
Over the Counter Help

User Perspective as an Active Ingredient in Marketing the Library

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Effectively marketing library services and resources can be a challenge—and, often, more difficult than it needs to be. Promoting what the library has to offer should be simple and straightforward, speaking to users in ways that will resonate with them and that will make them want to experience what the library is all about. How best to accomplish that? Perhaps by engaging the users themselves, then incorporating their perspectives in efforts to raise awareness of the library and communicate its impact. In this column, Andrea Bartelstein offers inspiration and a prescription for library marketing in which staff and users partner to successfully get the word out.—*Editor*

While at the ALA Annual Conference in Chicago this past summer, I stopped at a small food vendor in the convention center to get something to eat at the end of a long day of walking many miles inside the vast building. As I contemplated the selection of upscale snacks and espresso drinks, I noticed a wall display of small, square containers with rounded edges, clearly all the same brand, all identical with similar labeling. The package trim colors and text were different on each, but each one said something like *help® I have a headache*, or *help® I can't sleep*, or *help® I've cut myself*. The label indicated that inside each tin was acetaminophen, sleep aids, or bandages, in the case of the products mentioned above. The design was simple yet eye-catching. What I found most striking about the display was that the Help Remedies company had actually conceived its entire brand, including its very name, on the idea of marketing its products in terms of the needs they address.

Of course, all of this got me thinking about how we market and promote library services to our users, especially since the whole reason I found myself standing there trying to decide between high-end chips and attractively packaged dried fruit was because I'd been hiking back and forth inside McCormick Place all day to attend various programs and meetings about marketing and outreach. So by late afternoon I was pretty well focused on these issues, as well as worn out. I ended up buying a package of dried apples, although the *help® I'm tired* caffeine caplets were another available option.

Framing a product or service in terms of the user's need isn't a new concept. It seems fairly obvious that if we post flyers that announce, for example, "Web of Science Faculty Workshop, Tuesday 12:00 p.m.," we'll generate less interest than if we change the wording so that the largest size text on the page reads "Who's Citing You? Learn How to Find Out," followed by "Tuesday 12:00 p.m." Yet it's easy to forget this seemingly

simple shift in point of view. Additionally, we routinely go out of our way to devise clever names for the services and products we offer, sometimes to replace the already less-than-clear name of a purchased or licensed commercial product with a name customized for our library. In doing so, we add another layer of obscurity and then must take extra steps to explain what the product or service is. This strikes me as analogous to the meaningless names given to drugs by the pharmaceutical industry. Our services and procedures are cryptic enough to our users; why increase their bewilderment?

What I especially liked about the product line from Help Remedies, in addition to its simplicity and eye-catching design, was its straightforward, lighthearted, human voice. This is even more evident on the company's website (helpneedhelp.com), which provides a fun, interactive experience that expands on the personality of the brand and makes you want to explore the site. As I learned more about the company and its marketing techniques, I found numerous elements that seemed applicable to the library context. In some cases these were simply reminders of what we often already know but don't always successfully implement. Here are a few ideas we would do well to borrow from Help Remedies' marketing approach:

- Call things what they are. As I asked earlier, why deliberately concoct mysterious names that must then be explained? I did have fun imagining pharmaceutical-sounding names for library services, but would our users immediately understand the functions of Flibcat, Zibuloan, or Phyladox? Shouldn't we be trying to make our services and products more transparent, not less so?
- Offer what's appropriate to address the need and in small doses. The *help® I can't sleep* product contains a nighttime sleep aid without the pain medication that frequently accompanies it.¹ The *help® I have a headache* caplets contain 325 milligrams of acetaminophen, less than an extra-strength formulation. The thinking behind this, according to one of the company's founders, is that you can take more if you need to, but this is the amount recommended by pharmacists.² Similarly, it can be tempting to overload patrons, especially students, with more information than they need, when most of the time less is more. We should strive to provide just enough, checking frequently with our users to determine what exactly that is, while making it easy to get more if needed.

This summer, in preparing to revise and create new materials to welcome our incoming class of first-year students, a colleague and I have set out to emulate the Help Remedies focus on user needs and to develop content that's attention-getting, straightforward, and fun. We're aiming to present selected information, not everything they'll absolutely need to know all at once, based on the needs they can anticipate and on some they might not yet know they'll have. This will be an iterative process, and we'll ask the experts—students themselves—for their ideas. If we want to get their attention, then they're the authorities on how we can do that.

