Creating a Communication Advisory Committee and New Marketing Tools

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Abstract: This article outlines the creation, goal, and initial projects of the Spencer S. Eccles Health Sciences Library’s Communication Advisory Committee. Without the university marketing or public relations support, Eccles Library created this team to effectively communicate and promote the library’s resources, events, and expertise. The Communication Advisory Committee tackled numerous challenges facing many library event planners, including best practices for promoting events, increasing audience attendance, objectively assessing the event, and creating consistent relevant messages. The Communication Advisory Committee’s goal is to advise Eccles Library employees, both librarians and staff, to effectively promote and communicate their projects and events. To accomplish this, the Communication Advisory Committee developed and maintains tools and guides that assist library employees to reach intended audiences, measure success indicators, and enable the project/event leaders to report on outcomes. The initial steps and projects to create these tools and future directions will be shared. By creating a Communication Advisory Committee, the Eccles Library hopes to streamline communication, provide consistent messaging, and effectively market the various library services, resources, and expertise available to its community. This article will provide an overview for those facing similar marketing and communication challenges at their institutions and a possible solution in the form of an advisory committee.

Keywords: Strategic communication, marketing, promotion, libraries
Introduction

The Spencer S. Eccles Health Sciences Library (Eccles Library) is the academic health sciences library for University of Utah’s health campus, which includes the Colleges of Health, Nursing, and Pharmacy, the Schools of Dentistry and Medicine, the University Hospital, Huntsman Cancer Institute, University Orthopaedic Center, University Neuropsychiatric Institute, and twelve community clinics. Eccles Library contributes to the success of health professionals, students, researchers, educators, and the general community.

Although there is a marketing and public relations department that oversees the health sciences and clinic units, the Eccles Library has limited access to their expertise or resources for library-sponsored events, campaigns, signage, or web design. The University marketing department’s purpose is to promote all of the health campus as a large, cohesive unit, for a non-university audience. Unfortunately, internal department-specific events do not fall under the oversight of the marketing department’s responsibilities. This means that the Eccles Library must create its own communication venues to announce news, such as electronic journal access or an annual lecture series.

Eccles Library itself does not have a marketing department or library employees (faculty and staff) with marketing background or marketing duties within their job description. There is also no budget provided to cover professional marketing materials or giveaways. Two reoccurring annual events have small budgets to cover catering and physical advertisements (for example, postcard mailers). Eccles Library’s communication channels include the library’s website, blog, social media platforms, mailing lists, health sciences intranet postings, as well as printed flyers and posters in and around the Eccles Library building. Access to these communication channels is dispersed to many library employees. Without a dedicated marketing expert to help pursue marketing and advertising, library employees often lack the time and expertise to advance each communication channel to its full potential. For example, a campaign may be regularly tweeted on Twitter, but lacks a generated hashtag and cross-referencing with other accounts to join in the promotions. As a result, there is little to no engagement with other Twitter users.

The major disadvantages for Eccles Library’s marketing attempts have been a severe lack of direction, management, and communication. Without a dedicated marketing manager, or even guidelines, marketing attempts tend to be fragmented individualized efforts and not part of one, cohesive strategic plan. Some ideas, such as a “Technology Petting Zoo,” are not fully formed and can result in lackluster results and attendance. The bulk of information relating to a particular event, including how to best advertise it, only resides within the minds of a few library employees. Those employees may not have the time or other staff to help fully pursue the strategic marketing or promotion of an event. Without direction or communication, Eccles Library’s marketing attempts quickly become stagnant and repetitive. Without a comprehensive marketing strategy, some Eccles Library events were poorly attended and the announcements concerning new services and resources took a long period to spread.
History of the Communication Advisory Committee

The first step toward a marketing plan and team occurred in 2013, when Eccles Library leadership created the library’s 2013-2015 strategic directions. These six strategic directions, taken from the Eccles Library’s internal documents, were:

1. Engage with users in new and meaningful ways, including encouraging the adoption of emerging technologies
2. Communicate the value of library services, librarians and staff
3. Create a collaborative center that supports innovation and discovery
4. Learn and develop skills that exceed expectations and ensure excellence
5. Evaluate internal processes with a focus on providing value
6. Support and become an integral partner in health care transformation

Eccles Library leadership formed six committees to address each strategic direction and provided each committee with three to four objectives to investigate and accomplish. The committees consisted of a mixture of employees from the various Eccles Library departments.

The second strategic direction committee, communicate value strategic direction committee, was tasked to assess the resource and service needs of our users; inventory and assess our communication strategies; and promote the value of our expertise, services and resources through a cohesive, responsive, and consistent plan to all relevant audiences. The committee completed several projects to address these objectives. A few of the projects included conducting and reporting on a faculty survey; creating a one-page audience-specific marketing handout; introducing library departments via videos; displaying slides of employees with their expertise and contact information; and transforming the library newsletter (Casucci, 2014; Wimmer et al., 2014a; Wimmer et al., 2014b; Wimmer, Le Ber, & Casucci, 2014c; Wimmer & Hull, 2015).

After the strategic directions period ended, Eccles Library leadership informed communicate value strategic direction committee to continue its valuable work. Without clear direction, the group re-envisioned itself. The committee members were most interested in pursuing consistent messaging and playing an advisory role for library employees and leadership. Rather than completing marketing and promotional projects, the group wanted to encourage and advise other Eccles Library employees. For example, each library event organizer completed promotional tasks based on what they thought best or remembered to do, so the messaging was very inconsistent. By realigning committee to the Communication Advisory Committee (CAC), the group had the opportunity to investigate best practices and advise others within the library.

