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Practical low-cost marketing measures

The experience of Waterford Institute of Technology Libraries

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to illustrate that in increasingly financially constrained times, libraries do not require prerequisite specialised marketing expertise to promote their institution and its services successfully by engaging in cost effective marketing initiatives. It also aims to highlight the potential and importance of marketing to enhance services, communicate services and improve library visibility.

Design/methodology/approach – A case study is undertaken of the marketing experiences of Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT) Libraries, a small to medium-sized, publicly funded education institute in South-East Ireland. The paper details a series of low-cost, practical marketing measures undertaken by WIT Libraries over the period 2007-2008, and contextualises them for a collective audience.

Findings – WIT Libraries are engaged in a wide range of marketing initiatives, adopting traditional means and Web 2.0 technologies where possible to increase the library's exposure and the services it offers. Predominantly these marketing initiatives do not require a significant financial investment and can be implemented utilising existing library resources in terms of staff expertise and facilities. A "one size fits" all approach does not work for all libraries. Specific marketing techniques can be tailored to suit individual libraries and their users' needs. The authors contend that a range of low-cost initiatives can be used to successfully promote library services amongst users and the wider community. Further mid-term evaluation may be necessary.

Originality/value – The paper illustrates with concrete examples how a library with no specialised marketing expertise can adapt to the prevailing financial climate, to engage in cost effective initiatives and promote itself and its services successfully. The article will be of value to similar sized and similarly resourced libraries as a basis for engaging in low-cost effective marketing initiatives.

Keywords Marketing strategy, Ireland, Academic libraries, Cost reduction, Budgets, Worldwide web

Paper type Case study

Context

The current operating context for many academic libraries is one of budget cuts, declining numbers and a lack of awareness of services among users. The SCONUL top concerns survey 2008 (West, 2008) cited funding and financial management as the second highest concern of library managers (84 per cent). It would seem likely in the intervening months of negative economic growth and recession, that it could now be the most serious concern of library managers. SCONUL also tells us that despite significant increases in the usage of online library or related services, physical visits to



academic libraries are down over 22 per cent in the last ten years. Despite some anecdotal evidence from public libraries in particular, it is somewhat early to say whether the current economic downturn will result in increased “business” for academic libraries. Further, there often seems to be a disconnection or lack of awareness between what services libraries actually offer and what customers actually think they offer. This has been addressed by some in the literature (Bawden and Vilar, 2005; Carr, 2006; Maxymuk, 2007). Added to this is the very real fact that libraries can no longer lay claim to being sole information providers; what was once a “captive audience” on campus now has a range of information options (Brewerton, 2003; Alire, 2007; Ross and Sennyey, 2008).

Against this increasingly restrictive financial landscape and rising competition, academic libraries are having to find better ways of attracting patrons, retaining patrons and preserving their place at the centre of information provision services in the educational environment. The proliferation of the internet, search engines and “instant” answers are posing immense challenges for libraries. Alarming, according to a recent global survey, “89 percent of college students use search engines to begin an information search, while only 2 per cent start from a library web site” (OCLC, 2006). The financial landscape has also changed drastically in recent years; as academic institutions are feeling the effect of new economic realities directly in their revenue operating budgets and particularly in the area of discretionary spend. These circumstances are exacerbating the need for libraries to become more creative and to extract every bit of value for money from their expenditure. Singh (2009, p. 25) argues that it is “not difficult for an academic library to become complacent because it has no natural information competitors on campus to stimulate marketing initiatives”. To counter this complacency, libraries can seek to generate additional revenues (O’Brien and Cronin, 2007; Spalding and Wang, 2006; Moyer, 2005; Huang, 2006) or can seek to become more market savvy by adopting and developing marketing initiatives. There has also been some hostility (Parker *et al.*, 2007) and resistance to the application of marketing terminology in the context of libraries (Nims, 1999; Sen, 2006) - a little ironic in view of many libraries’ over-use of library-style language in dealing with undergraduates. Although a relatively recent phenomenon in academic libraries, marketing in the public sector and specifically the non-profit public sector has been in vogue in some form or another since the 1970s (see Kotler, 1983). In the current environment, the necessity for libraries to market themselves and assert their strengths has never been stronger. Marketing is identified as one of the key growth tenets of management skills for academic libraries in the SCOUNL Vision 2010 (2009).

