
Trickery as Marketing Strategy

Mallory Arents

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Sometimes a little subterfuge is necessary to get patrons to think outside the box of what they normally expect from a library. By using different lures, sometimes in disguise, libraries can introduce new patrons to resources and services they had no idea the library could offer. We know we have tons to offer our patrons—we just have to be a little creative in order to make them realize it! Mallory Arents from Darien Library in Darien, Connecticut gives us several great ideas on how to do that.—Editors

If you've been to a cocktail party, networking event, or some other social gathering recently, chances are you've answered the question of what you do for a living. And chances are, after you responded "I'm a librarian," you received one of two answers: either, "Oh, I love to read! My childhood librarian used to pile my arms high with books beyond my reading level!" or the less lucky response of, "A librarian? Are you worried that Google/Amazon/e-books are going to destroy your profession?" Try as we might, the general public has very specific ideas of what it means to be a library in 2016. We can fill our buildings with makerspaces, start-up incubators, therapy dogs, and meditation sessions during midterms, but this means nothing if our communities still view us as stodgy old institutions filled with dusty books. Our challenge as librarians is to change the dialogue about what it means to be a library. The quickest and easiest way to do so is to outright trick our patrons.

IF YOU FEED THEM, THEY WILL COME

Trickery in libraries is nothing new. If you've ever offered late-night pizza to students cramming for finals, or served cookies and coffee at a library program, you know what those items really are: a delicious bribe. Sometimes all it takes is a few snacks to lure in an unsuspecting audience and, before they know it, they're taking notes during a financial literacy seminar. Want an active Teen Advisory Board? Leave a trail of cupcakes and you'll soon enough have a group of enthusiastic advocates. Our resources and services directly address our community's needs; let's get them in the door through delicious trickery so they see it too.

At Darien Library, we're always thinking about ways to get our community members to open email blasts. One of our biggest successes was for a Meet the Author event featuring a New England cookbook author. The email announcing her visit had one of our highest open rates, yet had a simple subject line: "LobsterCraft" (see figure 1, next page).

AMPLIFY YOUR IMPACT

The image shows an email blast from LobsterCraft. At the top left is the LobsterCraft logo and a link to view the email in a browser. The main content features a book cover for 'New England Open-House Cookbook' by Sarah Leah Chase. The text of the email reads: 'Meet the Author - Sarah Leah Chase Sunday, July 19th at 5 p.m. Sarah Leah Chase, author of New England Open-House Cookbook, will be our featured speaker. The latest from this celebrated cookbook guru pays homage to all the foods Sarah grew up with during those lazy-Sunday Cape Cod mornings and those blustery New England winters. Perfect for anyone who has spent any time on the coast, The New England Open-House Cookbook is full of stews to keep you warm on cold evenings in Maine, salsas and steaks for the summer's family barbecues, and chillies for the nights where all you want to do is curl up in your oldest Nantucket-red sweatshirt and sit by a fire. "Exactly the food you want to cook at home - delicious, satisfying, earthy food that your friends and family will love... Familiar and yet totally original" -Ina Garten, Intro to New England Open-House Cookbook Books will be available for purchase at this event. Refreshments will be served. Learn More >

Figure 1. LobsterCraft email blast

The image shows a screenshot of a Meetup group page for 'Adult Day Camp'. The page has a red header with the group name. Below the header is a navigation bar with links for Home, Members, Sponsors, Photos, Pages, Discussions, and More. The main content area includes a 'Speed Friendship-ing' event scheduled for Friday, June 10, 2016, at 7:00 PM at Darien Library. The event description says: 'Consider this your first day of Camp. We've all just arrived and now it's time to pick your clique, share some weird stories, and make new friends. Whether you're new to Fairfield County, or you're just looking to ditch your current crew (no judgement), stop on by for some drinks and lightning-style rounds of friendship-ing.' There is a 'Post' button and a section for 'Hey Mallory, join the conversation!'. On the right side, there is a 'Your RSVP: Yes' section with 'Change' and 'Invite a friend' buttons, and a list of 50 people going to the event.

Figure 2. Adult Day Camp Meetup group

Unknown to many outside of our small town, LobsterCraft is a full-service lobster-roll food truck that makes residents salivate at just its mention. Opening with “LobsterCraft” gave our patrons the nudge to open and read our announcement and then, subsequently, pack our Community Room for buttery lobster from a food truck alongside a culinary lecture.

IT'S ALL IN HOW YOU SPIN IT

“Database,” every librarian’s most expensive friend, means nothing to our patrons, and the sooner we’re honest with ourselves about that, the better off we’ll all be. A treasure

trove for any scholar, these databases immediately lose their value if our patrons aren’t utilizing them. To trick community members into using our databases, let’s avoid the jargon and instead, go with language geared just for them. Instead of devoting staff time into marketing Mango Languages, why not teach a class on how to learn Farsi? Instead of creating bookmarks for ReferenceUSA, why not ask patrons to sign up for one-on-one assistance with a reference librarian to help conduct market research for their small businesses? Our community members only care about what is immediately useful for them; let’s trick them into thinking all of our databases were purchased just for their use.

