



Information Overload

Issue 13, September 2003

Welcome:

As promised this month we will be looking at the very interesting subject of marketing of library and information services. Otherwise entitled “how to provide more services with less money!” Actually there are two aspects to this month’s newsletter; the first as I have said is the marketing of the service in which we work. The other side of the coin is how we can effectively market ourselves. Whilst it can be argued that the two should go hand in hand, in reality the two don’t always go together. As always if you have any comments or suggestions on this month’s topic we would love to hear from you.

In this Issue we will be looking at:

- Marketing: Are you Reactive or Proactive?
- Marketing ourselves
- So what’s in a name?
- A Thought to Ponder

Marketing: Are you Reactive or Proactive?

One of the first rules in marketing (if I can call it that) is to provide your customers with what they want. You need to find out what it is they need and then find a way of answering that request in the best, most cost effective and efficient way possible.

For those of you who work in a busy library or information centre, you could argue that you do that on a daily basis – simply by answering customers and clients requests when they ask you a specific question.

For those who prefer to take a more proactive approach to finding solutions to a client or customers problems, you may already have a series of “solutions” already packaged that you issue on a daily/weekly or monthly basis. This includes providing: -

- Alerts or SDI’s
- New acquisition bulletins
- Table of Contents and/or abstracting services

- Bulletins and Newsletters highlighting items of interest (web pages, books, journals etc)

In addition to these types of services, some organisations like to get a little more creative with their library promotion, using displays to attract patrons to a particular service or type of material held. Journal displays in common areas (such as canteens) and journal circulation (routing).

But perhaps one of the best opportunities for external marketing is that of “Open days” and the use of Library and Information Week to promote activities.

However, this type of marketing is of limited value if it’s not what your clients or customers actually want you to provide.

How many of you have taken the time to ask your clients what it is they want to see your library and/or information service provide for them?

Oh no, I can hear the groans going around now....surveys!

Well, surveys are a good place to start – so when was the last time you conducted a survey? When was the last time you asked your clients for feedback?

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But in reality the best type of “survey” is not achieved by people filling in a form, but the types of comments you receive from your clients after they have stood in a queue waiting to return something, or take something out, or have their query dealt with.

One of the most successful marketers of all time has to be Richard Branson and his Virgin Empire. The reason that Virgin was able to take on the biggest airlines in the business was simple. Mr Branson took every opportunity that he could when he was flying to and from his many business meetings, to speak to the people who happened to be flying with him.

He took the time to discover what these people liked about their flying experience, and what they didn't. And whilst price was one of the biggest draw cards, Mr Branson has used every single piece of information to open up new markets.

Richard Branson took every opportunity to ask questions. He may not have had a piece of paper on which these questions were written down, that he gave out at the beginning of every flight he was on, but he certainly had a mental list. But more importantly than the questions that he asked was his ability to listen.

One of the biggest drawbacks to suggestion boxes, feedback forms, questionnaires and surveys is the fact that they are completely impersonal. They are usually anonymous too, so whilst some people will take the opportunity to make slanderous accusations about the staff and the service, they do not give you any opportunity to follow up with further questions or be able to seek any sort of clarification from the person(s) making the statement.

The question I have for you is this - When was the last time you took the opportunity to actually speak to your clients, and more importantly when did you last listen to them?

When did you last stand in the same queue that your clients were standing in to find out what they were talking about? People love to talk. By asking the right sort of questions, you can find out a huge amount about the service that your organisation provides.

When was the last time you spent time with your manager/supervisor/line manager. Chances are it was a one-way meeting with you telling them what you had been doing. Have you considered taking the opportunity to find out what the organisations long/medium and short-term goals were? What new research projects are going to be undertaken, what new subjects will be taught, what areas of concerns are facing the general public?

This important information will help you determine which way your library and information service will need to move in order to meet these new demands.

If you don't know what your organisations short-term, medium or long-term goals are, then chances are you will lose the opportunity to ask for additional funding to provide the extra services/books/journals that you will need in order for your clients to achieve these goals, and the types of research questions that you may well be facing in the not too distant future.

Of course if the organisation is moving into new areas, then chances are that the organisation may not need some of the items that it currently subscribes to. This has a double win opportunity for your organisation. You can save money for your organisation by culling those items which are no longer part of the core business activities, you can promote the new material based on the new project/research areas that your organisation will be moving into, and orders for the new material can be placed well in advance, and you will be seen to be the person with all the right answers...because you asked the right questions in the first place.

Whilst promoting your current library and information service is extremely important, you should also consider being more like the Richard Branson's of this world and ask the clever questions and open up the new marketing opportunities for yourself and your organisations library and information service..

Marketing Ourselves

Most people's image of a librarian is of a stereotypical "elderly" lady with greying hair, usually tied back into a bun, with glasses on the end of her nose, wearing a twin set, pearls and sensible shoes. For those of you who saw the posting on one of the various list serves recently this will have been brought home with a vengeance with the introduction of a librarian "action figure" called "Nancy Pearl" who comes complete with "shushing action." For those of you who wish to groan aloud at this stereotypical cliché or marvel at the inventors clever marketing audacity you need to go to

http://seattletimes.nwsources.com/html/localnews/135224851_librarian10.html

Will this stereotypical image of what a librarian looks like do the profession more harm than good? Does it matter what the general public thinks a librarian looks like? As a marketing strategy, this is a very clever way of getting everyone talking about librarians and public libraries in particular. I personally would like to take my glasses off to the Seattle based toy maker and the Seattle Public Library where Nancy Pearl

works, for raising the public's awareness of our industry. How many other librarians do you know who are world famous?

One a slightly different note: A recent article in the Australian Library Journal (August 2003, p 269 -) by Cathie Koina entitled "Librarians are the ultimate knowledge managers?" asks why is it that people are not "knocking down our doors, begging us to be the knowledge managers of the organisation?" Ms Koina argues that after all Librarians have been custodians of documented knowledge for centuries. However, as Ms Koina goes on to point out, if librarians want to have a place in the knowledge management field, they will need a mind shift, librarians will have to become more proactive and align the work that is being done with the goals of the organisation.

So What's in a Name?

Does it matter what we call ourselves? Recent arguments have raged over non-professionals calling themselves "librarians" simply because they work in a library. It is argued that to be a "librarian" you must have the correct degree qualification. Did you know that to be classed as a Librarian in America you need to have a Masters degree, and having a Bachelor's degree or a graduate diploma isn't considered good enough? The question is – does it really matter what we call ourselves if we are providing a professional level of service to our clients?

A Thought to Ponder:

"We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence then is not an act, but a habit."

Aristotle

Your comments and suggestions on the subject of this newsletter are most welcome. Or if you would like to see other issues covered in future editions, please email training@iea.com.au

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