Putting the Audience in Charge of the Message: Assessment of Student-Generated Public Relations Campaigns in an Academic Library

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Abstract: This article analyzes the effectiveness of an academic library's public relations (PR) strategies designed to promote librarians and library services to students. One of the core issues librarians face is that many students do not necessarily know what services the library offers or what librarians do and how they can help. To remedy this problem, librarians at the University of Florida collaborated with students from a PR class to devise strategies to better promote the services offered by the libraries as well as the libraries' subject specialists. Following this collaboration, the group implemented some of the recommended marketing strategies and assessed whether these methods resonated with students and/or changed their perceptions of librarians and libraries. Using a mixed

methods approach, the team conducted surveys and focus groups with the aim to better understand the effectiveness of student-generated library marketing and outreach strategies. This assessment will inform library marketing best practices and ensure that implemented strategies work by increasing student awareness of library services and subject librarians.

Keywords: Assessment, library marketing, academic libraries, public relations, student collaborations

Introduction

In the complex digital information environment, academic libraries are realizing the need to demonstrate their value and market awareness of services to the student population. But whether it is promoting the physical building or trying to get students to think beyond "library as space," such as by highlighting new resources or services, finding marketing strategies that both engage and resonate with users can be challenging.

At the University of Florida, a team of librarians at the humanities and social sciences branch of the George A. Smathers Libraries, Library West, wanted to increase awareness of subject librarians and how they can be instrumental to student success. While Library West is one of the most prominent libraries on campus, reporting more visitors per year than the university's football stadium, making students aware of the variety of resources available proved to be much more difficult than getting them into the building to study. Previous internal studies revealed that when students think of the library, they think of study space, technology, materials, and the coffee shop, but rarely of librarians and the research assistance they provide.

Conversely, on the other side of campus, a smaller and lesser known university library branch, the Education Library, was about to undergo an impressive and substantial renovation. The staff members there wanted students to be more aware of the newly enhanced physical space and improved services. Many students expressed to staff that they did not find out about the Education Library until they were about to graduate, did not know how to locate the library, which was hidden in the larger College of Education complex, and did not realize that non-education students could use the space.

To address these issues, staff from both branches partnered with two different Public Relations (PR) Campaigns courses to take on each library as a "client" for the spring semester, and this partnership was facilitated by the journalism and mass communications librarian. For the Library West campaign, students were charged with raising awareness of the librarians and the vital role they play as subject specialists, while the students working on the Education Library campaign were asked to focus on promoting the library's existence, location, collections, and other resources.

Although each library had different marketing needs, both benefited greatly from partnering with PR Campaigns classes at a university with one of the top PR programs in the country. After all,

who better to know how to reach students than the students themselves? Under the direction of their professor, students from each class met with librarians to develop a brand platform, a list of campaign issues, and a research plan that included survey and focus group data. Students then compiled their final recommendations into professional-quality campaign books that were presented to their clients, the librarians, for potential implementation.

The group that worked on the Education Library campaign conducted a survey whose results confirmed the anecdotal conversations between librarians and students about the Education library. According to the survey, a majority of students had not heard of the Education Library and many of those who had heard of it did not know where it was located. This PR group made two suggestions: 1) Collect a series of testimonials from students who use the Education Library to use as online and/or print promotional material, and 2) create a series of directional videos highlighting how to find the Education Library from various points around campus.

The class working on the Library West campaign also found significant and somewhat alarming results: 77% of student participants in their focus groups expressed they did not know what a subject librarian was and did not know how they could help them. This group recommended several strategies, including an all-day librarian Snapchat takeover, pop-up tabling events staffed by librarians, an infographic listing librarians as one of the top ten most valuable resources on campus, and a highly visible elevator wrap featuring photos and contact information for each subject librarian. One of their most intriguing recommendations was to create short humorous getting-to-know-you videos for each subject librarian that portrayed them in a more approachable light while also explaining how they help students.

Following the collaborations with the PR classes, both branches decided to implement the recommendations that were feasible in terms of funding and resources. However, before they proceeded, library staff wanted to investigate further to determine whether some of these methods (patron testimonials, directional videos, and librarian video profiles in particular) would resonate with their patrons and/or change perceptions of librarians and libraries. Is putting the audience in charge of the message truly the key to bridging the communication gap between users and library staff? Using a mixed-methods approach, the team therefore conducted surveys and focus groups with student participants to better understand the effectiveness of student-generated marketing and outreach strategies in an academic library.