Some marketing approaches

Marketing can take place in a variety of ways. Orava (2000) writes that “marketing is interaction” and takes a subtle “natural infiltration” rather than “aggressive campaigning” viewpoint. He argues that marketing is attitudinal and “a question not of money, but of philosophy”. Others such as Rowley (2003) promote “relationship marketing” and a more analytical long-term value added approach, suggesting a “critical perspective”, while de Sáez (2002) persuasively writes about marketing as common sense. “Guerilla marketing” or unconventional marketing strategies based on commercial models is another low cost approach recently applied to information services (Baltes and Leibing, 2008). Singh (2009) argues that marketing is simply about positive customer satisfaction, while others claim marketing is about increased

visibility, “embedding librarians” and occupying the space(s) in which students operate. Godwin and Parker (2008) and Golderman and Connolly (2007) have contended that it is necessary to connect directly with students and to extend “strategies to infiltrate student cyberculture”. Golderman and Connolly (2007, p. 166) add “the library’s presence also has to be both more direct and more pervasive if we expect to engage the Internet generation of students”. This may include institutional spaces such as VLEs or MLEs but will also include non-institutional environments. These spaces are, of course, part of the social web that students regularly inhabit and include not only applications such as IM, blogs, vlogs, podcasts, micro-blogging, but also “places” such as Facebook, Bebo, Second Life and MySpace. Golderman and Connolly (2007, p. 182) do recognise, however, that this approach will not apply to all students and that a more balanced and equitable approach is often necessary – “not all (our) students are technologically adept, and it’s a balancing act to maintain a welcoming atmosphere for the digital stragglers without being relegated to the sidelines by the more adventurous NetGen explorer”. Verostek (2005, p. 119) takes a softer approach to the marketing process, promoting affordable and realistic measures that require neither huge amounts of technology, expertise or money. Claiming that marketing need be neither “complicated, time-consuming or expensive”, Verostek (2005) urges libraries to “look for simple low-cost approaches to let your patrons know about the changes you have made”.

Waterford Institute of Technology

Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT) is a small to medium-sized third- and fourth-level educational institute offering programmes from undergraduate to PhD level across a range of disciplines. The immediate customer base consists of approximately 10,000 students, of which over 6,000 are full-time equivalents (FTEs), and 1,000 are staff members. As a public sector establishment, the primary source of funding is central government. Consequently, the Institute and, therefore, the library, are in an extremely vulnerable place as a result of the Irish exchequer public finances shortfall and expectant swingeing cuts (government returns in May 2009 show an exchequer deficit of €10.6 billion for the first five months of 2009 alone). WIT Libraries are no different to many other libraries and service providers in experiencing difficulties. Marketing alone cannot address this gap, but it has been WIT Libraries’ experience that a series of operational low cost initiatives can go some way towards boosting and enhancing services as well as increasing the visibility and relevance of the library among the customer bases. As part of the services sector of the Institute, the library is constantly mindful of the need to market itself better. This involves working to retain and give value to existing patrons and also to attract new customers to the library. Although there was no initial concerted integrated marketing policy, a modest range of initiatives has been developed to form part of the libraries ongoing marketing and branding strategy. In this, WIT Libraries has attempted to improve services, enhance communications and heighten the profile of the library. Staff have attempted to utilise Web 2.0 technologies to promote the library whenever possible. The authors acknowledge that many of these initiatives are neither new nor original and do not lay claim to having a niche on these ideas. This article will demonstrate that despite little or no marketing expertise and even less budget, how practical low-cost marketing measures can enhance services, raise profile, visibility and goodwill and be of benefit to

any academic library. The following are a selection of the marketing initiatives embarked on at WIT Libraries between 2007 and 2008.

