Re-branding academic libraries in tough times

Attracting students through marketing

A cademic institutions around the world have been affected as badly as anybody by the recent economic crisis. Departments are closing, faculty and staff are losing jobs, and every department of higher education institutions is being challenged to operate within increasingly restricted budgets. Among these are academic libraries. In ''Practical low-cost marketing measures: the experience of Waterford Institute of Technology Libraries,'' authors Kieran Cronin and Terry O'Brien not only outline different strategies for generating cash and relevance for academic libraries, but also propose a new philosophy for libraries centered on marketing.

The authors give some worrying context for academic libraries, which for the first time in their history are experiencing genuine competition, particularly from online sources. Physical visits to libraries by students and patrons have dropped by 22 percent in the last ten years. The popular perception of libraries is that they are no longer the sole providers of information; ''what was once a 'captive audience' on campus now has a range of information options''. Consequently, libraries need to begin finding better ways of attracting and retaining patrons, and re-establishing themselves as the primary information providers on campus. This can be done through marketing, which, as the authors suggest, is a philosophy traditionally at odds with that of academia. However, the strategies proposed here are sensible and affordable, with measurable benefits for libraries and their patrons.

Waterford Institute of Technology Libraries

Using the library system of Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT) in Ireland, Cronin and O'Brien outline several specific strategies that have been pioneered and applied to promote library use by their students. Many of these techniques are self-explanatory, and in terms of modern commercial business are regularly practiced, and all of them are cost-effective. This last factor is crucial in the current economic climate, especially as libraries are being forced to justify their budgets. This means that libraries need to become more aggressive in infiltrating their student base and establishing, even branding, themselves as primary service providers. WIT is a small to medium-sized higher-education institution offering programs from undergraduate to PhD level, with roughly 10,000 students. It is a public sector establishment with funding from central government, making WIT and its libraries vulnerable to severe budget cuts. Like any commercial business, therefore, the library needs to attract existing and new users by offering value.

Strategies

Between 2007 and 2008, WIT libraries initiated a number of strategies to attract and retain patrons, which can broadly be described as a marketing campaign. The authors openly

admit that many of the initiatives that have been implemented are not new or particularly innovative; however, together they become an effective collection of strategies, and provide a victory for common sense and affordability. Some of these basic strategies include the following:

■ Fines Amnesty on Books (FAB) campaign: WIT libraries waived all overdue fines on standard loan books. The result was the return of 175 overdue items, representing approximately €5,250 in value. It also encouraged a certain feel-good factor amongst patrons.

■ Heritage council: WIT libraries were successfully awarded with grant funding partially to fund a cataloguing and inventory project of the Christ Church Cathedral project. They also hosted a number of successful events during ''Heritage Week'' in 2008.

■ ''Q-ness'' quiet study campaign: in December 2008, the libraries instigated a drive to promote defined quiet study areas for students. This was done through branded fliers, posters and blog posts, and was popular amongst students.

■ Web technologies: WIT has embraced Web 2.0 technologies, including blogs, instant messaging and XML feeds, in order to reach its patrons. These initiatives required no financial investment from the Libraries, and few resources to implement.

■ Institutional repository: this is an online space that allows academics to publicize their research to the wider research community. The repository is powered by EPrints 3, free software developed at the University of Southampton, and can be located through Google Scholar and popular search engines.

■ Staff publications and presentations: WIT Libraries staff have written, published and presented papers to the wider library community, helping to raise the profile of the Libraries.

■ Updated web site: WIT Libraries launched a newly designed, more interactive and user-friendly web site, that incorporated Web 2.0 characteristics.

■ Signage: involving minimal expenditure, the use of redesigned and appropriately disseminated signage helped to re-brand the Libraries with users aesthetically, and employed more positively framed language. Efforts were made to maintain an aesthetic consistency in visual designs, which positively influenced the physical environment of the Libraries while branding the Libraries within the campus community.

■ Increased Library visibility: these cost-effective strategies included the use of surveys, an open-stand day, postgraduate night, new guides, and in-house publications.

Conclusions

The majority of these initiatives and techniques require little to no extra investment outside existing library resources. The authors highlight the effectiveness of these initiatives in retaining and attracting patrons on campus to the library as the primary source of information, and of re-establishing its relevance to student development and campus life. Most significant, however, is their ability to do so in the midst of dire financial circumstances. Academic libraries have understandably enjoyed pride of place, and consequently little to

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no serious competition, as primary information providers to universities, students, and communities for centuries. However, they are being seriously challenged for the first time in their history, as students are increasingly less inclined to pay physical visits to their libraries. To maintain their profile, and to continue to generate desperately needed revenue, libraries should overcome an inherent aversion to the language and techniques of marketing and embrace strategies that require a shift in philosophy without major investment. Academic libraries' biggest problem in this climate is complacency, but major gains can be achieved through appropriate strategies, and most importantly, through the enthusiasm of library employees. Libraries are, and will remain, a community's main repository of information; the challenge they face is reminding their communities of their continued relevance.

Reference

Kronin, K. and O'Brien, T. (2009), ''Practical low-cost marketing measures. The experience of Waterford Institute of Technology Libraries'', *New Library World*, Vol. 110 Nos 11/12, pp. 550-60, ISSN 0307-4803.

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