Literature Review

The literature search focused on documents that discussed collaboration between students and library staff to promote library services, and more specifically, to promote the librarians who provide research services. The team also looked for studies that discussed the assessment of marketing strategies in an academic library setting. In these studies, it is important to note that many marketing campaigns and strategies revolve around the promotion of library resources and services,

and not around the promotion of librarians, which could be considered both a resource and a service. This study attempts to bridge the gap in the literature on the marketing and promotion of librarians, as well as effective assessment of related campaigns.

Assessing marketing strategies in libraries

MacDonald, vanDuinkerken, and Stephens (2008) designed, implemented, and evaluated a library marketing campaign promoting a new virtual reference service at Texas A&M University. Their campaign assessment included data collection through pre- and post-campaign implementation surveys and analysis of service usage statistics. In their investigation of related research in the field, they discovered a bounty of information on how to implement marketing campaigns, but very little on effective assessment, which demonstrates a need for more systematic and quantitative analysis of marketing campaigns.

Fry (2014) analyzed usage statistics to assess an e-resources promotional campaign designed to promote underused databases at Bowling Green University. Although the author found increases in eight out of twelve promoted databases, she also acknowledged the possibility of inflation of some numbers due to library instruction sessions. Nevertheless, the article suggests that when resources are promoted, they are more likely to be used.

Librarians at Texas A&M University Libraries undertook assessment of a collaborative marketing campaign designed by the local undergraduate chapter of the American Advertising Federation (AAF) (McGeachin & Ramirez, 2005). Librarians observed that students and faculty were unaware of library services, calling for a more proactive marketing approach. The AAF students chose their campaign focus from a list of topics suggested by the librarians. Their choice was raising awareness of NetLibrary e-books. To assess the success of this campaign, they measured new NetLibrary accounts created, e-book turnaways (due to simultaneous usage), and e-book access statistics, in addition to soliciting anecdotal evidence. At first, there was a very moderate increase in e-book usage that did not meet the project goal of engaging 25% of the student body. However, data for the subsequent two years showed doubled and then tripled usage, demonstrating the need for persistence and ongoing assessment. The article ends with a suggestion to partner with a business or journalism marketing professor to use a library project as a class assignment.

Collaboration between Students and Librarians

A study by Han, Wang, & Luo (2014) discussed different levels of student participation in academic libraries:

> 1) shallow participation, which targets the student as a library user, soliciting their input in traditional librarian-led studies via surveys, focus groups, etc.;

2) deep participation, level 1, exemplified by the traditional library worker; and

3) deep participation, level 2, where the student is a collaborator and partner on a particular library project.

Tsinghua University Library in China has a long history of engaging students in their work and this paper described two such projects, one of which was a PR/marketing initiative. In this PR/marketing project, students were interviewed and chosen for their unique specializations to create a marketing video that would be distributed via social media. The project's goal was to improve library brand awareness and promote optimal use of the library in a popular and effective way. The students worked as a team with project librarians, and the resulting product was a five-episode video series titled "Falling in Love with the Library." The videos received more than 160,000 visits within 20 days of their release. The project was deemed a success because this kind of mutually beneficial "deep participation" allows libraries to "better engage the user community and enhance their library experiences" (p. 470).

Benedetti (2017) described, in detail, the methodology for a study at UCLA purporting to identify a more user-centered vocabulary that would better market library services and librarians. The study began with five student focus groups reviewing a series of vignettes and suggesting terms that meant the most to them based on their experiences. From these discussions, the authors were able to develop a list of top words and phrases, which they used to redesign the vignettes for administering to the larger population in survey form. The results showed a clear preference for vocabulary that is specific and clear within the context of the vignette, rather than library jargon. This was a very interesting use of student focus groups, demonstrating how students can help librarians by challenging assumptions and even the very words used to describe library personnel and services.