- Speak in a human voice; have a sense of humor. It's possible to do this while still sounding professional and conveying our expertise. Social media in particular has greatly impacted the style and tone of our interactions with our users. Communication has become more casual, more participatory, and more conversational; we can and should make it apparent that there are people behind our messages, regardless of format. I found excellent examples of this at the PR Xchange at ALA, and they came from all types of libraries and were directed at all types of patrons.³
- Invite your users to communicate with you and share their stories. Help Remedies offers t-shirts imprinted with the branded “help® I . . .” that can be customized with your own text to complete the sentence. Customers are encouraged to send in photos of themselves wearing their shirts for inclusion on the company's website.⁴ This marketing strategy allows customers to share something about themselves while connecting with (and promoting) the brand. Library staff are also recognizing the value of soliciting stories to promote our services and collections and to demonstrate their impact on those we serve. One reason to do this is because people tend to look first to their peers for help, for ideas, and to learn from their experiences. Another essential reason to create a marketing strategy with users' stories at its core is to place what we do into a meaningful context. We may announce that we've completed a digitization project of unique materials in our collections, but when a faculty member describes how she uses that material in her classroom it becomes more relevant and interesting—and is more likely to spark further ideas among her colleagues. We can publicize the fact that we offer research consultations, but a student talking about his own experience working with his librarian to find sources for his senior honors thesis will leave a far greater impression on other students with similar needs.

At Dartmouth, we're developing such a project: The library's slogan is “Inspiring Ideas,” and we're seeking out stories about how the library has inspired our users or helped them be successful in their work or in other areas of their lives. We're creating print and online materials featuring individuals or groups and highlighting the ways in which the library has inspired them. Rather than hear us talk about the services and resources we offer, our users will hear from each other, providing crucial context and, hopefully, serving as a catalyst for others.

The “Inspiring Ideas” slogan is the umbrella under which a number of interconnected initiatives reside. For example, we display a selection of recent books by Dartmouth authors in the library café and invite authors whose books are currently on display to write guest posts on our blog. They might write about an aspect of working on the book, or how it relates to their teaching. A faculty member recently related that a student contacted her after picking up her book from the display while waiting in line at the café. After browsing

through it, he sent her an email introducing himself and asked whether he could meet with her to discuss some ideas for an independent study project. Because of this chance encounter with a book and then its author, the student is currently in Italy pursuing studies in a direction he might not otherwise have envisioned. The same faculty member also described her own discovery of another book in the display, by a colleague in another department. She sought him out and introduced herself, and a conversation started. They are now developing a proposal for a new course that they plan to teach together next year.

Recently we began hosting author talks in conjunction with the book display, too. Situating these talks in the library provides an opportunity for students to engage with faculty from across the campus about their research and for faculty to learn what colleagues outside of their own departments are working on. “The library and the parking lot are the only places on campus where these kinds of connections happen,” claims my faculty informant. Our challenge is to bring these stories to the surface and make these connections known, thereby encouraging more of them to happen.

Meeting the challenge to learn about and communicate the impact we have on our students’ and faculty’s work is one of our goals for the coming year. It’s also a common need in research libraries and a concern to their managers. Dartmouth’s effective committee environment pushes library-wide work beyond the department/management structure to create leadership and accountability at all levels, especially

at the front lines of service, where committees are led by experienced practitioners. In this way, the perspectives and knowledge of staff across the library are incorporated into decision-making, including when it comes to devising “help remedies” for effectively meeting information needs. In my role as Education & Outreach Librarian, I chair the library’s Marketing and Communications committee, and administratively my position is 100 percent within our Education and Outreach program. While outreach and marketing activities are part of my personal responsibilities, the combination of position-dependent work and the committee’s work enables the library to advance its emphasis on including our users’ perspectives as we develop many of our services and resources. Managers looking to understand and communicate their libraries’ impact would do well to involve and empower a broad coalition of staff to determine, articulate, and promote exactly what the library does for those who use it.

References

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3. See www.ala.org/llama/awards/prxchange_bestofshow and www.flickr.com/photos/97060948@N06/sets for examples.
4. Help Remedies, “Tshirts,” accessed July 24, 2013, www.helpineedhelp.com/#/tshirts.