

Promotion of Digital Library Collections to Digital Users A New Trend in Digital Era

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Abstract : As technology advances, more and more libraries are beginning to offer digital collections. So far, the majority of promotion for these collections has relied on traditional physical marketing. However, the advances in technology also create new demographics of online patrons, such as digital immigrants and natives. Libraries must begin to target promotions at this demographic of users, or risk losing them to the internet at large. As people plunge headfirst into the world of the internet and Web 2.0, they immerse themselves in online technology. Nowadays people buy groceries online, text message mom to say they'll be home late from school, and post baby pictures online to share with grandma. More and more people rely on the internet and digital resources to conduct their everyday business.

Key Words : *Digital Library, Analog Marketing, Digital Education, Library Marketing*

1. Introduction

Like other industries, many libraries are going the next step and beginning to offer fully digital services and resources. However, libraries are finding many obstacles to overcome regarding digital collections. Budget, infrastructure support, hardware and software requirements, bandwidth, security, copyright and licensing, and training and education are some of the issues that must be taken into account when working with digital collections.

But addressing all those issues is moot if the collection is unused or under-used. Marketing digital collections is an important factor to consider, and one that seems to be neglected. Traditional physical library marketing campaigns do not apply to digital collections; relying on analog marketing for a digital collection does a disservice to the library, the collection, and the patron. In order to best serve an increasingly digital world, digital libraries will need to depend on digital marketing. Rather than relying on what works successfully for physical libraries, and applying those marketing campaigns to their digital counterparts, libraries need to look at marketing campaigns that work in the digital world, and apply them to their collections.

2. What is a digital collection?

In order to address marketing digital collections, it first must be determined what exactly a digital collection is. "A digital library," as defined by Slovney (2005), "also known as a data warehouse, electronic library, or virtual library, is a collection of digital representations of numerous types of media, such as documents, images and sounds that are stored in an information repository and are available through a local computer network or anywhere via the internet." Slovney notes that most digital libraries support or work in conjunction with traditional libraries, rather than replacing them.



It seems that digital libraries and digital collections within libraries are cropping up across the nation. The American Memory Project from the library of Congress is a prominent example of digital library collections. Academic library online resources, institutional repositories, corporate image collections and local public library genealogical databases are all examples of digital collections. All types of libraries are harnessing technological resources in order to offer collections of digital materials.

The focus on digital materials is not solely due to current technology. Obviously, the growth of the internet has been an influence. But there are other benefits to digital collections, such as multi-user access, increased speed

and retrieval times, improved search functionality, and the ability to support a variety of content formats (Lee 2002). Offering collections online also increases accessibility; previously, a physical library item could only be used in the library, or possibly sent via interlibrary loan to another location. Offering digital material online increases the ability for patrons to utilize the material anywhere, without having to physically enter the building or wait for an interlibrary delivery. In the academic world, distance education opportunities are on the rise. More students are conducting research online (Albanese and Oder 2002), necessitating an increase in digital resources. Another popular benefit of increased access is increased information sharing and therefore increased collaboration. In addition to these patron-shared benefits, libraries are also finding digital collections to be more cost-effective (Albanese 2001).

3. Reasons for Library Marketing

With the numerous documented benefits, it seems like digital collections sell themselves. Why should libraries invest in marketing digital collections? Because marketing is important, regardless of service format. Marketing has long been used to establish the importance of libraries and to justify their existence. If people do not see a service as important, they will not support it. This applies to libraries overall, but it also applies to digital collections. Marketing is also used to justify expenditures and solicit financial support. Patrons and administrators need to see a return on their investments (Nolan and Costanza 2006). Evidence of success can encourage additional support, be it financial or administrative. Library marketing also assists in advocating information literacy. Marketing can establish the library as an authoritative source of information.

“As libraries move towards digital collections they must ensure that users are aware of both the information available to them and how to access that information. In this way, effective promotion remains a particularly important issue” (Ashcroft and Langdon 1999 in Ashcroft 2002).

This is especially applicable to digital collections available on the internet: libraries need to assert their collections as the place to turn for accurate information, rather than letting web surfers rely on unreliable websites. And internet usage by library patrons is up, and not for use of library resources (Hoffert 2007).

