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Marketing Your Library's Business Collections

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So you went to school to learn to be a librarian, but little did you know that in addition to taking courses in archives and record management, and bibliographic access and control, you also should have been learning about marketing, management, psychology, public relations and communication.

The good news is that you don't need to go back to school to earn additional degrees in these subjects. All you need is to follow some basic principles to help you market and promote the products and services you provide at your library.

Though many people see marketing as creative and elusive, it is truly a systematic process that includes identifying target markets and developing a marketing mix strategy. If you follow this systematic approach, you can market any product or service in your library – from a children's reading hour, to a senior's genealogy workshop, or the newest electronic database in your business reference collection.

Let's go through the process and develop some ideas for marketing your business reference collection. The place to start is with the four basic principles of marketing called the 4 P's – product, place, price and promotion.

Product – Know it Well

The best way to market a database is to identify the many different ways it can help your patrons. To do this, you need to know your product inside and out.

Conduct research to find out about the product, read literature and conduct searches yourself. It's important that you understand the value of your products and what their uses and benefits are to your end-users.

Price and Place – In the Library

The next two P's – price and place – are closely related when it comes to marketing library products and services. Price is measured by money and time. The Place has to be convenient or patrons won't pay the price – which is spending time.

Today, what's important to patrons is time and convenience. Is this information worth a trip to the library? How much effort does it take to use a database in your library? Is it easy to search? Can it be accessed remotely from the comfort of home, the office or a dorm room?

Once you know all about the product, price and place, you can determine who your target market is.

Identifying Potential Target Markets

Know the make-up of your community well so you can identify groups of potential patrons who could benefit from using your business reference collection. For example, you could gather a few colleagues and have a brainstorming session to identify different groups of people who could use credible and reliable business information. Ask yourselves, "Who will want or need this?" Here are a few groups that come to mind:

- economic development councils
- small business administration
- local businesses
- local Service Corps of Retired Executives (SCORE)
- investment clubs
- individual investors
- high school and college students
- college business teachers
- newspapers

Now that you've identified target markets, pick one or two to you feel have the highest potential for success and develop your promotional mix.

Promotion – Getting the Word Out

Now you know all about your product, price and place, and you've identified your target markets. For this example, let's pick students and individual investors as target markets since these should be common groups among many libraries. Now you're ready to plan your promotional mix – this is a mix of elements used to promote the benefits and attributes of your business collections to your target audiences.

Promotion includes a number of different elements:

- Advertising
- Public relations
- Direct marketing
- Newsletters
- Fliers
- Brochures
- Web sites
- Contests
- Free workshops and public presentations
- Displays and signage

Conducting some research can help you uncover some of the preferences and characteristics of your target market so you can use the best mix of promotional tools to convince them to use your business reference

collection. What means the most to them, the extent of your business reference collection, or the ability to access databases remotely?

To begin promoting your business reference collections, let's start at the computer center in the library where patrons will access the databases. How about having on hand a list of your databases along with brief descriptions of what information can be found in the databases and a brief tutorial on how to search? You can provide this information in hard-copy form at the computer center and also have it online on your Web site.

An added feature of having the information on your Web site is that you can cut and paste the database logo right onto your site. Vendors often provide logos just for this marketing purpose. Combine the logo with the descriptions and you'll easily attract business information seekers to business reference collections. You can also use your Web site to feature a database of the month and perhaps connect them to an appropriate time of year. For those independent investors, how about last-minute investment opportunities before the end of the year?

Advertising

Advertising is a paid form of promotion that involves purchasing space or time from a media source -- newspaper, TV station, radio station, magazine or Web site. Libraries create their own ads and pay to place them, or have an agency do this for them. Advertising costs a lot of money -- unless your local paper, radio or TV station grants libraries free space (it never hurts to ask!) One way to try to get some free advertising is through a Public Service Announcement (PSA). This is a community service message media outlets run free to inform their audiences. If you decide to hold a free workshop to promote your business reference collection, the media may run a free public service announcement for you.

Newsletters

One of the most direct and easiest ways to promote your business reference collection is through your own library newsletter if you have one. You can include search tips, sample searches or even descriptions of your databases and other business reference tools. If you don't have a newsletter, it's easy to create one. At the end of this article is a list of resources where you can download a newsletter template.

Using Public Relations as Part of Your Promotional Mix

For students, many of their research projects are assigned at the beginning of the school semesters -- August/September and January/February. You can feature your business reference collections in a press release that includes information on how your databases can help students with their business research.

