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Promoting Depository Libraries

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Teresa and I decided to try to keep our presentations short so that we can have a discussion with everyone sharing ideas and suggestions on what you've done that has worked or not worked. Our goal is to start each of us thinking about what we can or might do in our own libraries. What are the possibilities? Teresa is going to talk about some of the more unusual places or ways to promote our depositories while I'm going to talk about promotion as part of a larger marketing plan and focus mainly on the planning process, the things to consider before we promote. We need to think of marketing or promotion as more of an ongoing process than as a single task. We need to carefully plan out what we want to accomplish and whom we want to reach.

There are several elements we need to consider in our planning process. We each have a different clientele and environment. Some of us are academic, some state, some public libraries. Some of us have more money or staff than others. We offer some different services, but we have definite--obvious-- similarities. Even if our libraries were totally different, we would still use the same planning process, though each of us must determine the best plan for our own library.

The Marketing Mix

In the marketing literature, they talk about the marketing mix, or the 5 P's. People, product, price, place, and promotion. A marketing plan is built around these five elements. We have to consider each of them as we plan how to promote or market our depositories.

People

The first thing we have to do is identify our users and potential users. Who are they? What information do they need? Where are they getting their information now? Are they using the library? Why or why not? What is their library skill level? Do they have electronic access? Do they know we exist? Do they want or need our products? Why? What's in it for them? Our promotion will be more successful if we can target it to a specific group.

Some depositories, such as a legal library or an agricultural library, may have a very specialized user group. But most of us have many user groups. At the University of Nevada,

Reno we have a combined business and documents collection, so we count the College of Business as one of our principle user groups. We can divide that group into students and faculty, undergraduate and graduate. There are also international students, international marketing and economics majors, etc. One large group can be narrowed down in many different ways.

We also serve the town patrons who come in to use the depository collection--or they come in to use the business collection and discover the depository collection. Since we are Regionals, we all serve colleagues in the selective libraries. We also serve Government officials, school children, reporters, business people, disgruntled tenants and more. We have to know our own user groups and design our product marketing efforts for them.

Product

Once we know our target market, we can decide on which product or service to market. What do we have to offer? What is our product? Is it the whole collection? Maybe it's a special subject matter or a particular agency. What about our services or our electronic access? The knowledge and abilities of the librarians and staff? What do we have that's special? What do people want or need? What will they respond to?

As we determine what we want to promote, we must make absolutely certain that we market only those services that we can do well. If we don't, we make ourselves look bad and lose credibility with our users.

Patrick O'Brien related a story in his article "Accentuate the Positive: Marketing Our Services, Marketing for Change" about a Cleveland company that was in the business of making drill bits. He said that was how they defined their company, "We manufacture drill bits." Then the technology changed and there was no longer a demand for drill bits and their business dropped dramatically. They had to change the way they thought about their business. They went from "we make drill bits," to "we make holes," and they changed their technology to keep pace with the times (O'Brien, 7). We need to decide what our business is. Do we need to redefine the way we look at it?

Price

I almost hesitate to say the word "price." I said it once in a roomful of librarians and their collective gasp almost sucked in the windows. Information is not free. We may not charge for it, but there are definitely costs involved.

We have costs associated with processing and maintaining our collection and equipment, overhead, staff time, and paper and other supplies we use for ourselves or our patrons. There are also costs to the user even when the product is "free." Transportation, parking, and time all must be taken into consideration. It doesn't really matter what the product is worth to us. What is it worth to the user? Do they consider what we have to offer worth giving up an afternoon or evening to get? What do we have that is of value to them? Price is often a measure of quality. You get what you pay for. How can we make a "free" product or service appear valuable? Can we afford to market or maintain the product or service ourselves?

Place and Distribution

Next we need to consider how people will access our product. Will they come to us or will we send the product to them? If users must come to our library, is it convenient to get to and to use? Is it inviting? Comfortable? Clean? Are our services obvious and easy to use or will users need help identifying them? We need to consider how our library appears from the users' point of view and organize it accordingly.

Then we look at our channels of distribution. If we have phone or e-mail reference, is it convenient and easy to use? Does the service (and the technology) function well. What other means of distribution are possible?

Promotion

Communication. How are we going to make our products or services known? How are we going to get users into the library? How will we make users perceive our products and services as valuable?

When we get to this step we should know what we have and who we want to reach. Then we decide what methods we are going to use to reach each target group. We should look at what resources we have available (staff, time, money) and decide where are we going to put our energies. We also need to decide what we aren't going to do.

Evaluation

Once we have a plan in place and have begun our promotion, we need to evaluate its effectiveness and determine what worked, what didn't, and what we will continue to do or will do again. We must evaluate the cost effectiveness of the promotion in terms of time, staff, money, and equipment. Was the result worth the cost? Did we reach the intended user group? Did they get the message we wanted them to receive? What were the effects on our library as a result of the promotion?

The marketing process can take quite a bit of time, but if we take the time to do the necessary planning, our promotion efforts can be a lot more effective.

The marketing process has some similarities with the reference process and fee-based searching. When I was in library school, I worked in the Computer Assisted Research Services Office at Brigham Young University. When users came to me to do a search for them, I might spend as much as 30 minutes on the reference interview to find out exactly what they wanted before going online. If I did a thorough job with the interview, I could log in, find the information I wanted very quickly, and log out. Thirty minutes of interview for five minutes or less of online time so the cost to the user was minimal.

The same holds true for the planning process. We need to spend time on the planning stage before starting the promotion. Once the plan is in place, the time we spend in the promotional tasks may seem very short by comparison. The time and effort we put into our planning can make the difference between a very successful promotion and a mediocre one.

O'Brien, Patrick M. "Accentuate the Positive: Marketing Our Services, Marketing for Change," *Public Library Quarterly* 12:2 (1992) pp. 3-16.