Akers (2011) reported on an initiative at the Emporia State University Libraries and Archives (ULA) to establish a recognized student organization, the purpose of which was to raise awareness and advocate for the ULA's services and collections. The organization called itself ESULA (Empowered Students for University Libraries and Archives). The intent of the organization was to go beyond an advisory committee or profession-oriented club and provide leadership and community involvement opportunities for members, as well as develop their roles as library advocates and mentors to students on campus. Emporia State had an accredited school of library and information science, so many of the members were library school students, which is not the norm for most institutions. The ESULA members had a very high level of involvement in the libraries' outreach programs and designed an innovative and far-reaching marketing plan.

Collaboration between Classes and Libraries

Nunn and Ruane (2011) underscored the value of partnering with marketing courses to promote reference-related library services. Collaborating with student teams helped provide librarians

with a fresh approach and creative marketing suggestions from the user's perspective. Their research revealed the necessity of employing various strategies to reach different user groups. They also discovered the importance of personalizing reference services by linking users with a face and not just a building. One key revelation was that some students felt that asking for help from a librarian could be construed as "cheating."

At Illinois Wesleyan University, Duke, McDonald, and Trimble (2009) collaborated with a business administration professor to give a class the "opportunity to apply marketing principles to a real-world situation" (p. 110). The class designed and implemented a survey to provide a current analysis of the library's reference services. Similar to data gathered from the Library West project, their survey revealed that although students felt librarians were helpful, less than half of the survey participants had ever asked a librarian for help. The survey also brought to light that 67% of participants used Google and the Internet as their primary or secondary resource and, even more disquieting, that none of the participants had ever consulted a librarian when beginning a research project. Finally, they decided a "lighthearted tone" was important for success of the marketing campaigns.

The project described in this article aims to add to these studies by looking more specifically at assessing the effectiveness of marketing strategies that were conceived by students for students, not only to promote library services but also the librarians themselves.

Methods

The team assessed the effectiveness of the libraries' marketing strategies using both quantitative and qualitative approaches. A quantitative survey was implemented to analyze the Library West outreach, while qualitative focus groups were used to gather feedback on both the Library West and Education Library strategies. Additionally, both Library West and the Education Library used quantitative data from various social media platforms to assess the effectiveness of their outreach.

Surveys

Librarians used a printed survey to analyze marketing strategies used at Library West. The survey was distributed twice, once before the implementation of the recommended marketing strategies in 2017, and once in 2018 after the librarians had adopted some of the strategies. It was completed by more than 300 participants, who answered questions about their perceptions and use of subject specialists before and after the implementation of various marketing strategies. The survey was distributed during a Finals Support Week event at Library West, which is usually one of the busiest weeks of the semester.

In 2017, 167 students were surveyed about their awareness of subject librarians. Similar to what the PR students found in their analysis, 72% of the students surveyed were unaware that they had a subject librarian. In 2018, the same survey was distributed to 133 students after Phase 1 of the

marketing campaign was implemented. The results showed that 62% of the survey respondents were not aware of their subject librarians. This yielded close to a 10% increase in awareness of subject specialists.

Focus Groups

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), qualitative research studies often involve following up with individuals to gather feedback on a project via interviews, surveys, or focus groups. Focus groups allow researchers to deepen their understanding of and planning for future projects. One unique aspect of focus groups is that participants can share their thoughts and opinions but may then revise or expand their original thoughts after hearing those of other group members.

In qualitative research studies, participants are chosen based on their ability to contribute information about the research question (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014). In this study, participants were recruited through advertisements on the Library West social media outlets, and e-mails were sent to various electronic mailing lists. The only criterion for participants was that they were currently enrolled undergraduate students at the university. Participants were provided with a free pizza lunch for their participation.

Qualitative researchers believe that there is no hard and fast rule for the number of participants that should be involved in a research project, but they do emphasize that participants come from a number of different sources to provide a variety of viewpoints (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This study consisted of three Institutional Review Board (IRB)-approved focus groups ranging from three to eight undergraduate participants each, with fourteen total participants. Nine participants were from humanities disciplines and five from STEM disciplines. Six of the participants were sophomores, six were juniors, and two were seniors.

The focus groups consisted of two parts: Part one focused on the marketing of Library West, while part two focused on the marketing of the Education Library. Recordings of the focus groups were made using a Zoom H1 recorder and transcribed by project team members for coding and analysis. One member of the project team served as a moderator for each focus group, but other team members were able to interject to provide clarity or ask follow-up questions.

