

AVCC Marketing, Communications and Development Conference 2007 “Tying it all Together”

Biblioshock! Establishing a marketing oriented culture in an academic library / Liz Burke, Anne M. Webster and Sonia Boccardo

Abstract

Traditionally the academic library has had a central place or role within the university. It has long been considered an important - and relatively unchanging - part of campus life. The building housed books that students borrowed and the staff provided similar services from year to year. There was no real need for the library to market itself to the university community and beyond.

The nature of the information services environment is changing dramatically. Developments in information technology have transformed the way people search for and locate information. The higher education sector has also changed dramatically with universities now competing for federally funded local students and full fee paying international students studying both on-shore and off-shore. Pedagogical theory has also changed resulting in the need for different types of library spaces and services. University students are a totally new breed; libraries now need to engage the ‘Google generation’.

To remain relevant, academic libraries need to reflect the vibrancy of the environment in which they operate. The University of Western Australia Library is meeting this challenge by embracing both intellectually and culturally the need for a customer focus and strategic marketing. This has resulted in:

- *the formation of a new dedicated Marketing Team that reports to the Library Executive*
- *recognising that the Library is more than what is contained within the four walls*
- *actively engaging with user groups and being driven more by their feedback*
- *developing mechanisms to share the Library’s response to feedback*
- *refining long standing policies and procedures in order to become more ‘yes’ than ‘no’*

Background

The long-established function of the academic library as a physical space on campus where students gather to access required reading and engage in their studies has ensured the Library’s role as an important - and relatively unchanging - part of university life. But recent changes in higher education in Australia, the advent of a new and distinct generation of students as well as significant and rapid change in the information environment challenges this notion of the academic library as just a place and drives the Library to view the services it provides in different ways. Elliott de Saez (2002) noted that librarians, once the dealers in artefacts, in selection, collection, storage and retrieval, are now in a very different service profession and that a “user-centric strategy must be the loadstone of the mission of every library service in the digital age”.

Changes to higher education environment

Universities today encompass shrinking numbers of staff and a shifting student population which incorporates significant numbers of mature age, part-time, international and postgraduate students. According to Gibbons, Limoges, Nowotony, Schwartzman, Scott, and Trow, (1994 cited in (Eveline, 2004), the ‘massification of education’ is a phrase which describes the shift in higher education since World War II resulting in greater numbers of students and relatively fewer staff and the fact that this is a phenomena international in scope and unlikely to be reversed. In tandem with increasing student enrolments is the fact that there are relatively fewer staff to support and teach the students. ‘Staff numbers, which have been significantly reduced, have borne the brunt of the funding gap. From 1988 to 1996 student load increased by only 49%, but academic and general staff numbers increased by only 26%’ (Karmel, 2001 cited in (Eveline, 2004)).

The twenty years from 1985 to 2005 have witnessed some very significant changes to the higher education system in Australia. Universities enrol significantly higher numbers of students than ever before while at the same time, numbers of staff to support and service the growing population is decreasing. Figures from the University of Western Australia illustrate the growing university population:

Table 1: Population Figures at UWA 1985 – 2005

EFSTU Population at UWA – Total				
1985	1990	1995	2000	2005
10,364	13,003	13,485	14,686	16,960

Source: [CAUL statistics](#)

In addition to the growing university population served by the library, the composition of that population has also changed. The number of higher degree students enrolling has increased dramatically, as illustrated in Table 2

Table 2: Numbers of Higher Degree Enrolments at UWA 1985 – 2005

1985	1990	1995	2000	2005
1,347	1,525	1,717	1,812	2,164

Source: [CAUL statistics](#)

Rapid changes in technology

The availability of banking and shopping online has led library users to expect a similar level of independence in locating and accessing information for their university studies. Users of the Internet are generally satisfied with the results they get (“good enough” results), despite the fact that librarians worry about the credibility and authority of the information found (Elliot, 2004). They prefer the simplicity of searching, rather than browsing through a library’s traditional layers of hierarchical information.

Developments in technology have enabled libraries to meet some of these user expectations. Documents can now be delivered to the desktop; reference services can be available 24/7; online tutorials have been developed; many journals are now available electronically; an increasing number of books are now available online; collaborative learning environments are being developed utilising groupware technology; integrating library content with learning management systems; institutional research repositories are being developed in many Australian universities, often led by the university library.

Many of the tools for social interaction are potential tools for libraries to reach users. Mobile phones and PDAs provide many opportunities for the delivery of library services in a new guise to users in the way they want to receive them: convenient, fast, without restrictions, personalised, and electronic. Jackson (Jackson, 2004) notes that such expectations won’t change and will continue well into the future.

