

Out-of-the-Box Library Marketing: Examining Third-Party Materials that Promote Electronic Resources

Hannah McKelvey

Electronic Resources & Discovery Services Librarian
Montana State University

Rachelle McLain

Collection Development Librarian,
Montana State University

Abstract: With so many online resources at our fingertips, balancing the brand identity of libraries and third-party resource providers has long been a concern. Existing research addresses the impact of promotional materials branded by third-party resource providers with little customizable space for libraries to add their brands. This article complements past research by reviewing the effectiveness of physical and digital marketing materials created by library resource providers to help libraries market their electronic content. We assess the contents of these marketing toolkits and survey librarians at academic, public, medical, law, and other types of libraries about how they use these promotional items, asking them to comment on their design and to express how well these materials link resources such as databases to the library.

Keywords: marketing; library vendors; library branding; electronic resources; marketing toolkits

Introduction

Montana State University (MSU) Library, like many other libraries, holds several outreach events each year to promote library services and highlight online resources. At these events, library staff hand out items from a variety of third-party resource providers, including notepads, pens, USB drives, water bottles, posters, bookmarks, and more. As these items are generously given to us by third parties, they showcase the resource providers' logos

and not the library's. Because of this, our patrons frequently mistake us for employees of a resource provider rather than library employees.

With so many online resources at our fingertips, balancing the brand identities of libraries and third-party resource providers is not a localized issue and has long been a concern for the library profession (Chandratre & Chandratre, 2015; Cartolano, 2019). Much of the recent research about marketing online resources tends to focus on libraries creating their own in-house marketing materials, such as postcards or brochures (Kennedy, 2011; Chandratre & Chandratre, 2015; Ndungu, 2016). Additionally, it addresses the importance of the library as a brand and the impact of third-party interfaces that offer little to no customizable space for libraries to add their brand (Alford, 2009; Frumkin & Reese, 2011; Marcin, 2018). When libraries can brand online resource interfaces with their own logos, it ensures that during electronic delivery to end users, the library's role in providing access is recognized (Alford, 2009; Frumkin & Reese, 2011). Robert Cartolano's 2019 post for *Scholarly Kitchen* detailed the approach Columbia University took to work with third-party providers to improve library branding on their websites. Cartolano argues that the success of libraries in providing seamless access has contributed, in part, to the invisible role they have between third parties and library users (2019). Cartolano also acknowledges that, because of poor library branding, faculty and staff are often unable to recognize when their university library has paid for access to an online resource (2019).

In a 2011 study, Marie Kennedy analyzed 24 articles published from 1994-2009 to gain a better understanding of how libraries were marketing their electronic resources. The corpus of articles analyzed included marketing efforts of college, medical, public, and university libraries. Kennedy's findings showed that the distribution of tangible items was one of the most widely used marketing techniques to familiarize library patrons with specific resources (2011). However, Kennedy does not specify whether these physical items came from a resource provider or whether they were created internally by the library. Kennedy concludes that giving away objects is one of the most popular ways for public libraries to market their services (2011). This makes sense given that the promotional materials industry is worth \$24 billion (Segran, 2018). Jerry McLaughlin (2011) also notes several reasons why swag is important. The term "swag" usually refers to a variety of products that can be branded with a logo and constitutes a much cheaper option than other marketing avenues, (e.g., commercials, radio spots). Furthermore, it aligns with "what researchers call the reciprocity effect – the conditioned cultural response to return the kindness of a gift"

(McLaughlin, 2011, para. 7). He also points out that physical promotional materials distributed at events result in human interaction (McLaughlin, 2011).

