

## Feedback as Outreach: Turning an Assessment Survey into a Marketing Opportunity

Fred Folmer

Connecticut College

**Abstract:** Feedback projects—for instance, those that survey users about the use of resources—can be very useful beyond their originally intended purpose of collecting information. Because these projects also involve contact with library users, they may additionally be useful as outreach or marketing tools. This article provides a case study of the ways in which librarians at Connecticut College took advantage of the marketing and outreach opportunities that were provided by user feedback. This article identifies four areas libraries can pay attention to in order to utilize this type of marketing opportunity: careful consideration of the language used, anticipation of concerns, adoption of a teaching mindset, and follow-up. The article also includes specific advice on how libraries can address all four of these areas in a feedback project. It makes the argument that by doing so, libraries can strengthen their relationship with users moving beyond a paradigm wherein the library seeks to simply obtain knowledge from them, and instead move toward stronger two-way communication.

**Keywords:** feedback, assessment, outreach, marketing, communication

### Introduction

Survey projects that seek feedback or data from users are a staple of library assessment. They can help librarians obtain crucial information on the extent or quality of the usage of resources, measure satisfaction with services or programming, or provide information on a broad range of collection- or service oriented-issues. Given that such projects involve making direct contact with library users, they can also present significant opportunities for marketing and outreach. However, because marketing is typically not the primary goal of a survey project, such opportunities might be overlooked or not utilized to their fullest advantage.

The purpose of this article is to describe the process by which librarians at Connecticut College, an undergraduate liberal arts institution, developed a survey whose initial purpose was to obtain feedback about the library collection. The library's staff members came to understand that the survey offered not only an opportunity to assess the collection but also to communicate to users. As librarians designed and administered the survey, they developed practices that were

tailored to the ostensibly secondary purpose of outreach. In doing so, they came to ask some key questions that this article will seek to address as it generalizes the lessons learned from this project: If one is developing feedback mechanisms that in part or in whole are designed to promote the library, how might those feedback mechanisms change? What kinds of considerations might they include?

## Survey Background

At Connecticut College, the survey's initial, stated purpose was to obtain information about the quality and extent of the usage of library databases. The College's librarians—a group consisting of staff members from Shain Library, Greer Music Library and the Linda Lear Center for Special Collections & Archives—sought a more detailed and sophisticated understanding of which databases were truly being used and valued by faculty; which ones were being taught in classes and/or used in research; and which resources faculty harbored an opinion about or attachment to. Existing data, the library's staff had found, was limited in their ability to explain the value of resources, and unable to account for faculty members who might highly prize a database even if its usage was relatively low. The library felt a strong impetus to conduct this survey because its collection budget had been reduced every year for the past decade due to inflationary pressures, along with two actual reductions to the library's operating budget. Staff had been forced to make multiple cuts to the roster of databases and wanted to make sure they knew as much as they could about the remaining resources in order to make any additional reductions in a responsible and ethical way.

At the same time, Connecticut College library staff members wanted to make the college's faculty members aware of the problem of both the inflated cost of serials and budget cuts. Collections staff had communicated previously in the form of emails to faculty and through articles in the library's newsletter that described the problem. Nevertheless, even following these communication efforts, librarians often heard faculty express surprise about a systemic problem with the library budget, indicating that communication efforts had not fully achieved their intended effect.

Given this gap in awareness of the library's budget problem, the issue of communication came to the forefront fairly early as librarians planned and created the survey. One of the first points that some Connecticut College staff members raised was that the framing of the survey—the introductory and internal wording—needed to be done very carefully, so as not to create a sense of undue alarm. At the same time, others mentioned that some alarm was precisely what the survey was trying to foster—that previous efforts to reach the faculty had, as mentioned, failed to raise sufficient awareness of the issue. In the process of trying to create the optimal level of alarm for faculty about our collections budget, staff members came to realize that the survey presented as much an opportunity for teaching and feedback as it did for gathering information.

Librarians then began to ask the basic question: How should surveys or other feedback mechanisms be crafted, if they are intended specifically as outreach? As the staff members began to ask this question, they noticed that several key themes emerged: attention to language, anticipation of reactions and concerns, teaching, and follow-up. The central idea of

this article is that by attending to these themes and recommendations, librarians can take full advantage of the marketing and outreach opportunities that are available when they conduct a survey. Ultimately, Connecticut College's librarians found that addressing these themes helped them take full advantage of the project's outreach opportunities, and that doing so also improved their overall relationships with a key constituent group.

