

ACRL Public Relations Award Submission Narrative

Milner Library Illinois State University

October, 2004

Milner Library serves the students, faculty and staff of Illinois State University as well as the surrounding community of Bloomington-Normal, which has a population of approximately 100,000. The University is centrally located between Chicago and St. Louis and enrolls 20,281 students from 41 states and 66 countries.

A survey of university faculty and students was conducted in the fall of 1999 with the help of the University of Illinois' Library Research Center and funded in part by a grant from the Illinois State Library. The survey measured overall satisfaction of library services delivered to students, faculty, and staff. A portion of the survey measured awareness of services offered by Milner Library. All faculty and a random sampling of students were surveyed. In all, 434 faculty and 455 students responded. Results of the survey were received in the fall of 2000.

Results of the survey showed that many faculty and students did not recognize library services currently available. The comment section of the survey repeatedly requested that the library offer services that were already being offered! Specifically, services that were undervalued or not acknowledged included librarian assistance, the breadth of electronic resources and general reference help. It was obvious that the library needed to do a better job of marketing its services as well as its value to the university community.

No one Milner Library faculty or staff member was assigned responsibility for library public relations. Up to this point, public relations was done on an "as needed" basis by anyone who thought to do it. The survey results revealed that Milner Library needed a formal public relations program. In April 2001 the dean of the library appointed a librarian to head a public relations program, and in July 2001 the public relations position was made official with the title of Assistant to the Dean for Grant Writing and Public Relations. Having a librarian serving in an official capacity as the public relations representative for Milner Library confirms that public relations is important and valued in an academic library.

Milner Library formed a Public Relations (PR) Committee in 2001, headed by the newly appointed Assistant to the Dean for Grant Writing and Public Relations, to address the need to market or publicize library services. In April 2001 the head of the PR Committee attended an Alliance Library System meeting introducing the American Library Association's campaign @ your library®. The presenter, Deborah Davis, emphasized that libraries are all too often taken for granted, and that ALA's multi-year campaign aimed to increase awareness of all library types. Milner Library's PR Committee enthusiastically resolved to plan Milner's marketing initiatives around the ALA theme. The PR Committee studied the aforementioned survey results and began looking at the services offered by the library that were not recognized or understood by users.

The PR Committee reviewed the library's mission and goals and recommended to library faculty that the goals specifically address Milner's marketing and public relations initiatives. A broadly defined role of the PR committee is to facilitate the overall message of the library's mission statement.

Additionally, marketing statements are included in the library's written goals. Outreach was first included in the library's goals in the 2002-2003 academic year. Specifically, the most relevant goal stated that the Public Relations Committee was to "Increase awareness of Milner Library on the campus and in the community." One way of accomplishing this goal was to sponsor authors that would appeal to the campus as well as the Bloomington-Normal community. Emily McCully, Joseph Bruchac, Joyce Carol Oates, Molly Ivins, and Richard Rodquez were the first five featured authors. Two of these authors were co-sponsored by The Ames Library at Illinois Wesleyan University, which is located only a few blocks from Illinois State University. Milner Library tracks the success of these events, noting increased community interest through the number of telephone, email and in person inquiries and by keeping a spreadsheet of attendance at all author events. (insert #21)

Milner library's goals support "Educating Illinois," Illinois State University's strategic planning document which covers the present to 2010. The library had two representatives on the "Educating Illinois" planning document team. Milner Library is included in ten of the sixteen actions within the document. Two of the actions are

directly tied to the library Public Relations Committee. First, Goal 2: “The national leader known for excellence in undergraduate and graduate education provides the premier undergraduate experience and demonstrates excellence in graduate education and is evidenced by increasing Library support for library collections, instruction, reference and services.” Second, Goal 5: ”The diverse community that fosters teamwork and support among its members increases the participation and achievement of students, faculty, and staff as evidenced by supporting multidisciplinary instruction, scholarship, library and information literacy instruction, and service.” Educating Illinois 2003-2010 can be accessed at <http://www.educatingillinois.ilstu.edu/>