However, current research fails to explicitly discuss the impact on libraries who use physical and digital marketing materials created by third-party resource providers. Today, many major companies that work with libraries have created their own library marketing departments and offer premade marketing resources and toolkits to their library clientele to assist in promoting and marketing the electronic content they sell to libraries. This movement is possibly inspired by the early efforts of Random House, which may have been the first major book publisher to create such a department to design materials specifically targeted at libraries. Random House is widely acknowledged for changing how book publishers work with libraries, having hired former librarian Marcia Purcell to spearhead its newly-formed library marketing department in April 1991 (Patrick, 2011).

In 2013, a questionnaire distributed by Mark Aaron Polger and Karen Okamoto (2013), which was intended to assess how librarians conduct marketing and promotional activities, found that “frequently cited challenges were juggling many responsibilities at once, ... lack of funding, ... lack of time, ... and lack of staffing/resources” (p. 246). The efforts of external resource providers to help create marketing materials could alleviate some of these pressures and help libraries bring awareness to the electronic products they have purchased without having to spend additional money on generating their own promotional content. In addition to saving money, librarians may see a savings of their own time in not having to create marketing materials themselves. Another possible benefit for librarians is having access to marketing materials created by design and marketing professionals.

In 2010, Cole, Graves, and Cipkowski (2010) note that the vendors in attendance at the 2009 NASIG conference “indicated that cooperative relationships between libraries and vendors could help increase usage of databases” (p.186). Nearly three decades ago, William Fisher (1993) described this cooperative library and vendor relationship as “good, harmonious, and peaceful or bad, acrimonious, and a constant battle” (p.61), stressing that the relationship must be maintained for the benefit of a third party. With many libraries spending less on print items and buying more digital products, libraries and resource providers must continue to work together for the good of those using the services and products. However, online and physical marketing materials created by third parties often do not allow for customization, so library patrons do not know that their library is responsible for providing access to a given product, thus diminishing their awareness of the library’s role.

Joseph Esposito writes, “if publishers’ brands have little or no value, then publishers can be disintermediated” (2010). Likewise, this applies to libraries.

Methodology

This project assesses the usefulness of self-service marketing materials and promotional toolkits created by several library resource providers (Appendix A), intended to help libraries market their electronic content. We chose to analyze resource providers who have self-serviceable toolkits that allow a library employee to access the marketing material directly from the resource provider’s website without having to contact the provider for assistance. In addition to analyzing online toolkits, we also conducted a survey (Appendix B) of library employees to ask how they were using this material, whether using these materials actually saves libraries time, how effective they are, and what costs are associated with using the materials, such as printing fees.

We utilized several local, regional, and national listservs to conduct a survey asking fellow library employees to share their experiences with marketing materials created by external resource providers, including ALCTS-COLLDV (ALCTS Collection Management Section list), ERI-L (Electronic Resources in Libraries list), WIRED-MT-L(Montana’s academic, public, and special libraries list), COLL-LIB (ACRL’s college librarians list), PNLA (Pacific Northwest Library Association list), and Law-Lib (law librarians list). The survey was open for two weeks in the spring of 2019 and consisted of 11 questions (Appendix B). In total, we received 93 responses. Respondents included library employees with many different job titles: electronic resources librarian, reference librarian, regional librarian, library director, associate director, reference & instruction librarian, law librarian, outreach & electronic resources librarian, adult services librarian, public services librarian, web services librarian, medical librarian, managing librarian, technical services librarian, collection management librarian, and serials librarian. In the following sections we synthesize opinions of library employees regarding the language used in vendor marketing material.

Analysis and Findings

Marketing Toolkits

We chose to analyze the marketing toolkits of 10 well-known resource providers that many libraries have contracts with: Adam Matthew Digital, Alexander Street Press, EBSCO, Elsevier, Gale, ProQuest, Springer Nature, Taylor & Francis, Sage, and Wiley (Appendix A, Table A1). In our analysis of these resource providers’ toolkits, we identified the toolkit name

and direct access URL, the types of content available (e.g., flyers, posters, web banners), a description of the toolkit (if one was provided), and whether the content had been developed in a modifiable format, such as Microsoft Word, so that it could easily be edited and customized (Appendix A, Table A2). We identified whether the material included any terms that might be considered library jargon or used the words “library” or “librarian” in any form to highlight the role of the library in providing access to the material (Appendix A, Table A3). We were also interested in determining whether resource providers offered physical materials that a library could request to hand out at an event (e.g., pens, bags, notepads) and whether it was obvious that the library had to make such a request from the provider’s website or whether they needed to contact the provider another way, such as emailing, calling their representative, or reaching out via a general customer service email or phone number.

