

Creating a Communication Advisory Committee and New Marketing Tools

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Abstract: This article outlines the creation, goals, and initial projects of the Communication Advisory Committee at the Spencer S. Eccles Health Sciences Library at the University of Utah. EHSL created the committee to provide marketing and public relations support that was not otherwise available at the university, with the purpose of streamlining communication, providing consistent messaging, and connecting the various internal marketing-related services, resources, and expertise that were available in the library. The committee sought to carry out this purpose by advising library employees on how to effectively promote and communicate their projects and events. The committee developed and maintained tools and guides for reaching intended audiences, measuring success, and reporting on outcomes. This article will share the initial steps and projects that went into creating these tools and will explore future directions they might take. This article's overview of the advisory committee and its work will present a possible solution to institutions facing similar challenges.

Keywords: strategic communication, marketing, promotion, libraries

Introduction

The Spencer S. Eccles Health Sciences Library (EHSL) is the library for the health sciences and clinical units at the University of Utah, in Salt Lake City. These units include 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 and collectively, they are known as U Health. EHSL contributes to the success of U Health professionals, students, researchers, educators, and the general community.

Though there is a marketing department that oversees U Health, its purpose is to promote all of U Health as a large, cohesive unit, for a non-university audience. EHSL has limited access to the department's expertise and resources. The promotional campaigns, signage, and web design that the library needs to market its resources and events, such as its electronic journal and annual lecture series, do not fall within the U Health marketing department's responsibilities.

In addition to EHSL lacking its own marketing department, its budget for marketing covers only catering and physical advertising (for example, postcard mailers) for specific events. EHSL therefore utilizes many tactics that do not require money.

Also, EHSL does not have any full-time staff with marketing in their title or job description, and this lack of dedicated marketing staff has had a severe impact on direction, management, and communication of marketing efforts. Marketing attempts tended to be fragmented, individualized efforts rather than part of one, larger strategic plan. Most information relating to events, including advertising decisions, have resided with only a few employees who do not always have time or resources to share their processes with other librarians or to commit to taking on future event marketing. In addition, librarians and other staff lacked the time and expertise to use library channels, including the library's website, blog, social media platforms, mailing lists, health sciences intranet postings, as well as printed flyers and posters hung in and around the EHSL building, to their full potential. For example, a campaign might have included regular posts on Twitter, but posts would lack the impact of custom hashtags or tags of other accounts. As a result, little to no engagement would take place with other Twitter users.

Overall, the absence of internal marketing direction has caused EHSL's efforts to become stagnant and repetitive and has led to ineffective communication concerning new services and resources and lackluster results, such as poor attendance at EHSL events.

History of the Communication Advisory Committee

The first step toward a marketing plan occurred in 2013, when an EHSL committee addressed the library's 2013-2015 strategic directions, taken from the taken from the library's internal documents:

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 healthcare transformation

EHSL leadership established committees for each of the six directions, which consisted of employees from various EHSL departments. The Communication Value Strategic Direction Committee, shortened to CommSD, was created to carry out the second strategic direction.

In order to communicate the value of library services, librarians, and staff, CommSD was tasked with assessing the resource and service needs of the library's users; inventorying and assessing communication strategies; and promoting the value of the library's expertise, services and resources through a cohesive, responsive, and consistent plan for all relevant audiences. The committee completed several projects to address these objectives, and included conducting and reporting on a faculty survey; creating a one-page audience-specific marketing handout; developing videos to introduce library departments; displaying slides of employees with their expertise and contact information; and transforming the library newsletter

After the strategic direction period ended, EHSL leadership advised CommSD to continue its work. In this next phase, the group concentrated on fostering consistent messaging across the library. For example, event organizers had been promoting their events according to their individual priorities and abilities, leading to inconsistent messaging across the library. Rather than taking on the library's marketing and promotional projects itself, the group wanted to focus on encouraging and advising other librarians. With this in mind, CommSD transformed into the Communication Advisory Committee (CAC).

In the fall of 2016, CAC officially took on this new advisory role by advising other EHSL employees on how to effectively promote and communicate their projects and events. CAC developed and maintained tools and guides to assist staff with reaching intended audiences and establishing success indicators, and to enable the project or event leads to report on outcomes.

Like CommSD, the membership of CAC has evolved over time but continues to be comprised of employees from various EHSL departments. Currently, CAC is led by two faculty librarians and has members from the Web content team, public services, and administration. In spring 2017, an undergraduate student joined the group as a communication intern. The intern's external perspective and background in strategic communication has provided unique insights to the committee.