In part one, participants were shown three two-minute videos, featuring profile interviews with some of the librarians from Library West. The participants were asked a series of open-ended, semi-structured pre- and post-video questions related to their thoughts, feelings, and understanding of the role of librarians.

In part two, participants were asked about their knowledge of and feelings about the Education Library prior to being shown images with patron testimonials called #FacesofNorman that were used on the Education Library's social media accounts. Previous data collected by the PR students for the Education Library campaign showed that 39% of survey participants indicated they would be more likely to use a library if a friend recommended it. Participants were then shown

directional videos describing how to get to the Education Library, a space notorious for being difficult to find, from different locations on campus. Again, participants were asked follow-up questions related to their thoughts, feelings, and understanding of the Education Library.

Evaluation of Results

Humanities and Social Sciences Library

The focus groups gave Library West tremendous insight into the effectiveness of the various, implemented marketing strategies. In part one, focus group participants highlighted that students have a general lack of understanding about who in the library is actually a librarian, thinking that anyone working in a library is a librarian. Additionally, students know neither what a librarian does nor how a librarian can help them personally, especially with their research. The participants indeed defined research "help" in very broad terms such as checking out headphones (which is typically a task of circulation staff rather than librarians), printing, scanning, etc. One participant mentioned that they "kind of know" that librarians can help with research because their friend, who is a graduate student, "talks to librarians a lot, but I never really did because, you know, I'm doing undergrad and I'm not doing research projects, so I kind of know that they do that without ever having particularly to hear it somewhere."

Another important takeaway from the focus groups was that, after watching the videos, participants viewed librarians as more accessible and helpful. In fact, participants were astonished at how friendly and willing to help librarians were. As one participant said: 'Before watching the video, I just assumed that they [the librarians] would be like super serious and intimidating. They're not just someone like who's behind the desk and like and telling you to be quiet. They're more than that. They want to help you, they want to get involved and so that was a good way to show that." Participants were surprised to discover that librarians not only "had valuable past experiences" but that they were also "normal people" who "went through the same thing that we're going through right now and they're just here to help you." The videos thus successfully helped humanize librarians while better articulating their role. After watching the videos, 13 of the 14 participants said they would be more likely to contact a librarian for help.

Most participants of the focus groups found the videos to be effective, or at least somewhat effective, in promoting subject specialists to their peers and increasing the visibility of librarians. The videos, one participant commented, can serve to "put a face out there" so students coming to the library would be able to recognize the librarians. The participants had many suggestions as to how to improve the videos and best promote them in order to maximize their impact. Participants explained that they were more likely to pay attention to library marketing content when it was shared by their instructors than when viewing this content through social media. They already felt inundated by news from their friends and said they would not pay attention to what the library would share on sites like Facebook or Twitter. At the same time, participants said that if the videos were to be shared on social

media, Facebook would be the preferred platform with Twitter second, especially if the goal were to have "people commenting on it, easily to be able to share it, or retweet it…"

While participants stated that social media was not their preferred way for promoting the videos, it is important to note that statistics seem to indicate that profile videos do very well on social media. For instance, when promoted directly on Twitter, the profile videos averaged more than 600 views. So, despite what participants said, social media still has an impact on the videos' popularity and remains a good way for the team to share the videos.

Regarding alternatives for promoting the videos in lieu of social media, participants recommended librarians collaborate closely with instructors, especially instructors working with freshmen and sophomores "cause those are the ones who aren't aware of like half the resources that you know, we offer, and by the time they are, you know, seniors, they have no idea." They suggested showing the videos during in-person subject orientations, "introduction to the major" classes, and at campus outreach events, such as "Freshman Preview," as well as working with instructors to include the videos in syllabi or in Canvas course sites in order to boost approachability. Participants also suggested that instructors require students to watch the videos in class to ensure that students do indeed watch the videos.

Education Library

In part two, most participants in the focus groups were unaware that there was an Education Library, and many who had heard of it did not know where it was located on campus. The participants had mixed feelings about the #FacesofNorman campaign. Most participants liked the idea behind the strategy of featuring a student testimonial about the Education Library; however, many thought that the graphics and colors looked outdated and out of style.