EBSCO, Elsevier, Springer Nature, and Taylor & Francis all use the term “promote” and/or “promotional” in their toolkit names. Adam Matthew Digital, Gale, and Wiley use the term “marketing” in their toolkit names. Alexander Street Press and Sage refer to their toolkits using the term “resource center.” Sage, ProQuest, and Wiley include “librarian” and “library” in their toolkit names.

We could not locate a description of the toolkits for Alexander Street Press or EBSCO. For the other providers, the descriptions of the toolkits include the following similar terms and phrases, designed to help libraries endorse their products on campuses or in the workplace: “promote,” “raise awareness,” “sharing,” “informing,” “encouraging,” “raise visibility,” and “spread the word.” The narrative descriptions of the toolkits are similar from provider to provider. They all state that they have created a variety of items and ways that the toolkits help libraries promote the purchased resources.

The dedicated online toolkits where libraries can retrieve marketing materials for their use provide varying levels of customization, with materials existing in many different formats: PDF, MS Word, Google Docs, and JPEG. Most of the toolkits had similar types of content or materials in them: Tutorials, bookmarks, flyers, posters, and web banners were among the most common.

We identified the location of the toolkits on the providers’ websites and read through the descriptions of the toolkits, looking for examples of common words and phrases that we identified as library jargon. We defined library jargon as those words or phrases that are known commonly among librarians, library staff, publishers, and vendors, but not

necessarily known among the patrons they serve. Furthermore, although the words themselves might be relatively common, we considered them jargon in the context of being used to define library resources. We found that the words “library” or “librarian” were often included in the marketing materials, though not consistently and only on select materials. Common terminology we saw included “free,” “courtesy,” “leading resource,” “leading original research,” “trusted resource,” “your library,” “our library,” and “access anytime, anywhere.”

During our analysis, we noted that, while some resource providers can assist librarians and instructors with marketing requests for things such as course alignment services (e.g., resource providers working directly with an instructor to assist in aligning their resources with course content) and custom portals, the toolkits analyzed in this study only include materials for use without resource provider assistance. We found that it is simple to acquire physical swag from most large vendors and publishers via email, but wanted to analyze the resource providers included in this study (Appendix A) to see if it was easy to request physical swag through their websites. We found that none of them allowed this except for Adam Matthew Digital, which allows users to submit requests for batches of printed posters.

Survey Results and Findings

Nearly 51% of our survey respondents identified as employees of academic libraries. We also received responses from public libraries (22%), law libraries (18%), medical libraries (4%), and other libraries (5%). Of the libraries who responded, staff size varied greatly, from under 25 employees to over 50 employees. Only 20% of respondents had more than 50 full- or part-time employees, with the majority (31%) having more than five but fewer than 25 full- or part-time employees. Most librarians who use vendor-created marketing materials are from academic libraries. However, law libraries and public libraries also use them. Nearly 80% of respondents, regardless of the type of library at which they work, have an ad hoc approach to marketing. Most of the libraries in our survey do not have a formal plan to use marketing materials.

What type of library do you work at?