As the campaign developed, more than one @ your library® themes was used. For example, “Power up @ your library®,” selected from among sixty catch phrases submitted by faculty and staff launched National Library Week festivities in 2001. “Exciting things happen @ your library® (insert #14) kicked off the fall semester. It - became obvious after using several diverse messages in front of the @ your library® message that a single branding message would convey the library’s image more clearly. As Beth Dempsey noted in a recent *Library Journal* article “Your library’s brand is the space you’ve captured in the minds of customers—it’s all the things that come to mind, all the expectations they have, when they hear the word *library*.”¹

The challenge, then, was to come up with one overarching message to brand the library in the minds of its users. After much thought the PR Committee along with library faculty and staff chose “Ask a librarian @ your library®” to be the focused message over time. This message places the librarian in the forefront as the first and best stop for information and carries the promise of excellent service. The librarian has the opportunity to offer research assistance, teach information-seeking skills, or find the answers to challenging queries. No matter what the activity or event associated with the library, Milner Librarians and staff are active participants – out on the frontlines or behind the scenes.

For special one time events such as homecoming or free coffee and doughnuts during finals, the @ your library® could be customized to fit the occasion. These single activities are recognized as being a part of the library’s overall campaign; librarians might not be the focus, but they plan, participate in and add value to these activities.

After the primary message was selected, the next step in developing this marketing campaign was to identify users and then to identify the vehicles to reach those users. A spreadsheet was developed to assist in making decisions matching users to media to the message. The spreadsheet is updated several times a year as Milner learns more about its users and how they access information. (insert #1)

Although it is ultimately desirable to appeal to many different constituent groups, the “Ask a Librarian @ your library®” campaign targets primary users, Illinois State University students. The library’s strategy is to use the same message throughout the student’s collegiate experience. For example, when students come to Preview, a two day introduction and orientation to the university and its services the summer before their first semester at Illinois State University, Milner Library participates in the process. Students and their families are introduced to the library and are given a pencil and post-it notes with the “Ask a Librarian @ your library®” imprint (insert # 2). Once on campus, freshmen participate in Passages, a four day orientation to campus life. The library purchases a weekly ad space in the *Planner*, a daily activity calendar given to all freshmen. (insert #3). Additional ad space is purchased in the campus newspaper back-to school issue. (inserts #4 & 5) Milner Library also distributes a door hanger to each resident hall room before students come to campus. (insert #6).

Broadening the message beyond orientation, the “Ask a librarian” is prominently positioned on the library’s home page which introduces the searcher to Milner Library. This “Ask a librarian” message is focused on highlighting library reference desk service, email reference, chat reference, subject specialist librarians, General Research on Demand and frequently asked questions. (inserts #7 & 8)

The “@ your library®” message is tailored each year to fit the university’s homecoming theme. Examples include “Redbird magic @ your library®,” “A Redbird Celebration @ your library®,” “Redbird Roundup @ your library®,” and “Catch the Redbird Spirit @ your library®.” (insert #9). Homecoming was identified in the library’s marketing plan as a way to show university spirit. The last four years the library has participated in the Illinois State University homecoming parade, winning first three times and placing second once in its division.

Special events present other opportunities for Milner Library to customize the @ your library® message. For example, the library reached a milestone when it added its 1.5 millionth volume to the collection. Promotional materials were developed using “1.5 million volumes @ your library®.” (Inserts #10 & 11) The @ your library® message also helped promote visiting authors not part of the Ames Milner/Milner Ames Visiting Author Series. (inserts #12 & 13)

Another special event was the “Evening Study Breaks @ your library®.” In the spring semester of 2004, the Milner Library Public Relations Committee decided to make finals week a little easier for students studying in the library. They planned two evenings of “Study Breaks” providing doughnuts, pastries, coffee, hot chocolate and hot teas. Library faculty and staff volunteered to work at the tables passing out refreshments to students. The Milner PR Committee solicited donations from area businesses. “Study Breaks” were well received by students; many commented on how much they appreciated having a snack in the library while studying for finals. This event was another way Milner Library involved librarians and staff in a special event. (insert #15)

The Campaign for Illinois State University, “Redefining Normal,” was adapted as “Redefining Normal @ your library®.” This message is communicated as “Service is still the top priority @ your library®,” “@ your library®, we are defining service more broadly than ever before,” and, “Campus partners can create a new sense of community @ your library®” throughout Milner Library’s brochure designed for the campaign. (insert #16) To date, this campaign has raised approximately 2.3 million dollars for the library.