4. Pre-existing Methods of Library Marketing

Most libraries are already aware of the need for marketing. Many libraries already engage in a number of marketing campaigns for their physical collections, and a number of books have been published on the subject. Documentation on marketing specific to digital collections, however, is rare.

Books about library marketing methods in the 21st century still fall back on traditional analog marketing strategies. In a book dedicated to marketing library web pages and resources, Curtis (2000) suggested newspaper articles, brochures, demonstrations, bookmarks, direct mail campaigns, public service announcements, booths at fairs and events, promotional products and banners—all physical ways of marketing something entirely online. Curtis briefly mentions email and banner ads as possibilities, revealing digital-based marketing methods for the first time in a library context. Reed (2001) says “This book will show you how to use traditional [i.e., physical] promotional materials and techniques to make your library and its services matter to everyone in your community” (emphasis added). If the library’s user community is comprised or partially comprised of digital-based users, how are these physical techniques going to be applicable?

Linda Ashcroft (2001) identified and listed current method of promoting library electronic journal collections. Fifteen methods we listed and ranked according to usage. One third of the methods listed were traditional physical marketing strategies, such as posters and newsletter articles. The remaining methods, while electronic, all targeted the library web page itself. Ashcroft also found that evaluation and promotion of these electronic collections, in both North America and the UK, was low. Not only are libraries using potentially unsuccessful marketing techniques, but many are not marketing digital collections to adequate levels at all. A 2005 study by OCLC suggested that “marketing missteps are largely to blame for the declining role of libraries in people’s lives” and that “most information consumers are not aware of the digital collections available to them from their community library, be it in a corporate, educational, or municipal setting” (Buczynski 2006).

5. Digital Collections Require Digital Marketing Tactics

While physical marketing methods may target traditional library patrons, a new demographic group emerging from the advances in technology will soon demand library attention. Today’s generation is the first to grow up surrounded by the new technology of computers, cellular phones, mp3 players, the World Wide Web and other aspects of the digital age. Prensky (2001) refers to this group as digital natives. Others have perhaps embraced these new technological developments to varying degrees, despite lack of immersion since birth; Prensky calls these people digital immigrants. While digital immigrants still can rely on analog methods as well as

technological means, digital natives have a completely different mindset: they expect fast access and instant gratification. Using analog promotional tactics to solicit attention from digital natives is most likely doomed.

If traditional physical marketing methods are not enough, what other marketing strategies can be harnessed in order to effectively promote digital library collections?

The biggest strategy, physical or digital, is visibility. Studies of library web resource links by Huntington et. al. (2004) and Sowards (2005) show that visibly prominent links were visited more often. Therefore, to increase digital collection usage, links to the collections must have high visibility.

Putting a link to a digital collection at the most visible spot on the library home page is merely a start. Libraries might not even be doing this: often it's the most frequently used resource links placed in highly visible spots, and infrequently used resources are moved out of the spotlight (Covey 2002). This is counter-effective in connecting more users to that under-utilized and infrequently visited collection via hyperlink. Hurst-Wahl (2005) thinks collections are so invisible that "it often seems that you have to know that a collection exists in order to find it."

Where else might digital-based users see a link to a library collection? Libraries need to put the links where the people already are looking. "People find great websites by sampling the content from other known websites" (Buczynski 2006). Buczynski suggests going so far as to get library resource links listed on the most popular online sites. He offers Slashdot, a site known for directing traffic to small, unknown websites, as an example. Another example is the University of Washington libraries: knowing students turned to Wikipedia for information, the library began inserting linkbacks to its digital collections as support and citations for various Wikipedia articles. Hits statistics for the digital materials skyrocketed (Lally and Dunford 2007). Every library's clientele is different. The trick is to find out what digital places library patrons are visiting, and place library links there. Perhaps public library patrons are interested in genealogy; a link to the library's related digital resources might be placed on the local genealogy society's web page.

Beyond target demographics and special interest groups, libraries need to begin targeting the patron as an individual. Personal data can be used to make predictions about an individual's needs (Henderson 2005). When people search Amazon.com for a book, the site recommends additional materials in which they might be interested. Libraries have yet to capitalize on this technique. Students researching a digital repository for thesis projects on nutritional supplements for horses might receive links to additional theses about veterinary nutrition, or horses. A patron searching a digital image collection for Vivienne Westwood's fashion designs might be linked to a digital video collection that included her runway shows. In addition to links, libraries have other opportunities to remain visible to patrons. A simple "bookmark this site" link available for a digital collection allows users to keep the online location accessible in their web browser. However, the user still needs to consciously follow the bookmarked link. The Web 2.0 technology of RSS (Really Simple Syndication) allows users to automatically be notified any time new content is added to a site. RSS subscription links can be placed in visible areas of the digital collection site, allowing patrons to subscribe with a single click, and then be notified via email or a feedreader anytime new material is added. New material could be new digital acquisitions within a collection, or new digital collections.