The #FacesofNorman testimonials that the participants liked most were ones that directly related to their own personal needs. For example, one testimonial said, "I love the Education Library because there are always empty tables on the second floor, even during exam week"; participants stated that it was very difficult to find a place to study in other libraries. Another testimonial that was well-received was one that said "I love the Education Library because there are computers with double monitors"; this was a feature that most other libraries on campus did not have.

Participants thought that the directional videos were shaky, hard to follow, and generally not very good. One participant suggested including an animated map in the corner of the video showing the location of the actor as they walk towards the Education Library. Another student suggested it would be better to use a split screen with an avatar moving around the map. Participants mentioned having the #FacesofNorman images around campus, including at other libraries, around the large lecture halls in the College of Education, and in the sorority houses and apartments in close proximity to the Education Library.

Implementation and Future Plans

Based on the feedback from the focus groups, the project team is collaborating with colleagues to implement several strategies to assist in video promotion. These strategies are highlighted below and include launching and developing a social media campaign, integrating videos specifically targeting faculty into Canvas, enhancing the video quality, and embedding videos within subject-related LibGuides. Further, the Education Library is planning to implement strategies to promote the #FacesofNorman campaign and the directional videos.

Library West

Social media campaign.

Following the focus groups, Library West launched a social media campaign called "Librarians Are on Your Team." First, all the profile videos were uploaded to the library's YouTube page in September 2018. Thus far, the nine videos have been viewed 1,090 times. For universal accessibility, all of the videos include closed captioning. To promote the videos, posts were created for both Facebook and Twitter with brief descriptions including what the video was about, who was featured, and what they do at the university. Additionally, relevant departments or colleges were tagged in these posts. For example, the Spanish and Portuguese Studies Department was tagged on the post for the European studies librarian. Facebook posts linked directly to the YouTube video, whereas on Twitter, the MPEG-4 file was uploaded directly to the Tweet. This proved to be a very successful strategy because the video would automatically play as people scrolled down Library West's Twitter profile, or whenever this post showed up in a follower's feed. For instance, the Journalism and Mass Communications librarian's video was viewed 741 times on Twitter vs. 214 times on YouTube. Similarly, the business librarian's video was viewed 363 times on Twitter and only 69 times on YouTube. It is important to note that we did not promote all the videos on social media as originally planned, but the team intends to promote the videos again in fall 2019.

Canvas integration and LibGuides.

Librarians from Library West are working with the Libraries Instruction Committee to integrate the videos into course sites on the Canvas learning management system. This step is part of a larger effort to incorporate librarians more fully into courses by including them in course websites hosted on Canvas. Indeed, librarians now have the ability to be present in course sites in a campus-assigned "librarian" role or via a "Library Research" button that links to their LibGuides. The librarian role, which is voluntary, is clearly defined and recognizable by students. By integrating librarians into classes in this way, librarians and instructors are able to collaboratively support students in their research process. The Library Research button allows LibGuides to be embedded in a Canvas course site;

librarians can modify the metadata of their guides to have them readily available to be embedded for specific courses.

In addition to having the LibGuides embedded in Canvas course sites, the team is encouraging subject specialists to embed their profile videos into their own LibGuides. That way, whenever students access a subject-specific LibGuide, they have the opportunity to watch the video of the subject specialist. The Spanish Studies Guide, for instance, has been viewed more than a hundred times in Canvas, and its homepage features the profile video of the European studies librarian. As more LibGuides are embedded into Canvas courses, this is yet another opportunity for librarians to reach students.

Target faculty.

The team is encouraging subject specialists to work with faculty in their subject areas to embed the video profiles into their course websites and/or show videos to their students on "syllabus day" during the first week of classes. One librarian successfully accomplished this in an introduction to the major class, an online class of 200 students. Anecdotally, students have stopped the librarian and mentioned that they saw her video. This strategy seems to be effective, but it may be difficult to get buy-in from faculty.

Video remix.

The team intends to apply for an internally funded grant to hire a graduate intern with video editing experience to assist with remixing the videos into montages or GIFs, allowing content to be shared via social media in a new way. This internship would be part of the Libraries Graduate Student Internship Program, which provides semester-based graduate student internships in collaboration with academic units through a competitive application process.