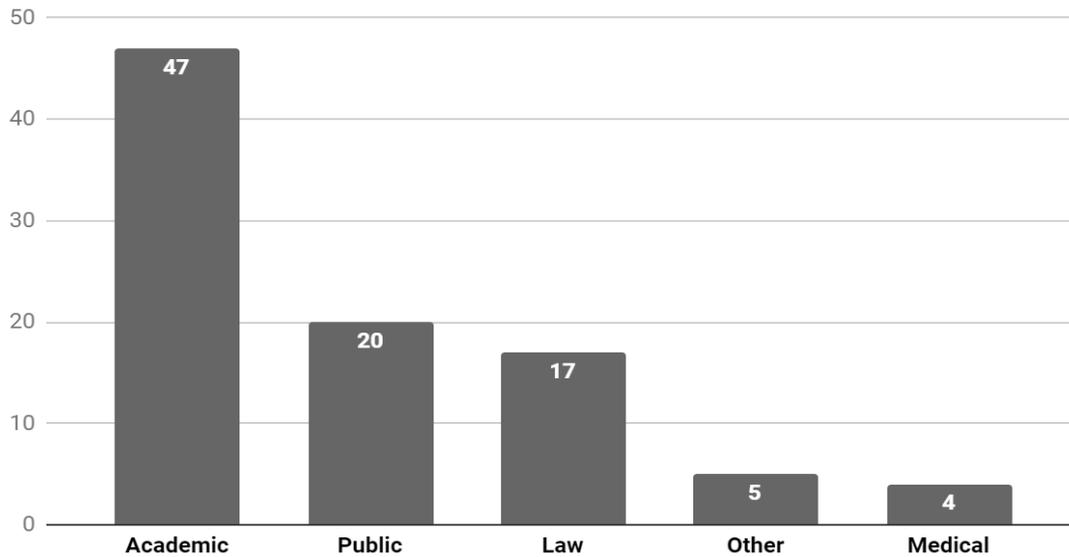


Figure 1: Types of Libraries of Survey Respondents

Note. In total, 93 respondents completed the survey, with most respondents identifying as employees of academic libraries.

How many employees work at your library?

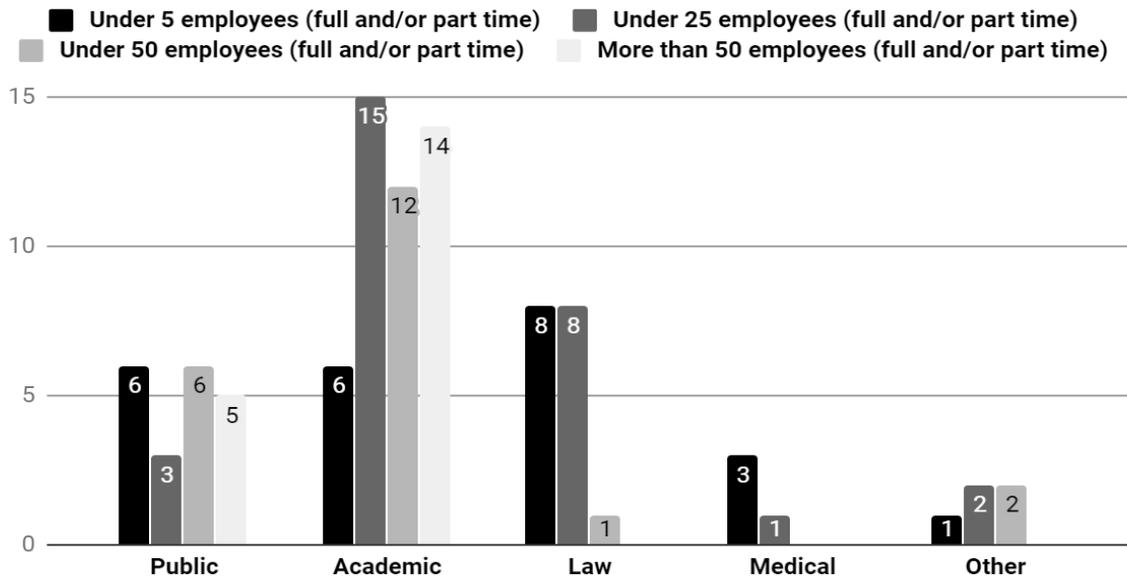


Figure 2: Employees at Library, by Library Type and Employee Quantity

Note. Staff size varies greatly from under 25 employees to over 50 employees. Only 20% of respondents have more than 50 full- or part-time employees, with the majority (31%) having more than five but fewer than 25 full- or part-time employees.