Milner Library’s outreach and marketing efforts have been recognized at the local, regional, state and national levels. As word of Milner’s successful marketing efforts has spread, Milner Library librarians have been asked to speak at several conferences and workshops, Toni Tucker, Assistant to the Dean for Grant Writing and Public Relations, and Kathe Conley, Head of General Reference and Documents and a member of the Public Relations Committee, were invited to and presented a half day program “Advocacy: It’s Not Only Politics,” at the ISLMA (Illinois School Library Media Association) Leadership Summit, on July 7, 2004. Kathe also participated with

librarians in a day long training workshop, “Advocacy for Academic Libraries,” at the Missouri Mobius (Missouri Bibliographic Information User System) conference on June 3, 2004, an invited presentation.

Conferences offer another venue to showcase Milner’s successful efforts. Toni and Kathe presented “Matching Media to Audiences and Basic Advertising Design Equals Marketing Success” on April 1, 2004, at the biennial IACRL (Illinois Association of College and Research Libraries) conference held in Oakbrook, Illinois. Toni also presented “Strategic Marketing Skills for Academic Libraries” at the Illinois Library Association conference held in Chicago, September 28, 2004. Evaluations from both conferences were overwhelmingly positive; many attendees remarked upon the practicality of the information offered and the many good ideas that they could take back to their own libraries.

In response to request from attendees at the pre-conference, a website was created which includes key presentation materials, sample marketing plans and a bibliography. The website, “Creating a Marketing Plan for your Academic and Research Library,” can be viewed at <http://www.iwu.edu/~sdaviska/ILA2004>. The creation of this site allows for an audience larger than just workshop participants to benefit from the ideas and suggestions presented.

Indeed, the dean from Chicago State University library had attended the IACRL presentation and sent his librarian with public relations and marketing responsibilities to spend the day with Toni and Kathe at Illinois State University. It provided another excellent opportunity to share successes and assist another university with marketing efforts.

The Alliance Library System newsletter, *At First Glance*, paraded “A Redbird Celebration @ your library®” on its front page. The ALA Midwinter 2003 winter update, “What’s new @ your library®” highlighted Milner Library’s public relations efforts. The ALA website “Successful Academic Marketing Efforts” <http://www.ala.org/poi/campaign/academicresearch/successfulacademic.htm> includes Milner Library in its “Getting Started: Case Histories.” (inserts # 17, 18 & 19) The November 2001 issue of *College & Research Libraries News* spotlighted Milner Library

in a column in “News from the Field” entitled “Support for @ your library® campaign.”
(opposite insert #19)

To ensure that our efforts are more than (mostly) fond memories, the PR Committee has developed and used for each initiative, its “Activity/Planning/Assessment” document (insert # 20)

Most recently, the 2003-2004 library goals directed the-Public Relations Committee to “Clarify and strategically communicate Milner Library’s message to the campus and the community.” The Public Relations Committee is revisiting the library’s formal written marketing plan and planning a more detailed assessment than that afforded by the activity report mentioned above. This process is allowing the committee to develop more focused and relevant messages. Milner Library strives to be a leader in marketing success by increasing event participation and anticipation, and by continuing to assist other libraries who presently have fledgling marketing programs. Milner’s message, “Ask a librarian @ your library®” conveys personal assistance, a sense of humor, a welcoming attitude and, above all, professionalism and expert advice and guidance. In other words, it, truly, brings together all the expectations customers have when they hear the word “library.”

1. Dempsey, Beth. 2004. TARGET YOUR BRAND. Library journal 129 (13): 32-.36.