Creation of New Marketing Tools

CAC began carrying out its charge by gathering information to develop a cohesive event-planning and marketing strategy. It established a list of EHSL's communication channels, which included printed flyers, blog posts, homepage banners, electronic display panels, university calendars, e-mails, social media accounts, and a few university-specific channels. This list was augmented with details about each channel, such as the intended audience, engagement levels, time requirements, and ways to evaluate effectiveness. CAC used the opinions and post-event assessments of expert event planners to prioritize the communication channels and develop some best practices for each. CAC will continually assess its tools in the coming years.

Identifying experts to assist event planners was CAC's second project. CAC sought to relieve event planners from some of the burden of marketing by tapping other people and

resources that were in a position to help. For example, the public services supervisor's background included graphic design, so she could help event planners by creating flyers, logos, and other visuals. CAC also identified external champions and department administrators who could help promote events to specific audiences. For example, student advisors could be effective advocates for student-specific content. Aside from relieving event planners, CAC saw other potential benefits from this distributed approach: improved internal communication and marketing output.

CAC has developed an event planning tool based on the Special Events Toolkit & Operations Plan Intake Form created by the Student Centers at the University of Hartford (University of Hartford, 2017). The University of Hartford's toolkit and intake form covered a wide range of topics for event planning, such as event history, RSVP system, production schedule, safety and security, and ADA accommodations. CAC was able to easily modify and expand the concepts in the University of Hartford materials to create a paper-based intake form for EHSL events. CAC's form includes similar topics, such as event details, cosponsor information, equipment and space requirements, marketing selling points, and catering needs.

Although the intake form requires event planners to do some pre-planning, CAC believes that gathering and making relevant information available all in one place will help coordinate and streamline event marketing. Everyone has access to the same information and thus is more likely have the same understanding and expectations. By requiring unique selling points, a short pitch or description, longer description, logo, and event details, the form should result in more consistent messaging for EHSL's events. For example, after an event planner submits event information through the form, part-time staff can access and review it to craft social media posts. Additionally, the single collection point for all EHSL event information will make annual report creation much easier. CAC hopes that these and other benefits will motivate event planners to use the form and seek out CAC's advice.

CAC plans to merge the intake form with the communication channel marketing strategy and expert list into one comprehensive product to create a robust advisory tool for everyone at EHSL. An important feature of this combined tool will be assessment—of the tool itself and the events that rely on it. It will track both the event planner's perceptions and the audience's response, as well as event and marketing effectiveness. CAC's assessment data will enable refinements of best practices and marketing workflows.

Future Marketing Tools

CAC will use the results of the initial intake form to develop a web-based intake form, a database, and automated internal and external feedback mechanisms. Ultimately, these changes will allow for easier reporting, including annual report summaries and data mining for continued improvements.

The first step will be converting the intake form from paper into a web-based format. The online version of the form will be structured as a series of relevant and related questions, and some form selections will trigger additional form options. The 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 enable coordination between departments and allow event planners to easily monitor progress, as workflows will generate task notifications and schedule deadlines.

The second step will be automating the input of repeating events by using stored data. Initiating a repeating event will automatically populate the intake form with information from the previous event and will make related historical data available. This will reduce input time, maintain consistency and thoroughness, and safeguard against information caused by personnel turnover. The third step will be creating online feedback forms to collect data from internal and external sources and automate response prompts. EHSL will use custom or third-party solutions to develop and host audience and participant feedback forms and to store form responses. The forms will include not only standard questions for comparative purposes but also custom event-specific questions as needed by the planner. The system will automatically e-mail a feedback form link to individuals who RSVPed and signed in at events. Additionally, the system will send an e-mail to the event planners with a link to a standard feedback form that allows them to grade the event process and provide additional comments. This attendee and planner feedback will be linked to the event data and made available when planning future events. Finally, the attendee and planner feedback forms will be structured to facilitate comparative analysis. This information will help CAC refine recommendations and best practices.

Conclusion

By building these communication and marketing tools, CAC aims to ensure EHSL offerings will be clearly represented to the U Health community. U Health community members are at risk of job burnout, suffer high stress, and have no spare time. For this reason, it is even more important to clearly communicate and market EHSL's expertise, resources, services, and events. By strengthening EHSL's communication and marketing strategies, CAC's tools will ensure messaging is consistent and directed at the target audiences.

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