How would you summarize your current efforts regarding marketing your electronic resources?

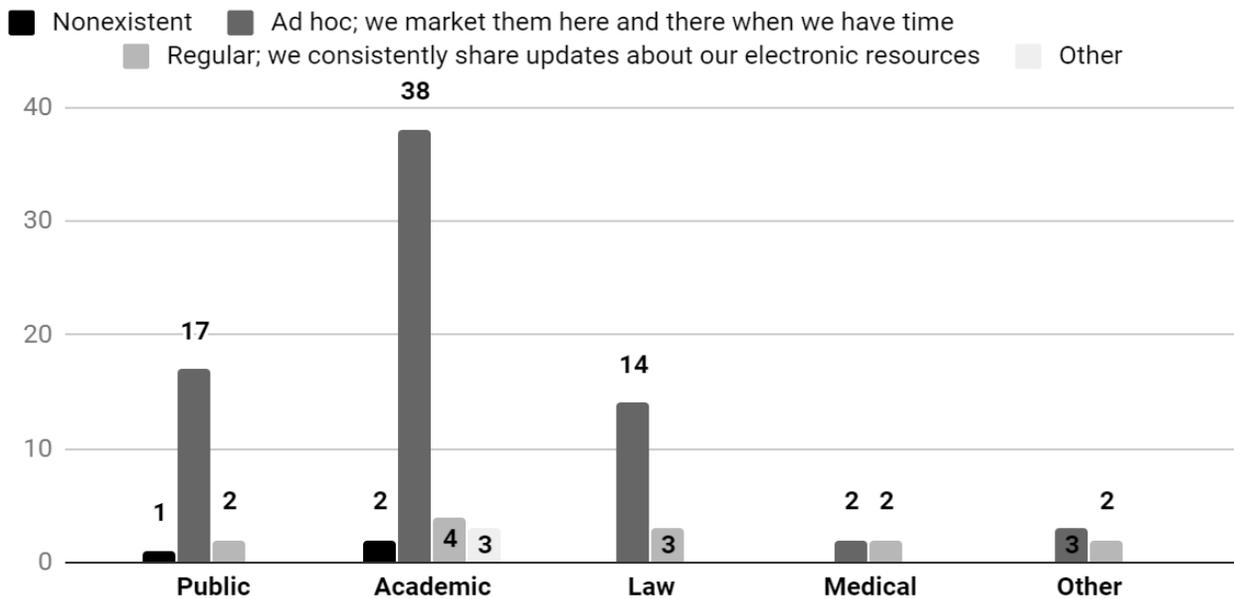


Figure 3: How Libraries Market Electronic Resources

Note. Nearly 80% of respondents, regardless of the type of library at which they are employed, have an ad hoc approach to marketing. Most libraries in our survey do not have a formal plan to use marketing materials.

The types of materials used by libraries vary, as well. While most use physical swag (pens, flyers, brochures, posters, bags, bookmarks) over digital promotional items, vendor and publisher electronic materials do get a fair amount of use. Libraries will use pre-created social media posts, email and press release templates, logos, web banners, tutorials, and videos. The most popular items used across all libraries are flyers and/or posters (54%), and the least used are blog templates (6%) and press release templates (8%). Public library respondents tend to use bookmarks (60%), flyers/posters (50%), and brochures (45%) the most. Academic library respondents reported using flyers/posters (57%), physical swag (53%), and brochures (51%) the most. Law libraries reported using product descriptions most

frequently (53%), while medical library respondents reported using email templates the most (75%). Items supplied by EBSCO (35%), ProQuest (24%), Gale (20%), and Kanopy (14%) are the most used by all types of respondents.

