Marketing Library Services to Distance Learners

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INTRODUCTION

"The ACRL Guidelines for Distance Learning Library Services (2000) assert 'access to adequate library services and resources is essential for the attainment of superior academic skills in post-secondary education, regardless of where students, faculty, and programs are located'" (Nicholas and Tomeo, 2005). Additionally, the guidelines include responsibility for promotion of library services to both students and faculty in distance education programs (Association of College and Research Libraries, Distance Learning Section, 2004, p.4). As the number of distance education programs and courses grows, and as methods of delivery evolve, distance education librarians have pro-actively assumed the role of providing equitable services and resources to all distance students using the Guidelines as a framework. However, providing the services and resources accomplishes nothing if faculty and students are not aware of them. Effective marketing efforts are needed to maximize the awareness and use of library services and resources.

BACKGROUND

Prior to the internet and the availability of online research resources, many distance learning courses were self-contained, i.e., all materials the student needed were provided by the distance learning institution, making the need to market library services and resources unnecessary. With the rise of the internet and accompanying communication technologies, many services are now provided to students electronically. This makes it possible for students to access needed resources whenever and wherever they are studying. In spite of these advances and significant efforts by librarians

to provide library services to distance learners, many faculty teaching distance learning courses and students enrolled in those courses remain unaware of the library services and resources available to them. These faculty and students "...provide a unique challenge for the marketing of library services, since they rarely visit the library" (MacDonald & vanDuinkerken, 2005).

As early as 1998, the literature contains references to articles about marketing the delivery of library services and resources to distance learners. Even though library resources are available, students are usually unaware of that availability (Riedel, 2004). Cahoy & Moyo (2005) studied faculty teaching distance education courses and reported "…a significant lack of faculty awareness of existing library services and resources available to the e-learning community" (p.2). Dermody (2005) found that because distance learners do not often come to the campus or the library, it is important to market the services to them. Marketing was the driving force of critical success factors for use of library services (Kunneke,1999). Promotion, one aspect of marketing, is essential "in order to successfully provide library support" (Ault, 2002, p.39).

The literature demonstrates that marketing efforts are needed to inform both faculty and students about the services that are available. According to Lebowitz (1998) even when students seek out library services, a marketing plan is necessary. Summey (2004) discovered that creating a marketing plan was critical to guiding the marketing efforts. Wolpert (1998) asserts that library services for distance education students should be viewed as a "new business opportunity, utilizing techniques of market evaluation and analysis" (p.21). MacDonald & vanDuinkerken (2005) emphasize that market plans need to assess the usefulness of the services provided.

MARKETING LIBRARY SERVICES AND RESOURCES

Marketing cannot be a series of random actions. To be successful it is essential that librarians collaborate with the distance or continuing education unit, the faculty teaching distance courses and other departments in the library that provide the services. Marketing is not simply providing the services and publicizing them. Strategies need to be carefully planned, organized, and carried out continuously in a methodical manner. Developing a marketing plan provides structure, guidance, sequence and evaluation of the effort. Elements of a marketing plan include: identifying the target market, determining needs, branding the services developed, publicizing the services to the target market, and assessing the services.

DEVELOPING A MARKETING PLAN

Target Market

The first step is to identify the target market. In distance education, the most obvious target market is the students taking the courses; however, "the faculty who will be designing the courses, determining the content, and creating the assignments warrant consideration as well" (Jerabek & McMain, 2002, p. 390). Faculty members, who believe that library services and resources are not available to students, generally do not incorporate them into their curriculum, assuming that students can use their local public library, a nearby university library or the internet to complete assignments. Students may be left on their own to figure out how to get needed library materials. Both these audiences need to be addressed in a marketing plan.

Determining Needs

After identifying the target market, a method for discovering the needs of both students and faculty should be implemented. Irons (1997) maintains that "…an understanding of the customer's real needs…is the very essence of marketing" (p. xv). Knowing the needs of the faculty and the learners will help librarians to design and provide the types of services and resources necessary for successful completion of distance coursework. Common methods of discovering needs are surveys--print,

telephone or online--focus groups, or consultations with faculty or course designers. A single method or a combination of methods may be needed to gather this information (Jones, 2002, p. 404). The anticipated needs of those not using library services and resources also need to be discovered. When the needs are identified, they can serve as a framework for librarians to modify current services for distance learners or initiate new services to meet their needs.

Branding and Publicity

Branding the library services helps both students and faculty to realize that the library is willing to support their programs and courses and provides a recognizable point of contact. Branding involves creating an identity that faculty and distance students recognize and automatically associate with the library (Wolpert, 1998, p. 21). It may include a particular graphic, a catchphrase, a short mission statement, or a logo. Once the brand has been created, it is essential that it appear on all electronic or print documents that are given to faculty and students.(Summey, 2004, p. 460)

Once services are in place, there are several ways to publicize them to both faculty and students. Several recent studies have shown that the faculty member is the most influential person to inform students about available library services and to encourage their use (Cahoy & Moyo, 2005; see also MacDonald & vanDuinkerken, 2005). When asked about how they learn about library services, distance students indicated that they expect to hear about library services from their instructor (Ault, 2002; see also Cahoy & Moyo, 2005). Holding open houses or training sessions for faculty who teach distance courses on campus or at an off-site center can alert them to the possibilities for incorporating library services and resources into their course(s). MacDonald & vanDuinkerken (2005) included a printed brochure with the faculty's invitation to a presentation about a new service for distance learners the library was introducing.

Another successful way of publicizing the services is using the same mode of delivery as that used to deliver courses to students. If the course is online, use an online method such as a portal, an email, a CD, a web page (either the library page or the distance education page, or both), electronic brochure or post an announcement in the course itself. Providing contact information for a librarian or embedding one as a resource person in

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