The remainder of this article will explicate these four themes, including an overview of how each theme relates to the specific feedback/outreach project undertaken by library staff members. It will also offer some general observations for librarians who wish to carry out a similar initiative.

## **Attention to Language**

The theme of language was one of the first to catch Connecticut College librarians' attention as they sought to develop the outreach-related aspects of their survey. Because of the sensitivity of the collection budget issue, staff members paid close attention to the specific language used to invite faculty to take the survey as well as within the survey itself. Librarians felt that it would not have been optimal to send the survey with a generic method (e.g., one that said, "We're conducting a survey; will you help us out?"). Rather, they decided that because of the implications of the questions they were asking—responses to the survey could potentially determine which databases would be canceled—they had to make a clear and explicit case for why the survey was necessary. This decision led the staff directly into an outreach task.

Librarians tasked with crafting the language for the survey experienced an especially delicate challenge. The survey presented an implicit warning about potential resource cancellations; on the other, librarians were trying to demonstrate that the survey was part of improving their support of research and teaching. Staff members worried that these messages may have appeared somewhat contradictory, and that any communication attempting to contain both warning and support could understandably be interpreted as a mixed message.

Librarians thus decided to send a note along with the survey whose purpose was to be as direct and explicit as possible about the goals of the project. To accomplish this, they crafted an introductory email that Connecticut College's director of collections sent to all faculty. Then, each liaison librarian created a survey whose questions were customized for a particular department, but whose invitation email used the same language as the introduction. In addition, once respondents clicked on the link to go to the survey, they found that the standardized message was also found at the top of each survey page.

Reflecting the multiple messages the librarians were trying to convey, the standardized communications included a mixture of warnings and reassurances. The standardized message contained a brief introductory message about the survey that stated: "Following is a questionnaire regarding some of our electronic databases." Following this, the email clearly, in boldface type, stated the following: "The resources we are asking about are not necessarily going to be discontinued." Librarians intended the phrase "not necessarily" as a simultaneous reassurance as well as an implicit warning. They followed this sentence with another reassuring one: "Additional reductions for the remainder of the 2017-18 academic year are not imminent. However, it is important to note the context of this inquiry." Then, throughout the remainder of

the email, librarians gave respondents a more detailed explanation of the budget situation and a rationale for asking the questions. They avoided adjectives or other descriptive words that might have set off undue alarms; rather, they limited the description to the facts at hand. In so doing, staff members' hope was that the tone they took in their communications would model the emotions and reactions that they had hoped to elicit: awareness, without excessive alarm. Having cleared the space for understanding, staff hoped, with opening words that correctly balanced warning and reassurance that librarians could then apprise faculty of the budget situation and compel these users to pay attention where other methods had failed.

*Conclusion and implication:* Libraries that use feedback projects for outreach purposes need to be deliberate about the language they use. Further, survey designers need to tell the truth, but also remember to clear an affective space for the kind of message they are trying to send.

### **Anticipation of Reactions and Concerns**

Even after attending carefully to the survey language, librarians must be aware that any questions about the longevity library resources—the suggestion that library resources *could* be discontinued—may garner a strong and perhaps unhelpful reaction from a significant numbers of survey respondents who could assume that the databases on the survey *would certainly* be discontinued.

In anticipation of this reaction, Connecticut College's librarians decided to frame the entire feedback project as a broader look at the library's databases, so that faculty could view the exercise as helping librarians understand their collection. The library staff decided, therefore, to include such core resources as *PsychInfo* in their questions, even though that particular database was not under consideration to be discontinued. Librarians wanted respondents to be able to look at the survey and its broad range of questions about databases and view the entire project as a resource overview rather than a "cut list." Using this framing, librarians hoped that respondents would provide honest and helpful feedback that was not overly influenced by a strong negative reaction. And while a few faculty members did in fact react strongly to the survey, or mark every database as essential (in a likely attempt to preserve all resources), most provided feedback that helped librarians draw distinctions among resources.

In addition, librarians felt that the decision to frame the feedback project as a broader initiative to obtain information about quality and extent of usage sent a very genuine message: We care about you and are doing our best to respond to your needs. Library staff members saw this strategy as successful and noted that many faculty respondents sent messages of gratitude for the liaison's interaction.

