the booth (to run power to a laptop, a radio, etc).
- Use of space outside of The D.B. Weldon Library (adjacent to Quotes Café on concrete beach).

Equipment

- A tent (either rented for the week or purchased for use in this, and future marketing initiatives).

Supplies

- Balloons – several helium-filled, purple and white balloon bouquets
- Banner – a 'Western Libraries' banner for the booth
- Bracelets – silicone, purple 'Western Libraries' bracelets
- T-Shirts – purple and/or white t-shirts for front-line staff

Budget

The following is the estimated cost, both to equip the 'Western Libraries Information Booth' and to acquire the necessary marketing supplies, to realize the above-proposed marketing initiative for O-Week 2005. All prices are approximate:

Balloons	\$ 100.00
Banner (2x6 vinyl, two colour)	\$ 100.00
Silicone Bracelets (1000)	\$ 1400.00
Tent Rental (approx. \$300.00/day, 4 days)	\$ 1200.00
T-Shirts for All Staff (200) 100 purple @ \$7.50/ea + tax 100 white @ \$5.75/ea + tax	\$ 1500.00

Other (Miscellaneous)	\$ 100.00
TOTAL	\$ 4400.00

Conclusion

Western Libraries involvement in campus orientation is crucial to the first-year student's academic experience here at Western. We hope that LLG will consider the above proposal seriously, as step toward further aligning Western Libraries with other campus and student services groups who participate fully in the first-year orientation experience.

Proposed Staff T-Shirt



FRONT



BACK