Traditional library marketing methods, especially in recent years, have focused on the library as a "place." The emphasis is on coming to the physical library location because it's a desirable place to be. Many libraries' physical promotional campaigns often focus on the library as a community place, and have attempted to transfer this idea to digital collections. Buczynski (2006) claims this approach is not applicable to digital libraries and collections, and is one reason library marketing flounders in this area. While marketing focusing on physical aspects will obviously not apply to digital collections, the concept of digital collections as "places to be" is still an advantageous tactic, especially with Web 2.0 technologies. New online communication and sharing tools can establish a sense of community for internet users. The power of Web 2.0 is not solely in the advanced technology, but in that technology's ability to bring users together (Welsh 2007). If patrons had the opportunity to participate more within a digital collection, such as commenting on articles, tagging photos, or discussing videos, that library sense of place can also apply to the online arena. The technologies of Web 2.0 offer "an amazing way to market the library through meaningful conversation and collaboration" (Konieczko 2007). Once users are communicating and sharing information, there are more opportunities for more referrals to additional resources. ArchivesNext (2007) emphasizes the need for immersion in these communities: "Libraries can either become part of the fabric of these conversations, or be left out of them and so become...increasingly irrelevant to those users."

6. Obstacles to Digital Promotion

All of the suggested digital promotion methods listed above are relatively cheap and easy to implement. Many of them require less financial and time investment than some traditional physical promotional campaigns; adding an RSS option to a site is a short, single instance of coding, while a campaign of printed newsletters takes time to write, compile and print, plus the cost of paper and possibly mailing. So why are libraries falling back on more costly, time consuming methods of physical promotion that possibly don't even work?

Possibly one of the biggest challenges stems from unfamiliarity with technology. The generation gap of librarians leaves many without the technological knowledge they need to implement these changes, regardless of attitude. Also, people become reliant on techniques that have been successful in the past, hence the attempt to apply traditional physical marketing methods to digital collections. The fact that most library marketing books, even ones specifically targeting the 21st century or the World Wide Web, are still suggesting newsletters, bookmarks and fair booths as promotions, can lead a librarian with the best intentions of promoting a digital collection astray.

Rapid changes in technology often make people wary of investing. Why spend time setting up the ability for RSS subscriptions, if the technology will just change or evolve into something different a year or two from now? This mindset has always been a hurdle regarding technology. However, if librarians approached technology with this mindset, libraries would still have card catalogs. Is it not better to serve digital patrons for the limited amount of time a technology such as RSS may allow before evolving, rather than not addressing the needs of those patrons at all?

Often the biggest issue to address is not the technology itself but rather its support. Many libraries do not have the knowledge or receive the training necessary to implement these types of digital promotions. Without administrative understanding or evidence of patron need, it is difficult to prove the necessity for training and classes. Funding can also be an issue. Depending on the size of the library, additional staff with adequate technological knowledge may be necessary.

Including digital promotion in the library marketing plan is imperative. Hurst-Wahl (2005) emphasizes the importance of planning with regard to library marketing. It seems many libraries do not have a formal marketing plan, and those that do make no specific consideration for digital marketing. Without policies and plans in evidence, administrators may find it difficult to support digital marketing. The biggest obstacle of all is, of course, the digital collection itself. If the service offered is sub-par, promotion will only make the situation worse. Digital collections should not be promoted merely because they are digital, but because they offer a service to the library patron. The technology should fill a need, not create a new one (Konieczko 2007).

7. Conclusion

Digital marketing is not for all collections, nor is it the only way to market digital library collections. Some success can still occur when promotion digital collection through traditional physical methods. However, as the number of digital immigrants and digital natives rises, libraries need to address this demographic of users. Digital marketing campaigns can target this demographic more successfully than traditional methods. If libraries fail to meet these patrons where they are, they are bound to lose them.

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