We were having a terrible time getting patrons to utilize our literary databases or come to classes on downloading e-books. Having an active Book Group community, we decided to focus the message and tailor it just to them. As soon as we announced our “Upgrade Your Book Group” workshop, we had to schedule another three sessions to accommodate the demand. Little did our patrons know, they were getting the same exact e-book class, with the addition of a little literary research thrown in, just repackaged with a pretty little bow.

MARKETING TO MILLENNIALS

One of my favorite methods of trickery is meant to engage that elusive twenty- to thirtysomething set libraries are always trying to attract. While we can plan and host a series of events geared just for that crowd, chances are that young professionals just aren’t checking their local library’s website to see what’s happening on a Thursday or Friday evening. Instead, meet them where they are.

Our library started hosting a series of events we marketed through Meetup.com. Anyone with an interest or hobby can create a Meetup group and local users will be encouraged to join and participate. It’s like online dating, except rather than helping users meet a potential romantic partner, it is a way to make new friends based on shared interests. Love hiking? Start a Meetup group and invite people to join you on the trail on Saturday afternoon. Want to learn how to knit? Join a knitting Meetup group that meets weekly at a local coffee shop. If used correctly, Meetup can help build a community, just like a library.

Our Meetup group, Adult Day Camp, has become a destination for an enthusiastic group of new users. Riffing off the idea of summer camp and nostalgia, Adult Day Camp was created with the millennial set in mind. Our monthly events aren’t marketed on our website, and you have to dig to see that a library is behind all the fun (see figure 2). By disguising that a library is the one hosting Nerf Blaster Capture the Flag or book groups in bars, we don’t have to compete with many people’s dated view of what is possible at a library. At the beginning of each event, I introduce myself and explain that Adult Day Camp is a library-sponsored series and watch as understanding washes over everyone’s faces. Our new patrons have just been tricked, and they’re delighted by

the results. Less than a year in, we're close to nine hundred members who had never before used their local library, and the general sentiment of attendees is complete awe at what can happen when a library gets involved. More than attendance numbers, responses like "I can't believe you can do this at a library!" and "Your library is different . . . 'cooler' is the closest word that comes to mind," will always be our biggest markers of success.

COERCION AS STRATEGY

Trickery comes in many forms. Sometimes it looks like a cheese plate, other times it looks like cleverly disguised research tools, and sometimes it's events on a social media platform. If all other methods have failed, it's time to resort to the Mother of All Trickery: friendly coercion. If your community still isn't buying into the idea that libraries are a unique place built just for them, let's force them into believing just so. Looking to build a coffee and conversation group for older adults? Ask your colleagues who the power users are and personally invite each of them so they feel like they're obligated to attend. Slowly, these patrons will invite their friends, those friends will invite other friends, and then all your coercion will have paid off!

The Grand Rapids (MI) Public Library assigns a reference librarian to each elected city official.¹ Imagine receiving an email saying, "Congratulations! Sally has been assigned as your reference librarian. She is here to help with any research you may need during your term." It puts the library at the forefront of patrons' minds, offering a service they may not even realize they wanted.

Why not try a combination of delicious trickery and friendly coercion? A Pop-Up Library brings everything we love about our libraries and puts it right in front of community members so they have to notice us. Bring your Pop-Up

Library to a local business park and work with a food truck to provide lunch. Lunch is on the library, as long as the hungry office workers sign up for a library card first. Soon enough, you'll have a captive audience as you hawk the latest in fiction, discuss library-sponsored business workshops, and conduct some ready reference. Your new patrons will leave with some library love in their heart as well as a full belly.

TRICKERY FIRST, UNENDING LIBRARY LOVE NEXT

Now is the absolute best time to be working in libraries. We're leading pub quizzes in bars.² We're hosting sensory storytime for children on the autism spectrum.³ We are on the front lines in responding to community disasters.⁴ It is our job as librarians to respond to these community needs; let's trick our members into seeing the good work we're already doing.

References

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3. Megan Cottrell, "Storytime for the Spectrum: Libraries Add Services for Children with Autism," *American Libraries*, March 1, 2016, <https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/2016/03/01/sensory-storytime-spectrum-libraries-add-services-for-children-with-autism>.
4. "Ferguson Library Director Gets Standing Ovation at ALA 2015 Midwinter Meeting," *Libraries Transform*, American Library Association, accessed June 8, 2016, www.ala.org/transforming-libraries/libraries-transforming-communities/blog/ferguson-library-director-gets-standing-ovation-ala-2015.