Google and post-Google information seekers

They are the millennial generation, and they make up the demographic tsunami that will permanently and irreversibly change the library and information landscape (Sweeney, 2005)

The demographics of university students have changed significantly within the last decade with the current group of undergraduate students being referred to interchangeably as digital natives, the Google generation, Gen Y or Millennials. Whatever the terminology used to describe this newest generation of undergraduates what is clear is that they represent a group that have vastly different needs and expectations than any previous generation of students. They are extremely familiar with technology and their academic; leisure and work time is fused into a seamless world aided by the use of portable electronic devices.

This next generation of students are techno-savvy and expect instant access to and delivery of information. Their culture is one that blends independence, choice, and personalisation, and their information seeking behaviour tends to rely heavily on the World Wide Web. Paying attention to generational trends of this group will allow us to assess the way we provide our services to them, look at the gaps, and react to their needs. Libraries must aim to adapt and market themselves in a way that this generational group can relate to, and demonstrate a flexibility and relevancy.

Finding the right way to achieve balance between traditional library values and the expectations and habits of coming generations will determine whether libraries remain relevant in the social, educational, and personal contexts of the Information Age. (McDonald, 2006)

Competitors to the Library

Today's students lead a fast-paced, deadline-oriented life, and look for convenience, independence and immediacy when seeking information. Academic staff also lead a deadline-oriented life, burdened by significant workloads and they seek convenience and immediacy and rarely visit their university library in person. In such an environment, the Library has a number of potential competitors in the form of the Internet, Google, and various commercial suppliers such as bookstores and video libraries. Elliott de Saez (Elliott de Saez, 2002) observed that "expanding numbers of service companies present real threats to libraries and information services".(p.138)

The Internet contains a number of computer networks, which work together to provide access to information and services, including WWW documents, email, blogs, file transfer, and online chat facilities. The Internet allows advanced accessibility, usability, and flexibility. The rapid expansion of the internet and the advent of advanced search engines such as Google which have the mission of being all things to all users of the internet represent a significant competitive area for traditional libraries.

Google promotes their service as one that provides easy access to more than 8 billion web pages. Google offers a number of special features to help users find what they are looking for, including translation, images, definitions, spell checker. Google is easy to use, easily accessible, and retrieves results quickly, all of which makes Google a preferred resource for seeking and accessing information. In addition they have developed Google Scholar specifically targeted at the academic market and a service which libraries must take serious note of.

The Internet has also allowed for a whole raft of commercial service providers to develop timely and cost-effective ways of delivering information services. For some students, the cost of using these services could be offset by the convenience they offer. Online bookstores such as Amazon and Ebay, Open access publishing, Print on demand publishers, who can produce high quality print copies cost effectively and in a short time frame and publishers who allow individual journal articles to be purchased on the Internet for a relatively small fee are all viable competitors to a library that remains behind closed doors.

UWA Library's response

A library which fails to respond to the life- and work-styles of current students – the 'Google Generation' – and which fails to find a role in the rapid growth of e-Research will lapse into dignified irrelevance. (UWA Library, 2005)

The University of Western Australia Library was quick to recognise that both changes in the information environment coupled with the expectations of newer generations of students meant we had to plan our library services differently. The Library's strategic plan Re-placing the Library: Strategic Plan 2005-2007 (UWA Library, 2005) articulated this very issue with responsiveness to users being a key theme of the three year plan. "The use made by students of information and communications technology has in critical ways changed experiences and expectations. The Library must understand and respond to these changes if its services are to be useful and used." (UWA Library, 2005)

To establish a practical mechanism for developing this theme of responsive to users the Library formed a Marketing Team in 2005. This team was seen as a high level strategic planning committee to formulate policy and advise the Library executive of marketing direction. The terms of reference for the Marketing Team are

1. Investigate and analyse the nature, expectations and needs of the Library's market groups
2. Identify the major gaps between the level of service provision and service expectations and needs

3. Oversee the effective communication, both print and digital, of the Library with its various user groups within a consistent overall branding
4. Develop and maintain a Library marketing plan

Although this seems a rather simplistic approach in the face of so much change, libraries traditionally haven't possessed a strong marketing culture. So to recognise the need for such a function within the Library and to initiate it at a high level within the organisation's structure showed a real commitment to changing the way we engage with our clients.

The First Steps

Traditionally, academic libraries have developed the services and collections that librarians have deemed useful and valuable to students and academic staff. User feedback may have been sought, but it was more likely to assess the existing suite of services and collections, rather than to inform future developments and activities.

With so much competition, an academic library has to "get it right", and the best way to do this, is to ask the customer what they want. Schmidt (Schmidt, 2006) noted the simplest way to find out what clients want, is to ask them. The UWA Library has been working to develop mechanisms to seek client feedback and share the Library's response to that feedback.