	Public	Academic	Law	Medical	Other	Combined Total
Blog Templates	1	3	1	1	0	6
Bookmarks	12	19	3	1	2	37
Brochures	9	24	5	1	2	41
Email Templates	2	8	5	3	0	18
Flyers/Posters	10	27	8	2	3	50
Logos	8	17	6	1	2	34
Postcards	4	5	1	0	0	10
Press Release Templates	4	3	0	0	0	7
Product Descriptions	5	18	8	2	2	35
Social Media Posts	7	13	2	0	0	22
Physical Swag	6	25	6	1	2	40
Tutorials	4	13	9	2	1	29
Videos	3	9	3	0	2	17
Web Banners	2	8	0	1	1	12
Other(s)	1	2	2	0	1	6

Table 1: Types of Library Swag

Note. The most popular items used across all libraries are flyers and/or posters, with 54% of respondents indicating they have used them. The least used items are blog templates (6%) and press release templates (8%).

	Public	Academic	Law	Medical	Other	Combined Total
Adam Matthew Digital	0	3	0	0	0	3
Alexander Street Press	0	6	1	0	0	7
Clarivate	0	4	0	0	0	4
Credo	0	4	0	0	0	4
EBSCO	7	21	0	3	2	33
Elsevier	0	7	2	1	1	11
Gale	4	14	1	0	0	19
Kanopy	2	11	0	0	0	13
ProQuest	3	15	2	0	2	22
Sage	2	6	0	0	0	8
Springer Nature	0	4	0	0	0	4
Taylor & Francis	0	2	0	0	0	2
Wiley	0	4	0	1	1	6
Other(s)	10	16	12	1	2	41

Table 2: Swag Supplied by Vendors

Note. Items supplied by EBSCO (35%), ProQuest (24%), Gale (20%), and Kanopy (14%) are the most used by all types of respondents.

Additionally, 23% of all libraries responded that they had never used vendor-created marketing materials. Of this subset of respondents, 47% were academic libraries, 14% were law libraries, 10% identified as “other” libraries, and 29% were from public libraries. Respondents’ comments on their reasons for not using vendor-created marketing materials included lack of time, lack of staffing to manipulate or use the materials, lack of resources required (such as high-quality printing), the inability to edit materials, the inability to find items they want to use, and the unawareness that marketing materials even existed.

Even though some of the resource providers were listed as options in the survey, respondents still listed them as “Other.” Those responses were not integrated with the results and were only counted under “Other.” Resource providers listed under “Other” included Routledge, Third Iron (BrowZine), Freegal, Wolters Kluwer, Thomson Reuters, Bloomberg BNA, LexisNexis, OverDrive, World Book Encyclopedia, World Trade Press, HeinOnline, RBdigital, JSTOR, West Publisher (Thomson Reuters), Infobase (Films on Demand), McGraw Hill, Ovid, STAT!Ref, Taylor & Francis, Oxford University Press, Cambridge University

Press, Springshare, Lynda.com, National Library of Medicine, BiblioBoard, Naxos Music Library, cloudLibrary, Mango, The New York Times, Digital Public Library of America, Westlaw, VoxGov, Bloomberg Law, West Academic, hoopla, Axis 360, Center for Computer-Assisted Legal Instruction, Clarivate, and Credo Reference.