Education Library

#FacesofNorman.

The Education Library plans to continue the #FacesofNorman campaign and will look for ways to improve the testimonials. Some ideas that participants suggested were to use less text overall, find words that grab readers' attention, develop attractive graphics, and focus on services that make the Education Library unique from other libraries on campus. The participants suggested using the images as posters, which could be placed outside the Education Library near the College of Education, in locations that students frequent in close proximity to the library such as sorority houses, and even advertising farther away on campus. However, participants pointed out that the posters would not make much difference to students who have not heard about or know the location of the Education Library, so a balance between the two suggestions would need to be struck.

Directional videos.

The participants said that the videos showing how to locate the Education Library were a good concept but felt the videos were not of good quality. One participant commented that the videos were "a little shaky." Another said, "it gives you a general idea of where it is...I think I would not have found that on my own...at all," while another participant pointed out that the video "didn't really show where it is." These comments make sense, as the videos were originally created by a library employee using amateur equipment. Based on feedback from this project, the Education Library has decided to explore the possibility of hiring a professional to create an updated video.

In addition, participants stated it would be useful for the Education Library to install signs around the College of Education complex with arrows and text that says "Library this way." Even participants in the focus group who had classes in the College of Education building had no idea that a library was there and lamented that, had they known earlier that there was a library so close, go there would have been much easier than walking back to the other side of campus. One student stated, "I wish I would've known, I lived on that side of campus last semester."

Conclusion

Collaboration between librarians and patrons can be an effective tool to create successful marketing campaigns, but it is also important to gather and consider user feedback to properly reach that audience, as well as conduct assessment to discern the efficacy and impact. Were the public relations students always spot-on when it came to the tactics and messaging that would resonate the most with their peers? Not always, as undergraduate students are not a "one size fits all" community. But such partnerships did yield multiple strategies and insights not previously considered by library staff and successfully reenergized marketing and public relations efforts for both branches.

The follow-up assessment of the recommended strategies in the form of surveys and focus groups resulted in additional data that allowed library staff to truly understand their users on a deeper level. For example, students are not going to ask a librarian for help if they don't know the extent of the librarian's role and what that means to their own academic success. Furthermore, they are not necessarily interested in viewing library marketing content through social media but are more likely to seek out library services and resources when advised by a friend or instructor. Students identify with messages on topics that impact them the most, especially available study space, proximity to home or class, and technology (such as scanners or double monitors).

The focus groups presented two limitations to the study: 1) The sample size was relatively small with only 14 total participants, and 2) only two disciplines were represented among the participants, humanities and STEM. None of the participants were education majors or first-year students. Additionally, the survey sample was limited to students who were already at the library for an event. However, consistent trends persisted across all three focus groups, surveys distributed by

library staff, and data collected by the PR Campaigns students. Future research could include larger surveys and focus groups after adjusting content and implementing feedback from student participants.

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Appendix: Focus Group Questions

Before Showing Librarian Profile Videos:

1. What do you think a librarian does?

2. Have you ever asked a librarian for help? And if so for what? In person or online?

3. Do you know you have a subject specialist (a librarian that offers expert research help for your major or college)?

After Showing Librarian Profile Videos:

1. What are your views of librarians now? Do you feel like you would be more willing to reach out to a librarian for help?

2. Did anything surprise you? If so, what?

3. Do you think these videos are an effective way to promote subject librarians to your peers? Why or why not?

4. If so, what do you think is the best way to get these videos out to students? Show in class? Post in Canvas? Via email? Social Media – if so, which platform?

Before showing Education Library directional videos and content from the #FacesofNorman campaign:

1. Do you know the Education Library exists? Have you ever been there? If not, why not?

2. If so, describe what your visit was like – what did you notice?

After showing videos and #FacesofNorman content:

1. What are your thoughts about the Education Library now?

2. Did anything surprise you?

3. Based on what we've shown you...would you visit the Education Library in the future? Why or why not?

4. Do you think these posters and directional videos are an effective way to promote the Education Library to your peers? Why or why not?

5. What's the best way to get this content out? Social Media? Via Email? Distributing flyers? Hanging posters?