*Conclusion and implications:* Reactions to a feedback effort, particularly in the context and specter of possible budget reductions, can be strong. Libraries who are considering such a project should work to reframe survey questions so that their feedback project is (correctly) interpreted as an outreach effort that is aimed at better understanding overall needs.

### **A Teaching Mindset**

Another frame with which libraries might seek to develop a feedback/outreach project concerns a topic that is very familiar to many librarians and that is teaching. When Connecticut College librarians developed the survey communications for faculty, they thought about the question, "What do we want them to learn?" And while they did not employ particularly sophisticated pedagogical techniques—for instance, they did not think in terms of active learning, nor did they utilize social constructivist theory—they did outline in a deliberate way the anticipated learning outcomes, and they used consistent and repeated messages to try to effect these outcomes. Based on comments that librarians received, librarians saw that at least some of these outcomes had been achieved. For example, some staff members received notes from faculty members with whom they had not previously communicated regarding the collection budget, indicating that the message had in at least some instances reached its audience. Library staff members also became aware of numerous conversations that took place among faculty members regarding the budget and the library collections. Without the survey, it seemed unlikely that these conversations would have happened.

*Conclusion and implications:* For those thinking of using a feedback project to market to library users, it is helpful to think about what is being taught, as well as the method being used to deliver the instruction. Even if survey administrators do not use sophisticated pedagogical methods, carefully crafting the intended message and repeating it will help raise awareness. Librarians undertaking such a project will send a series of subtle yet unmistakable messages: We want to learn from you; we want you to learn something from us; we are all learning from each other.

## Following Up

When the survey or feedback mechanism is also intended as outreach, a response to an expression of either concern or appreciation—or any other message on the continuum—is especially crucial. In the survey at Connecticut College, librarians received varying kinds of responses from faculty members: those who reacted with surprise to the situation, who thanked librarians for taking an interest, who commiserated about the library budget situation, who engaged in debate among themselves, and who expressed anxiety that discontinuing databases was a possibility. In all cases, the College's librarians followed up on these messages. For effective outreach, follow-up responses are important as a way of facilitating ongoing two-way communication—which, for any library, is an important goal. If the follow-up element were absent, it is likely that the project would have simply remained a one-way feedback mechanism.

*Conclusion and implications:* Librarians planning a project with a feedback/outreach dual purpose should remember to include a deliberate, intentional effort to respond to concerns or other matters that users raise. Such an effort will both complement and extend the outreach capability of a project.

## Overall Conclusion and Future Directions

The project at Connecticut College was originally conceived mostly as a mechanism to receive feedback from users. As such, library staff did not begin with principles that this article has been articulating. Rather, such principles developed as librarians realized that given the

sensitive nature of the feedback they were seeking, some outreach might be needed. This article provides an overview of what the library staff learned throughout this specific project, along with what they learned about how one might proceed from the start on a project with similar dual goals. The four articulated themes—language, anticipation of concerns, a teaching/pedagogical mindset, and response to feedback—were the elements that the College’s librarians found not only would make such a project successful, but would also further the ongoing two-way communication and relationship development that is a critical aspect of any library’s success.

One of the possible pitfalls of such a deliberate approach to “feedback as outreach” is that it might be difficult to measure exactly what was learned or gained by the survey respondents. This is an issue because the overt feedback from the survey is not directly outreach related but might, as was the case in the project at Connecticut College, be related to usage of the collection. In other words, in these kinds of outreach projects, the marketing of the library remains a sort of by-product, and so truly measuring the effects of the outreach might require another survey (leading, perhaps, to an endless circle of feedback/outreach projects).

Similarly, while librarians found that a teaching mindset was useful, in the end they relied mostly on circumstantial evidence to glean what participants had actually learned, rather than using a more deliberate methodology. As such, librarians who seek to design future feedback/outreach projects might attempt to incorporate some more direct form of assessment, and/or by utilize more sophisticated pedagogical methods. Whatever form this might take, librarians at Connecticut College who worked on this feedback/outreach project were pleased to have gained some introductory insights about how such projects can operate and are eager to see how other projects might build on this work.

Copyright: © 2018 Folmer. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike License (CC BY-NC-SA), which permits unrestricted non-commercial use, sharing, adapting, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