The Marketing Team chose as its first priority the investigation of the needs of the Library's market groups. The Library had previously conducted client satisfaction surveys in 1994, 1998, and 2002 using an in-house survey instrument that sought information on how aware clients were of library services, how often they used the Library, what resources and services they used, their use of library training services, how well they rated the study environment, how they rated information about library services, and their rating for Library services overall. While these surveys provided some useful information, their results were not rolled into an operational plan or a strategic plan.

It was decided in 2005 that a new focus was required to ensure that the needs of readers are understood and addressed, and Library operational efficiencies achieved. To assist in meeting this objective, the Library chose to participate in the 2005 LibQUAL+ Survey. This is a web-based survey developed by the Association of Research Library in the United States. Its purpose is to provide libraries with a standardised, effective method to measure the quality of library services based on the perceptions of students, academic staff and general staff.

The LibQUAL+ survey instrument asks clients to rate up to thirty statements concerning their library services on a scale from one to nine. Three ratings are sought for each statement: the minimum acceptable standard of service, the desired level respondents like to receive, and the actual level of service they perceive from their library. These ratings provide two further measures: the adequacy gap is the amount by which the perceived level exceeds the minimum, and the superiority gap is the amount by which the perceived level exceeds the desired level (Creaser, 2006).

The results of the survey have provided the Library with a rich source of information about strengths and weaknesses. Analysis of the survey scores and user comments has helped the Library to identify specific areas for improvement and specific areas where additional service quality information may be needed.

The Library intends to conduct a LibQUAL+ Survey again in 2007 and the resulting data will provide a useful comparison to see if readers believe the Library's services have improved over the past two years. Schmidt (2006) also noted the value of regularly evaluating all library services and products.

Survey responses

The 2005 LibQUAL+ Survey provided valuable feedback on library services and resources. Our clients told us that we are doing well in a number of areas including providing information that could be located easily and independently through the library, an effective website, and modern equipment allowing easy access to needed information. They told us that we have staff who are consistently courteous, willing to help, and respond well to enquires.

Priorities identified from the survey tell us that our clients want electronic information resources accessible from their home or office, and greater access to required journals. They told us it was important for them to have computer equipment that allowed ready access to the Internet and required software.

The survey highlighted the need to make some improvements in how we provide access to computers, the Internet, required software, electronic resources, and to our journal collections. Our clients said we need to ensure that subject specialist assistance is available, and that they needed help identifying reliable and authoritative sources of information for their research. The responses of the survey also indicated the importance of providing a library space that inspires study and learning.

General comments told us that our readers would like to see an increase in library opening hours, a greater mix of group and silent study spaces, and more books and printed materials added to our collection.

As a result of the feedback gained from the LibQUAL+ Survey the Library developed an action plan to address many of the issues raised. The survey results and the library's plan of action was communicated to our clients through the Library web site ([http://www.library.uwa.edu.au/about the uwa library/feedback and surveys](http://www.library.uwa.edu.au/about_the_uwa_library/feedback_and_surveys)).

Where to next

The Marketing Team considered the use of the LibQUAL+ Survey instrument as just a starting point for addressing the significant issue of change facing academic libraries. The next step has been to develop a strategic marketing direction for the Library through the development of a three year marketing plan.

The marketing plan focussed on four strategic themes. Theme 1 is *Continuous improvement* which focuses on the importance of the Library listening to clients and utilising that feedback to continue to specifically target and improve services. Targeting of specific market segments (e.g. undergraduates, new academic staff, researchers), seeking client feedback through surveys, focus groups, student advisory board, suggestions to the Library, reviewing current and new services based on client feedback and exploration of collaborative opportunities across the University and with external organisations all form part of this theme.

Theme 2 is *Re-placing our brand* which focuses on developing an overall strategy for extending Library branding to all aspects of the organisation. To achieve this it is important to focus on developing a marketing culture throughout the Library where every opportunity is taken to ensure the Library is presented in a consistently professional and service-oriented light.

Theme 3 is *Promoting ourselves* where the Library will focus on promotion of both existing and new services as well as explore opportunities to modernize the Library's promotional material through the use of web 2.0 technologies.

Theme 4 is *Going to our users* where the Library will be proactive within the University community in taking every opportunity to be involved in staff and student initiatives. It is important that the Library is seen not just as a building on campus but an important service that goes beyond its physical presence.

The strategic marketing plan will form the basis of the Library's marketing direction for the next few years. A key aspect of this will be to constantly monitor and review the effectiveness of the strategic direction the Library is taking to see if it is enough of a response to the changes that the academic library environment is facing.

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