You can send the press release to your local newspapers and radio stations, the school district's newsletter or, if you're at an academic library, to your campus newsletter and radio station.

Or how about a press release on how your business reference databases can help individual investors and small businesses? This would be especially helpful during the last quarter of the year when people and businesses are looking for investment opportunities to help with taxes before the end of the year.

Right now you may be saying, "Wait a minute here. Me write a press release?" Daunting as it may sound, it's really not that difficult when you stick to the basic process and facts. To familiarize yourself with the components of a press release, go to company Web sites for examples.

Working with Your Local Media

The media -- the reporters and editors at newspapers, magazines, radio stations and TV stations -- are the gatekeepers of information. They determine whether information provided in a press release will be passed on to the public.

It's for this reason that media relations, which is developing relationships with reporters and editors, is important. Basically you're trying to form a positive working relationship and make friends with the media. The reciprocal side of this relationship is that they rely on the press releases for information to give to their readers, listeners or viewers.

So in saying that, get to know the media in your community. There's probably a person or two that covers books, libraries, community events. And they'll appreciate a phone call ahead of time – or an e-mail -- since many are very busy, asking if they are the right person.

Another item to inquire about is how they prefer to receive their press releases – through traditional mail, fax or e-mail. You're trying to make it as easy as possible to get them the information. If you have an idea, but it's not newsworthy to develop into a press release, you can develop a "pitch" instead. A pitch is a brief description of a story idea that you give to a reporter or editor.

Lastly, you can develop good media relations by inviting your media contacts to your events. Ask them to come to the library and attend a workshop, or how your business reference collection can help individual investors. The media may not always have time, but you're making the gesture and building goodwill, which are the foundations of good media relations.

Web Site Marketing

In today's world, many of your patrons will visit your library virtually, probably more often than you see them in person, so your Web site becomes an important marketing tool. This is why it's extremely important to make your site welcoming and easy-to-navigate. Whether you're The Thomson Corporation or Peoria Public Library, the same guiding principals for good website design hold true:

- Content is critical – make sure the information your community wants is easily accessible and complete
- Don't make people scroll! Keep pertinent information "above the fold"
- Everyone wants it to look/act/feel like a commercial site (i.e., Amazon.com) so keep this in mind when designing
- Keep it simple...if a user can't figure it out in the first minute, forget it
- Make sure you have good technical support – there's nothing worse than having some little technical glitch turn away potential users
- Make sure you're ADA compliant (there is specific software you can buy to help you measure compliance with Section 508)

So now that you have a great Web site design, here's what you can promote on your site:

- Ask a Librarian reference services or e-mail reference
- Database of the Month
- 24/7 Live Reference
- Overdue notices by e-mail
- Connections to statewide networks
- Mailing lists
- Virtual galleries
- Online pathfinders
- Localized content for topics of interest and related internet links
- Calendars
- Opinion polls, feedback, and comment forms
- Purchase suggestion forms

- Tax forms
- Newsletters
- Community bulletin boards
- Search engines for the site
- Access to online catalog
- Instant messaging (chat)

Free Resources

When looking to market your library's business reference collection, or your library in general, you don't have to re-invent the wheel. To help you out, here are a number of free information sources available that provide guidance and tools:

<http://solutions.cengage.com/galepromo/>

Free resources to help market your library. Information for academic, public, schools, law and military libraries.

<http://www.ala.org>

@YourLibrary program section

On the promotions page, you'll find a variety of resources created by librarians and ALA staff to educate, inform and entertain children, teens, adults and families.

<http://www.infoday.com/mls>

The Marketing Library Services newsletter provides information professionals in all types of libraries with specific ideas for marketing their services. You'll find numerous suggestions for planning programs, making money, increasing business and proving your value to your administrator. The newsletter is available online or in print.

<http://www.olc.org/marketing>

This site, from the Ohio Library Council, offers marketing training on the Web. It's an in-depth, self-directed study site primarily targeted for public libraries, though its step-by-step process is applicable to all libraries.

<http://librarysupportstaff.com/>

This is owned and maintained by Mary Niederlander, a library technician from Buffalo, New York. The site is packed with information for support staff – from reference links to educational links and Web site design tips.

Now that you're armed with basic information and tools, you'll be able to market your business reference collections and any other collection, program or initiative at your library. Good luck and get marketing!