In the fall of 2016, the committee was granted permission to continue in this new advisory role. The purpose of CAC is to advise Eccles Library employees to effectively promote and communicate their projects and event. CAC will develop and maintain tools and guides that assist staff to reach intended audiences, measure success indicators, and enable the project/event leads will be able to report on outcomes. Currently, CAC is led by two faculty librarians and has representation from the web content team, public services, and administration. In spring-summer 2017, an undergraduate student joined the group as the communication intern. The communication intern had a background in strategic communication
and provided a unique perspective as a “library outsider” and the Eccles Library’s first communication specialist.

**Creation of New Marketing Tools**

As mentioned earlier, CAC’s role is to advise Eccles Library employees to effectively promote and communicate their projects and events by developing and maintaining tools and guides that assist staff to reach intended audiences, measure success indicators, and enable the project/event leads report on outcomes. To accomplish this lofty goal, CAC started gathering information and expertise to develop a cohesive event planning and marketing plan.

CAC’s first project was establishing a list of Eccles Library’s communication channels. Eccles Library’s communication channels include printed flyers, blog posts, homepage banners, electronic display panels, university calendars, emails, social media accounts, and a few university-specific channels. After creating this list, CAC members added additional information about each channel, such as the intended audience, engagement levels, time requirements, and ways to evaluate effectiveness. Based upon expert event planner’s opinions and post-event assessments, the communication channels were listed in order of importance and some best practices for each channel were cultivated. Over the next few years, as events are pushed through CAC’s tools, these channels and best practices will be continually assessed.

CAC’s second project was identifying experts within Eccles Library to assist event planners. For example, the public services supervisor’s background includes graphic design, so she can help with the creation of flyers, logos, and other visuals. Rather than place all the burden on the event planner, CAC wanted to make other library employees and resources available to them. CAC’s hope is that this distributed team method will also improve internal communication and external marketing outputs. Moreover, CAC identified external library champions and department administrators who can help with audience-specific promotion. For example, School of Medicine’s student presidents can be great advocates for promoting student-specific content.

CAC developed an event planning tool based on the Student Centers at the University of Hartford’s Special Events Toolkit & Operations Plan Intake Form for its third project (University of Hartford, 2017). The University of Hartford’s toolkit and intake form covers a wide range of topics for event planning, such as event history, RSVP system, production schedule, safety and security, and ADA accommodations. This toolkit and intake form allowed CAC to easily modify and expand the concepts outlined in the University of Hartford’s form into a similar intake form that would work for Eccles Library events. CAC’s event planning form includes similar topics, such as event details, co-sponsors information, equipment and space requirements, marketing selling points, and catering.

Even though CAC’s tool will require some pre-planning work for the event planner, CAC believes that it will help coordinate and streamline marketing events. By having all the information on one form, library employees can have the same understanding and expectations. Since CAC’s form includes unique selling points, a short pitch or description, longer description, logo, and event details, the messaging for Eccles Library’s event will be more consistent. For example, after the event planner outlines the event information, the part-time library employees can review the form as they craft social media posts utilizing this information. The events may align with Eccles Library’s tagline, *Inform. Connect. Innovate.*, depending upon the website and
blog redesign. Additionally, since all Eccles Library events will have information in one place, it will make creating the annual report much easier too. These and other benefits will hopefully motivate event planners to participate and allow CAC to advise them.

**Future Plans for Marketing Tools**

CAC plans to merge the planning intake form with the communication channel marketing strategy and expert list into one cohesive product. This cohesive product will serve as an excellent advisory tool for anyone at Eccles Library. Another important feature that will be woven throughout is assessment. This assessment will focus on the event planner’s perception of the tool and the audience’s response to the event. By including mechanisms for assessment, CAC’s data will support changes within the best practices or marketing workflows. Event and marketing effectiveness will be clearly tracked.

After testing the paper-based tool, CAC will develop three additional components. The three components are the web-based intake form, a database, and automated internal and external feedback mechanisms. Ultimately, the combined components will allow for easier reporting, including annual report summaries and data mining for continued improvements.

The first step is converting the paper-based tool into a web-based intake form. The intake form will be structured in a series of relevant and related questions with selections triggering additional hidden/visible options based upon input. This form will be hosted on an intranet, store form data to a database, and with automation scripts, manage scheduling, calendar entries, room reservations, and reminder prompts. The intake form process will arrange coordination between departments, as workflows generate task notifications and schedule deadlines, allowing the planner to easily monitor the progression.

The second component is automating repeatable events from stored data. Initiating a repeating event will automatically prepopulate event information pulled from the previous event, as well as make related historical data available. This will reduce input time, maintain consistency and thoroughness, while safeguarding lost information from personnel turnover. Simple and standard events could be auto-scheduled with minimal supervision.

The third component will be tools to create and collect feedback forms and data from internal and external sources and automate response prompts. Audience and participant feedback forms will be available online with custom or third-party solution for the creating, hosting and storing of the form and responses. The forms will include standardized questions applicable to all events for comparative purposes, as well as event specific questions the planner can append to the form. Auto-generated email reminders with the feedback form link will be sent to event attendees, who either RSVPd or signed-in at an event. Additionally, a feedback form link will be sent to the event planners to grade the event process and provide additional comments. The feedback from both attendees and planners would be linked to the event data and made available for review on future events. Finally, for both external and internal feedback, the questions will be highly structured to facilitate comparative analysis. This information will help CAC further develop recommendations and best practices.
Conclusion

As CAC builds these communication and marketing tools, CAC members aim to ensure Eccles Library events, resources, and services will be clearly represented to our community. Since Eccles Library serves the University of Utah health community which is at risk for job burnout, high stress, and no spare time, it is even more important to clearly communicate and market Eccles Library’s expertise, resources, services, and events. By realigning Eccles Library’s communication and marketing strategies, CAC’s tools will continue to ensure messaging is consistent and directed at the target audiences.

References


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