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Sell what they're buying

Marketing information literacy

Promoting information literacy to faculty is an important part of the job for any academic librarian with an instructional role.¹ We all know we need to do it, but how to do it proves to be the greatest challenge. Faculty are busy and often focused on their primary responsibilities—teaching and research. We feel fortunate to have the opportunity to provide a one-shot session about the library and its resources, so asking for much more seems like an imposition. Yet, the services we bring to the table are critically important to the students' academic success, and ultimately, the instructor's success. The trick is to figure out how to sell what faculty will buy.

While the library is not truly a business, by using business marketing strategies we can meet the institution's learning objectives and our own goals. The American Marketing Association defines marketing as "the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners and society at large."²

Information literacy instruction has the potential to be of considerable value for our faculty, and it is our job to find a way to create, communicate, deliver, and exchange it in a way that is meaningful to them. To be effective we must understand the desires and needs of our faculty, develop services that they will find valuable, and then promote them effectively.

Professional marketers often ask, what services and products do people spend money on, and what is a problem for which I can provide a solution?³ The question is not whether information literacy instruction

is needed, rather how do we connect faculty with the goods and services we have and help them see the benefits?

In order to sell information literacy instruction, you have to develop a plan to market it. This is where a little market research comes in. Find out everything you can about the faculty you serve, as well as what they think about the services you offer.⁴ This involves starting a conversation with the faculty you serve and listening to find out what they do, what they teach, and what is important to them. No marketing plan can work without visibility, so you must know where your faculty are and take your message to them effectively.

To illustrate my points, let me share a story about a colleague, whom I will call Sara. Sara came to her library to be the college librarian for one of the university's largest and most competitive colleges. Not long after she arrived and became embedded in the college, the college moved to a different campus within the university.

Sara was not in a position to move, so she suddenly found herself in an entirely new situation. She had a new assignment with two smaller departments that were not using the library's instructional services as much as her college had. Knowing that she had to make inroads with these departments, she didn't sit back and wait for them to come to her. Rather, she did some research and

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then went to meet with the faculty in these departments to understand their needs. She determined what they would buy (i.e., what was of value to them) and then packaged her information literacy instructional services in a way that was meaningful to them (i.e., the less time they spent correcting citations, the more time they could spend on their own research). She shifted her thinking from “this is what I have to sell” to “this is what they will buy.” This concept is at the heart of what consumers demand in the Information Age.⁵

It is important to be strategic about what you can do, as well. If you are fortunate enough to work at a small institution with a well staffed library, it might be possible for you to provide information literacy instruction for every class in your area of assignment. More likely, you are not in such a position, so it is important to think about scalability.

This is where technology can be very useful. We use Springshare’s LibGuides at my library, and, quite often, faculty are impressed with the way these guides help connect their students with appropriate sources of information. Creating a course-specific research guide can be a simple and effective way to integrate information literacy into a course, and faculty are often willing to include a link to those guides in their syllabi or course management system.

Timing is equally important. One of my most successful classroom collaborations was the result of knowing exactly when to deliver the message. I had not previously worked with this professor, but we knew each other well through other activities. When, in a casual conversation, she expressed her frustration about her students using inappropriate sources in their term papers, I took that opportunity to explain how I could offer a solution to her problem. I listened and matched her need with a solution at just the right moment.

We have been working together for almost two years now; the students are using better resources, and she seems pleased with the results of our collaboration. She also did a little word-of-mouth marketing for me by

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telling several other faculty in her department about how I helped her and her students, and this led to additional opportunities to integrate information literacy into the department’s curriculum.

A wise colleague once warned me that the reward for good work is more work. When word gets around that you are a valuable resource and can really benefit faculty, you’ll be very popular.

Marketing our services and ourselves is critical to keeping librarians relevant in today’s ever-changing, self-serve information environment. Developing your plan takes an investment of time and hard work, but it can open doors that will lead to new and exciting opportunities to engage with faculty and students.

The payoff for all those involved—students, faculty, and you—is well worth the effort.

Notes

1. ACRL, “Association of College and Libraries Standards for Proficiencies for Instruction Librarians and Coordinators,” accessed April 29, 2012, www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/standards/profstandards.cfm.

2. American Marketing Association, “Definition of Marketing,” accessed April 29, 2012, <http://www.marketingpower.com/AboutAMA/Pages/DefinitionofMarketing.aspx>.

3. Robert Bly, *Marketing Plan Handbook* (Irvine, CA: Entrepreneur Press, 2009), 38.

4. See Barry Callen, *Manager’s Guide to Marketing, Advertising, and Publicity* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010), 221.

5. Lester Wunderman, *Being Direct: Making Advertising Pay* (New York: Random House, 1996), xiii. ¶¶