The Accidental Marketer: Selling Your Library

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What Is an "Accidental" Marketer?

An "accidental" marketer is someone who started working in libraries without intending to do marketing and publicity work. Oftentimes, people are asked to make fliers for an event or to help plan a program, then they get pulled into doing more and more publicity. They often have little or no training for these tasks. Like so many "other duties as assigned," you end up doing this sort of work without meaning to do and without actually knowing how. If you've found yourself in such a position, then you're an accidental marketer. And you're not alone!

What Does "Marketing" Really Mean?

Many people think they're doing "marketing" but they're really not, because that word is used interchangeably with other words. So that you can make sure you're doing "true marketing"—the kind that really works—I'll tell you the real deal.

+ **Marketing** is taking steps to move goods from producers to consumers. It's determining what people want, delivering it, evaluating consumer satisfaction, and then periodically updating that whole process.

+ **Public Relations** is a planned, long-term communication program (via various media) that has a goal of convincing the public to have good will toward something. It's helping people to think well of an organization, product, or concept.

+ **Publicity** is sending a message via official channels such as news releases, newsletters, press conferences, etc.

+ **Promotion** is furthering the growth or development of a product or service. It's not just aiming toward good will; it's encouraging people to use it by telling those people how it would benefit them.

+ **Branding** is a process with dual objectives: 1) establishing a strong link between a company and its logo/typeface/picture or name/phrase, and 2) developing the “personality” of your product and service, building the characteristics that should come to mind when people think of you. Branding helps build loyalty.

+ **Advocacy** is getting people who have good opinions of your organization to speak to others on its behalf, to convince other people of its value.

+ **Advertising** is calling attention to something through paid announcements.
The Cycle of True Marketing

Constantly evaluate changing environments

A. Do in-depth market research
B. Segment into target markets
C. Set goals
D. Ask targets what they want
E. Overcome products/services
F. ID competition
G. Plan evaluation
H. Promote products/services
I. Deliver products/services
J. Get feedback
K. Study feedback
L. Go back to improve steps

Write marketing plan
Strategies, Tools, and Communication Skills You Should Use

**Strategies**
Target your efforts toward like-minded groups of people.

Use surveys to ask for patron opinions.

Operate on evidence-based information.

Remember: It's all about the customer!

Don't overlook the need for internal marketing: Your own staff members and administrators are among your most important target groups.

Treat members of the media as a separate target market, not just as your conduit to the public.

Never guess what people want when you can ask.

Don't wait until you're in trouble to start building partnerships and looking for help. Get to know people from your target audiences over a period of time so that, when you need to ask for their opinions, votes, or advocacy, you already have a positive relationship.

Start at the end and build backwards. What outcome do you want to end up with? Think about who can help you reach that goal, then build a relationship.

Always track your results and evaluate them to see what works and what doesn't. Your process needs to be fluid so you can change and improve easily when necessary.

**Tools**
Use your patron information to its fullest capacity. What attributes do your patrons share? Map out where they live (and notice where they don't).

Find out what sorts of usage reports that your vendors can give you, and make the most of them. According to your ILS, what types of things are used most frequently? What is seldom used? Do you have sets of very frequent and very infrequent borrowers? How much is each of your databases used? What days and times of day see your highest usage?

Use your server logs to check for search trails and patterns. What are users' major search destinations? Do people get to them quickly or do they come in roundabout
ways through unrelated pages? You may need to promote certain resources to make them easier to find.

Study your reference question statistics. Are there any frequently asked questions or major topics that expose a certain information need?

Pay special attention to customer feedback, suggestion boxes (physical and online), survey results, and website comments. These are primary sources of information telling you what people want.

Find out what sort of data your city / university / corporation has on your area and its residents / employees. City planning info can affect your collection development and service decisions. Ditto for projections of growth in your county, info about students expected in the next 5 to 10 years, or information about company employees.

There are many published reports about library funding, computer usage, public opinions, etc. Sites of organizations like ALA, WebJunction, Outsell, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation all offer plenty of data for the taking. It's not specific to your own user population, of course, but it can be very useful for presentations or influential speeches you may give to potential partners or advocates.

**Communication Skills**

Communicate with each target audience in the way that works for its members. Different groups of people require different messages sent through different mediums.

Learn about word-of-mouth (WOM) marketing. It's more than hoping other people will help you spread the word. WOM uses its own plan, where you identify influential people, ask for their opinions (as representatives of their target groups), then work with them to design a specific message, and ask them to spread it via their contacts and influence. WOM is about purposefully building relationships and training a few select advocates to help spread key messages for your library.

Role-play with colleagues to practice asking for things until it feels more natural.

Don't be shy about meeting people and asking for information or assistance. Don't feel as if the library is a charitable cause. Remember, libraries are pillars of society; they are respected and reputable. When you're asking for people to work with you for the good of the library, remind them that libraries are positive forces in society, and that their work helps to build a more-literate, better-educated population that supports our democracy and our economy. Libraries build communities.