Summary of Comments

In addition to asking multiple choice questions in the survey, we asked respondents to view five promotional posters created by various resource providers. In general, respondents preferred color images that looked modern and contained simple designs. Images that limited the amount of text were also popular. If text *was* present in images, then respondents were wary of jargon – terms and phrases that librarians would be familiar with but that patrons might not understand. Librarians who took this survey tended to have the opinion that their users (community patrons, community college students, university undergrads, graduate students, and lawyers) would not know what some of the terms, regularly used by publishers and library staff, meant. This unfamiliarity with specialized terms could lead to confusion among patrons as they may not associate the library with a resource and would not know to seek assistance from the library. Examples of library jargon used in the sample marketing images we included in our survey include the names of resource providers, “hidden web,” “CrossRef,” “concurrent users,” and “DRM free.” One respondent pointed out that the posters where the resource provider logos were “too big” and “prominent” would mean nothing to users, as they do not care what vendor or publisher libraries use to provide a service. Another respondent noted their concern that resource providers may use terms that library staff do not regularly use with their patrons. This could lead to users not making the connection between resources and the libraries who not only provide paid access to these resources but support for them, as well.

Images used on promotional posters that elicit humor or are associated with fun are also noteworthy among librarians. However, a few respondents noted they would not use materials that were “corny.” Finding the balance between what users would find amusing but not cringe-worthy is challenging. Our survey takers responded well to graphics that were “engaging,” “eye-catching,” “hip,” “dynamic,” and “clean.” Furthermore, they note that imagery must be “modern.” Respondents also noted that students today, who are used to top-notch digital graphics, would not respond to outdated images. It is also imperative that the images used on posters do not elicit boredom.



Figure 4: Promotional Posters

Note. Survey results revealed that the image on the left was the least popular poster and was perceived as dated and text-heavy, while the image of the crying woman was the most eye-catching and popular design.

Most of our respondents want the ability to customize vendor- and publisher-created marketing materials. Librarians want to add their choice of colors, their library logos, their university logos, their library contact information, their library website information, and, in some cases, a QR code. A respondent commented they would want to “edit the language” on a poster. Another commented that they would not use the material at all if editing were not an option. A few users wrote that they prefer materials that advertise more broadly versus just one database, such as resources covering a topic or subject area in general. One user commented that they would edit the URLs to include their library’s proxy information. It is very important to librarians that their users identify resources in relationship to the library, not just the resource on its own. A respondent noted that, should the library attach its logo on a marketing item, it would appear to the user that the library had created the marketing item and not the vendor or publisher. Another respondent, while wanting the ability to

customize, also questioned where the customization would appear. They commented that the library's logo would need to be able to be "integrated seamlessly" into the graphic.

Another theme seen in the comments is the importance of posters, if used, not resembling advertisements. They note that there is the potential for patrons to view them as spam and ignore them. There is a concern that posters like this may not look like they typically belong in a library. What is positive about the comments that respondents took the time to write is that their users are first on their minds. Librarians from all types of libraries are mindful of their patrons' needs, how they are using the library, and what they will respond to. While it is not possible for library staff to anticipate their users' every need, our respondents are representative of a population that works its best to do so. The librarians who responded to our survey are cognizant of their audience and how their audience views and responds to marketing.

Conclusion

It is important to libraries that marketing materials created by resource providers are customizable so that users can connect the resource to the library. The inclusion of specific language (e.g., "at your library" or the specific library's name) to tie a resource to the library can help users. Vendors and libraries will agree that if a patron needs assistance with a resource, knowing that the resource is provided by the library will lead them to getting help quickly. Additionally, usage of the resource can potentially increase, which both libraries and resource providers like to see.

Materials should be up-to-date with a modern look and feel, designed for an audience used to high-quality graphics. All materials should avoid jargon and technical terms unfamiliar to library patrons. Doing so can lead to closer relationships between librarians and vendors. The two can work together to identify jargon, unfamiliar terms, and what is appropriate to include on marketing materials. Resource providers should keep their marketing materials up-to-date and regularly remove materials from their toolkits that do not fit those criteria.

While most of our respondents were from academic libraries, responses from the majority include those from public, medical, and law libraries too. Our survey identified flyers, posters, brochures, pens, notepads, and bookmarks as the physical marketing materials most used by libraries. Logos, product descriptions, social media posts, and tutorials were the non-physical materials used most by libraries. Blogs, email and press release templates,

postcards, web banners, and videos appear to be the marketing material least used by libraries.

