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Engaging in Our Customers' Experience: Lessons Learned from Attending Entrepreneurial Events

Background

The University of Maine Fogler Library receives state funding for the Maine Business, Science and Technology Library and is also the home of Maine's Patent and Trademark Resource Center (PTRC). Serving the business community is part of our mission. We've always provided workshops and research consultations to inventors and business owners, but this past year, as the PTRC librarian and the business librarian, we decided to expand our outreach. We participated in two events specifically aimed at helping entrepreneurs develop and grow their business ideas. The first event, the SBIR Road Tour, was held in Portland, Maine, on August 24, 2018, and the second event, the Blitz- Bangor Area Entrepreneurship Conference, was held in Bangor, Maine, on September 28-29, 2018. Both entrepreneurial events had about 100 attendees and were similar in scope and composition. The attendees included local entrepreneurs and people from service agencies such as local Small Business Administration (SBA), SBDC (Small Business Development Center), SCORE, local law firms, and funding agencies. In this article, we will share our experiences participating in these two events.

Entrepreneur Awareness of Library Services

Only some of the business service agencies are aware of our library services. Our library has previously worked with New Ventures Maine and Maine Stream Finance for their "writing a business plan" programs. These programs introduce business owners to the business librarian and guide them to complete research on related industries. Local SCORE and SBA already

work closely with Bangor Public Library; however, their interaction with the University's Fogler Library is very limited.

From conversations with event attendees, we found that not only are most business service agencies unaware of the library resources, so are the entrepreneurs. In general, we found that there was a lack of awareness of both what the University library offers and to whom. For example, some entrepreneurs were not sure whether they could check out books from the University library or even whether they needed to pay to access the library resources. Entrepreneurs also weren't aware that the business librarian can help with business planning and marketing research and the PTRC librarian can help with patent and trademark research. In fact, during a business panel discussion at the SBIR event, the business librarian asked if the panelists had used library resources in the phase of writing grant proposals and commercialization plans. None of the panelists were aware that librarians can help with this request.

Some of the business owners, particularly those affiliated with the University as current students or alumni, have worked with the librarians before. However, despite having used some of the library's physical resources, many were still unaware of the research and consultation assistance provided by the business and PTRC librarians.

Attendance at these events confirmed our hypothesis: there is a general lack of awareness regarding public access to University library resources, in particular those resources geared towards entrepreneurs. People naturally consider the library a collection of materials but don't seem to consider seeking out the services of information professionals. We realized that in order to eliminate misconceptions, we would need to increase awareness of our resources. Attendance at the entrepreneur events provided us with useful insights into our audience. Where are they looking for information? What kind of information do they need most? What roadblocks or hurdles do they face? If we, the librarians, don't increase awareness of resources and deliver proper information to the community, the use of library services will continue to be limited and misconceptions will persist.

Librarian Awareness of Potential Business Information Needs

Business owners require a variety of information during the process of business planning and market research. They need to research industry, patents, competitors, consumer demographics, behavior, attitudes, market trends, domain names, trademarks and more. Student entrepreneurs are engaging more with business contests and grant applications. Information needs include assistance with preparing a business pitch or commercialization plan, or searching patents and trademark databases.

Although there are common information needs, entrepreneurs' needs are also very individualized. The business librarian has encountered questions such as how to estimate cost-structure of a new venture, or how to find commercial kitchens nearby with appropriate facilities or even how to find gluten-free bakery co-packers in the state. The PTRC librarian has assisted

patent applicants in searching through past patents or current patent applications, or in navigating international patents related to everything from underwear to coffee lids. We find that most of the information requests we receive involve applying business or patent knowledge to discover the users' true information needs.

The University library currently maintains a web portal of general information to meet the needs of businesses, as well as business and science librarians. The Maine Business Science and Technology Library (MBSTL) Portal (<https://libguides.library.umaine.edu/mbstl>) includes free information sources that are carefully selected by librarians. In the business section, it aggregates many local and national resources for businesses as they start, run and grow their ventures. The guide is more focused on local assistance available for small businesses, including free mentoring programs, business plan classes, SBA webinars, and financing opportunities. The portal also connects to the PTRC librarian's Patent and Trademark Research Guide (<https://libguides.library.umaine.edu/ptrc>) which includes information on search strategies, video tutorials, application information, legal aid and more. Without successful outreach, however, these resources may remain undiscovered.

The SBIR Road Show and Blitz Bangor events enhanced our understanding of what outside resources are available for entrepreneurs and business owners and how to better integrate the library with those outside resources as well as how best to reach individuals.

Reflections and Future Opportunities

At SBIR and Blitz events this year, we distributed a bookmark-sized handout for the MBSTL portal as well as an informational handout about the Patent and Trademark Resource Center. However, after participating in these two events, we realized that the greatest benefits came from our face-to-face conversations and these can really only occur when we seek out business owners and resource organizations in their own arena. This more personalized approach also helps market the library services and professional expertise provided by the librarians. The online pathfinders and research guides (LibGuides) we provide do help businesses navigate the resources and support systems. However, we also want to engage in conversation so that we can better facilitate entrepreneurs in fulfilling their goals.

Possible avenues to explore include providing assistance in developing a commercialization plan or completing the patent application process. There is also potential to connect with businesses and integrate academic sources into their decision-making process.

In the immediate future, we plan to go on our own road tour. We'll start first with a half dozen local business development resource centers in our immediate vicinity. The next stage will be to take a road tour to the nearest large city center, Portland, Maine. For both tours our goal will be to establish partnerships with other assistance centers in order to share referrals. We hope to share our success stories with you after our road tour.