Fines Amnesty on Books (FAB) Campaign

Prior to undertaking an inventory of library stock in June 2008, as required by the Institute auditors, WIT Libraries commenced on a “Fines Amnesty on Books” (FAB) Campaign. For two days, WIT Libraries waived all fines on all standard loan books returned, irrespective of overdue date. WIT Libraries marketed the campaign using traditional techniques including the placing of fliers and posters with library branding throughout the college campus and by word of mouth. Web technologies including e-mail, blog posts, RSS and the library web site were also used as methods of advertisement. The campaign was not publicised too far in advance, mindful of the probability of loan items being misused in full knowledge of the forthcoming amnesty.

The “FAB” Campaign generated both direct and indirect benefits for WIT Libraries, the direct benefits included the return of 175 overdue items prior to undertaking the stocktake. Using a conservative estimate of €30 per item, this equated to €5,250 in returned stock during the amnesty. The indirect benefits included the enhanced promotion of the library through the numerous marketing initiatives. 97 patrons had fines waived under the amnesty and WIT Libraries waived €1,450 fines in total over the two days. Even in applying a simplified direct cost/benefit analysis (€5,250-€1,450 = €3,800 net gain) the pay-off was clear. There was also a strong resultant “feel good” factor amongst the patrons and the campaign achieved its goals of retrieving additional overdue stock in advance of the Libraries’ stocktake.

Heritage Council

Grant and funding awards provide a great opportunity to raise the profile of a library. In October 2007 Waterford Institute of Technology Libraries applied for funding from the Irish Heritage Council under the 2008 Museums and Archives Grant Scheme. Arising out of this application, WIT Libraries were successfully awarded grant funding to partially fund a cataloguing and inventory project of the Christ Church Cathedral collection[1], of which they are custodians. The completed project has resulted in the creation of over 800 electronic records and enabled the creation of an online index of items on public display in the WIT Libraries special collections area. The collection is searchable from anywhere in the world through the WIT Libraries catalogue. The online catalogue will open up the collection and consequently WIT Libraries to a wider audience and increase awareness of the collection amongst the research community and wider public. This project would not have been possible without the support of the Heritage Council. The grant has allowed WIT Libraries to publicise and increase awareness of its special collection resources.

WIT Libraries hosted a number of very successful events during Heritage Week 2008. This included the staging of a Christ Church Cathedral Collection Open Week in the Special Collections Room in the Luke Wadding Library[2] from Monday 25th to Friday 29th August. During the open week, normal appointment procedures were waived and members of the public were presented with an exhibition of the collection allowing them to engage with the collection. Public lectures from local heritage experts were also hosted in the Special Collections Room and these events were advertised through WIT Libraries’ News blog, web site and local media. WIT Libraries have found that the hosting of the various events has led to numerous queries about aspects

of the collection thus leading to greater promotion and awareness of the collection and accordingly the Libraries themselves.

“Q-ness” Quiet Study Campaign

Sweet is the silent mouth (From the Gaelic translation “*is binn béal ina thost*”).

In advance of the end of semester examinations in December 2008, WIT Libraries instigated a strategy to promote a defined quiet study area for students. The “Q-ness” campaign was marketed as a tongue in cheek reference to the Gaelic word *ciúinas*, which translates into English as quietness or silence. WIT Libraries utilised branded fliers, posters and blog posts to advertise the campaign. The Q-ness campaign was fairly small scale and it required little investment in terms of financial resources. Its success was based on the visual aids utilised and the greater staff presence in the Library.

Direct benefits of the campaign included the maintenance of a silent study area and the cultivation of an enhanced environment for reflection and study. WIT Libraries are conscious of the diverse learning patterns of patrons so it accommodates group study and individual study within separate parts of its building. Q-ness focused on the quiet individual study area and encouraged groups to utilise the group study area. Overall, it was found that most students were supportive of the goals of the campaign and the proactive strategy raised the profile of the libraries. The Q-ness campaign is part of the wider signage and re-zoning of the library building.

Web technologies

Like many libraries, WIT has tried to embrace web and Web 2.0 technologies as a means of providing better services to its patrons. These technologies include blogs, instant messaging and xml feeds. The technologies are also being used to market WIT Libraries’ services and provide a platform for raising its profile amongst patrons.