According to our survey, the vendors that provide the most marketing physical materials (i.e., swag) to all types of library respondents are EBSCO, Gale, ProQuest, and Kanopy. What do these vendors have in common? It is possible that their vendor representatives have closer relationships with their libraries, and therefore there is more of an opportunity to provide items. These are also larger corporations who may have staff devoted solely to marketing. Additionally, we wonder if there is a difference between being a publisher and being a vendor regarding the amount of swag made available to libraries.

Vendors who do not typically have only libraries as their clients (and those that do) have an opportunity to learn about the unique marketing needs of academic, public, law, and medical libraries. Libraries have a unique relationship with their patrons. In the case of our survey, these patrons include academic faculty and students, public library patrons, community college patrons, attorneys and other law staff, and medical staff. Vendors and publishers should differentiate marketing toolkits for different types of libraries, making it easier for library staff to find materials unique to them.

References

- Alford, E. (2009). Promoting and marketing e-resources. *The Serials Librarian*, 57(3), 272-277. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03615260902877084>
- Cartolano, R. (2019, March 20). The library is the brand [Guest post]. *Scholarly Kitchen*, <https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2019/03/20/guest-post-the-library-is-the-brand/?informz>
- Chandratre, S. V., & Chandratre, M. S. (2015). Marketing of library and information services. *Journal of Commerce and Management Thought*, 6(1), 162-175. <https://doi.org/10.5958/0976-478x.2015.00011.7>
- Cole, K., Graves, T., & Cipkowski, P. (2010). Marketing the library in a digital world. *The Serials Librarian*, 58(1-4), 182-187. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03615261003625729>
- Esposito, J. (2010, April 12). Why publishers' brands matter. *Scholarly Kitchen*, <https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2010/04/12/why-publishers-brands-matter/>
- Fisher, W. (1993). A brief history of library-vendor relations since 1950. *Library Acquisitions: Practice & Theory*, 17(1), 61-69. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0364-6408\(93\)90031-Z](https://doi.org/10.1016/0364-6408(93)90031-Z)
- Frumkin, J., & Reese, T. (2011). Provision recognition: Increasing awareness of the library's value in delivering electronic information resources. *Journal of Library Administration*, 51(7-8), 810-819, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2011.601277>
- Kennedy, M. (2011). What are we really doing to market electronic resources? *Library Management*, 32(3), 144-158. <https://doi.org/10.1108/01435121111112862>
- Marcin, S. (2018, March 4-7). *The library is the brand: Managing the library brand across e-resource platforms* [Poster presentation]. Electronic Resources and Libraries Conference, Austin, TX, USA. <https://academiccommons.columbia.edu/doi/10.7916/D8CN8KV8>
- McLaughlin, J. (2011, August 11). Does swag work? *Fast Company*, <https://www.fastcompany.com/1793498/does-swag-work>

Ndungu, M.W. (2016). Promotion of electronic resources in academic libraries on a minimal budget. *International Information & Library Review*, 48(2), 94-101.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/10572317.2016.1176449>

Patrick, D. (2011, December 2). Pioneering library-publisher relations. *Publishers Weekly*,

<https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publishing-and-marketing/article/49721-pioneering-library-publisher-relations.html>

Polger, M.A., & Okamoto, K. (2013). Who's spinning the library? Responsibilities of academic librarians who promote. *Library Management*, 34(3), 236-253.

<https://doi.org/10.1108/01435121311310914>

Segran, E. (2018, November 2). It's time to stop spending billions on cheap conference swag.

Fast Company, <https://www.fastcompany.com/90260185/its-time-to-stop-spending-billions-on-cheap-conference-swag>



Copyright: © 2020 McKelvey & McLain. 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.