WIT Libraries launched its Library News web blog <http://witlibrary.wordpress.com> in February 2007. The blog was hosted on the wordpress.com platform, a free blog hosting web site. Blog posts are organised by date and categories. The Library News blog has been developed to advertise new library services, databases, events and all the latest developments and news in WIT Libraries. The blog is linked seamlessly from the library web site to provide regular updates. The Library News blog will also automatically generate RSS feeds for all new entries. Patrons can sign up to WIT Libraries’ RSS feed and they will automatically receive notification of new blog posts to their desktops without having to search the library blog or web site.

As an additional information service to patrons, WIT Libraries launched the Meebo instant messaging service in April 2008. WIT Libraries instant messaging reference service means that patrons can “chat” in real-time with a library staff member, without being on campus. Meebo (<http://www.meebo.com>) and other alternative services such as Google Talk, MSN Messenger, Yahoo! Messenger are ubiquitous and free, allowing patrons to interact with a library staff member when and where it suits them. The instant interaction has all the benefits of being in the library in person but can be accessed from anywhere. WIT recognises that from a library perspective, IM services most likely represent a niche market.

These initiatives required no financial investment from WIT Libraries and took inconsiderable resources to implement. The benefits far exceed the outlay as these

technologies have helped WIT Libraries to enhance and promote its services to patrons through platforms with which they are familiar.

Institutional repository

WIT Libraries have been the driving force behind the establishment and development of Waterford Institute of Technology's institutional repository <http://repository.wit.ie>. The repository was launched in 2007 and it affords the opportunity for WIT academics to publicise their research work to the wider research community. The repository proposes to make the Institute's research more easily accessible through a central institutional platform and it also aims to raise the number of citation references for deposited works.

WIT's institutional repository is powered by EPrints 3, free software developed by the University of Southampton. The repository has a clear presence on the web and its content can be located through Google Scholar and popular searching engines. This has the direct benefit of raising the profile of the academic researcher and the Institute but as it is branded with WIT Libraries branding, the Libraries' reputation and exposure is also enhanced within the Institute and also in the wider academic community.

Staff publications and presentations

A great way of marketing the library and raising its profile is through staff involvement and networking in external projects. WIT Libraries staff are pro-actively involved in writing articles for various scholarly journals, and have a strong track record of publications. WIT Libraries staff have delivered presentations at seminars and national conferences, including those hosted by the Academic and Special Libraries section of the Library Association of Ireland and the Irish Innovative Interfaces User Group. WIT Libraries staff have also been involved in national committees and strategic review groups. While the relevant staff have benefited from a personal and professional development perspective from being involved in such extracurricular activity, the libraries profile has been promoted through their employees' endeavours.

Web site

A newly designed and revamped web site was launched in late 2007. This project was managed over an eight-week period and, although labour intensive, did not require any additional direct monetary costs from the staff or library budget. Library staff expertise and existing technological infrastructure meant that the major costs were primarily measurable in staff time. The rationale for the new web site was based on a number of factors – variants of the same site and design style had been used for a number of years, there had been some negative anecdotal feedback around the site design and usability, and it was felt that the web site needed to reflect a fresher, more interactive, user-friendly approach. Many of the features of the web site <http://library.wit.ie> incorporated Web 2.0 characteristics and client centred adjustments, such as the move away from deep navigation to quick links and tabs, and the use of normal language as opposed to library terminology. Other features include direct links to the catalogue, your own library account, easily navigable subject resources, changing images, a library news blog, rss feeds, multiple contact options incorporating instant messaging and live chat, Web 2.0 bookmarking and sharing options, use of snap shot

embedded images (www.snap.com), and audio options for increased accessibility. None of these elements required any direct funding. These changes have resulted in putting the web site and catalogue at the centre of our library services. The web site overhaul has been very well received, eliciting very high satisfaction ratings in the 2008 Research Postgraduate Library survey 2008[3], and although constantly evolving, has enabled the library to market services efficiently, proactively and in a more interactive cost-effective way.

Signage

This was very much a practical small-scale initiative involving minimal expenditure.

The importance of good and clear signage should not be underestimated. Good signage can have positive effects aesthetically, for the user (particularly new or inexperienced) and for the physical environment within the library. It is also an opportunity to brand the library at an operational and strategic level. This was achieved at WIT Libraries by removing all existing signage and literally starting again. Over time a variety of signage had accumulated across the working environment different in colours and styles and lacking consistency. There was also simply too much signage and an over-reliance on text. This resulted in over-saturation and less impact. There was a conscious attempt to reduce signage, have a consistent design, place it in more strategic and effective locations, and combine visual and text messages. The library hopes to develop this further by zoning the different learning areas by colour/alpha code in 2009. Key notices, fliers, bookmarks, guides, handouts and signs all have a consistent library brand/design and contain key information – web site address, e-mail and phone contacts, etc. All signage, including bay ends and library guides were re-designed in-house. Signage and notices were also displayed using positive as opposed to prohibitive language, stressing a more user-friendly message. For example, rather than emphasising when the library was closed, opening hours are highlighted; rather than stressing that mobile phone use is prohibited, you are directed to designated zones where you can use your phone.

Engaging with users – increasing library visibility

Surveys. WIT Libraries has carried out two library surveys in an attempt to gauge user satisfaction levels of library services and inform future service delivery. During 2004/5, a major survey of some 1,100 undergraduates and 110 academic staff was undertaken and more recently an online survey of 170 research postgraduates was completed. Both these surveys, although extremely labour intensive, were carried out and written up in-house and using no additional financial resources. The results of both these surveys were disseminated locally amongst the Institute community, and amongst the wider library profession (Hayden *et al.*, 2005; Hegarty *et al.*, 2009).

Open day stand. The Schools Liaison and Marketing Office of WIT regularly hosts open days and nights for prospective students and their parents/guardians. Library involvement in these events was previously confined to providing the odd tour or welcoming students or parents as they wandered around campus. During 2008, the library made a conscious decision to become more actively involved in some of these events. For the first time at an annual open day event for prospective students and parents, the library had a stand on the main concourse on campus amongst the careers office, academic departments, social clubs, etc. Library staff attended to the stand and took the opportunity to raise awareness about the library and its central role on

campus. Large amounts of through-traffic stopped, chatted and interacted with library staff. The library stand proved one of the most popular on the night. Enticements were offered by having a steady stream of give-aways – pens, notepads, magnets, chocolates, gadgets (due in no small part to our commercial suppliers) in conjunction with library handouts outlining some basic facts and figures about the library – concentrating on stock, size, services and space. This channel proved a very strong platform to market the library to the wider community and indeed to impact on students before they even attend the Institute as *bona fida* students. The library staff on duty felt it was an immensely positive and worthwhile experience; it also proved to be cost-effective, with little or no direct costs.

Postgraduate night. A “meet-n-greet” reception was hosted for newly registered postgraduates nearby and in the library early during the 2007/2008 academic year. The purpose was to familiarise new postgraduates with some of the staff and library services available to them. Advertised using the usual e-mail, poster, flyer, blog channels, this was the first such event for postgraduates hosted by the library. Refreshments were made available to students as they met and mingled with library staff before a number of brief library presentations were given outlining the main relevant service provisions. The direct cost of this event was fairly minimal at just €150.00 and was attended by 30 postgraduate students. It is intended to host such events more frequently and to extend if practical across the various academic departments.

New guides – Web 2.0. Like most libraries, WIT has long been developing and designing its own in-house library help and self-help guides. In recent years the growth of Web 2.0 and more social forms of information has compelled libraries to go beyond traditional “how to search the catalogue” guides. WIT Libraries have created a number of guides in the area of Web 2.0, including WIT Guides to Flickr, Social Bookmarking, Google Scholar and Wikipedia. Most of these guides cover just two pages, and contain a concise introduction to the subject matter. The content is more factual and informative than original, but is localised, has WIT Libraries branding and is publicly available.

Other relevant initiatives. WIT Libraries recently set up its own Flickr account (www.flickr.com). This is free and relatively easy for anyone with an interest in photography. This has the potential to give any library increased exposure internationally, and to become part of an online photo sharing community. There is a huge amount of library related photography accessible on Flickr or alternatives, such as Picassa, Zoomr, Photobucket.

For the last number of years WIT Libraries has facilitated the donation of large numbers of textbooks to the developing world through Book Aid International and more recently directly to Tanzania. Each year the library collects good quality textbooks from academic staff, students and other donors on behalf of the Institute and arranges to have them shipped to the relevant agency. The cost of shipping is borne by local business. This is obviously a constructive thing to do in a wider societal sense, but it also gives WIT Libraries strong social capital and a positive exposure with the wider community. In 2009, WIT will facilitate the donation of quality used textbooks to Read International.

In-house publications. This is a somewhat obvious if frequently overlooked area in which libraries can directly and effectively market their services. In-house publications and College newsletters also afford a free and timely method of promoting the library

and communicating information to a captive audience at key times during the year. In the past year, WIT Libraries has marketed its services through the main student publication – “Grapevine”, through the academic Research Unit publication – “Research Matters”, and through the staff newsletter – “WITness”. These publications have a wide internal audience, a relatively informal style and are always happy to receive contributions.

Evaluation and conclusions

In increasingly financially constrained times, libraries do not require prerequisite specialised marketing expertise to promote their institution and its services successfully. By engaging in cost effective marketing initiatives, there is undoubted potential to enhance and promote services and improve library visibility and exposure.

Despite financial limitations, it has been WIT Libraries’ experience that practical marketing initiatives can achieve effective promotion of the library and its services. These initiatives can be utilised to promote both existing and new services and to communicate and engage with customers.

The marketing initiatives implemented by WIT Libraries were extremely cost-effective; most required either minimal financial investment or cost nothing at all. For example the FAB and Q-ness campaigns accrued no direct costs and both were highly successful. Heritage events, the Institutional Repository and library staff publications increased library exposure to wider communities. Signage, library guide improvements and the library web site re-design directly benefited users. Surveys and Web 2.0 enhancements increased interactivity and channels of communication.

Staff enthusiasm and existing institutional resources have been key to the success of the marketing initiatives. With no real prior library marketing expertise, it was imperative that the library maximised all available resources and cultivated knowledge from each marketing initiative to ensure the continual development and influence of marketing campaigns. Each marketing project presented its own unique challenges, but, by drawing on past experiences and lessons learned, WIT Libraries were able to utilise existing resources and overcome most obstacles.

Whilst these marketing initiatives are applicable to libraries at any time, it is the authors’ assertion that these initiatives are equally relevant in times of recession when a library’s discretionary spend is particularly low. There is no “one size fits” all approach to cover all libraries and specific marketing techniques should be applied to suit individual libraries, staff competencies and their users’ needs. Also this experience found that, although specific training is not always required, marketing and library branding training and support should form a stronger part of continuing professional development and the library skills set. This would be of obvious practical value and also encourage library practitioners to understand and think more about the benefits of marketing in the digital age. Where there is a dearth of experience or a reluctance to engage in marketing activity and without the luxury of a library marketing officer, libraries should not be afraid to make use of existing expertise outside the library but within their institution. This could be dedicated marketing or communication officers, an alumni office or academic staff. This experience also found that in-house help was forthcoming if asked for, and this can often prove a positive source of advice or re-assurance. Further support and information is often available from creative library colleagues, professional associations or groupings, and library publications are replete with practical examples of what can be achieved by librarians at all levels. Although

many of the initiatives carried out at WIT could be regarded as quite modest, there is a growing recognition amongst senior library staff of the value of marketing and, that at policy and strategy level, marketing should in the words of de Sáez (2002) become a “core management consideration”. This consideration is reflected in marketing becoming a key element in future strategic planning and policy of WIT Libraries. Finally, the tangible sense of achievement and ownership amongst library staff in getting involved in such projects and initiatives is of immense and indisputable benefit to the library.

Notes

1. WIT Libraries special collections <http://library.wit.ie/LibraryServices/SpecialCollections/>
2. Luke Wadding, born in Waterford in 1588 was a Franciscan monk, renowned historian and theologian. He died at St Isidore's College, Rome, 1657.
3. For full survey results and details, go to http://library.wit.ie/ResearchSupport/ResearchPostgraduateSupport/Pgrad_survey_report_Aug81.pdf

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