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## **Simple Marketing Techniques and Space Planning to Increase Circulation**

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*In the academic Information Commons, the frontline staff are key library assets. This article demonstrates one example of frontline staff observing, analyzing, and modifying user behavior using simple marketing techniques and space planning. James Madison University East Campus Library personnel increased circulation of books by increasing the visibility of the book collection. Minor furniture changes in the lobby, adding rotating themed book displays, and providing digital and print signage produced a dramatic effect. Circulation numbers essentially doubled for the lobby browsing book collection and markedly increased for books highlighted in the displays.*

**KEYWORDS** *marketing, space planning, shelving, circulation, book displays, browsing collections, library staff, Information Commons*

### **Running Head: Marketing and Space Planning Increase Circulation**

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## INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, academic libraries have been transforming their physical spaces to accommodate an increasing demand for digital services including computing, printing, and other digital processing. This physical transformation is often accompanied by a service transformation to a single consolidated access point, the Information Commons (Beagle 2006). The organizational changes associated with the move to the Information Commons model bring significantly increased roles for frontline access services staff (Carver 1992, 2010; Boyd 2008). Traditionally, the front desk handled circulation and reserves. Now they are also the primary contact point for technology questions and reference assistance. The value of using frontline staff to observe, analyze, and modify user behavior in the Information Commons academic library environment is demonstrated in this article. Ironically, in this instance the user behavior modified was a very traditional one: checking out books.

The National Center for Education Statistics (Budd 2009) and the Association of Research Libraries (Martell 2008) both report statistics showing that book circulation in academic libraries is dropping. At the same time, gate counts have increased in many institutions (Budd 2009; Martell 2008). James Madison University (JMU) Libraries also reflect this trend, showing a 9% decrease in items circulated (James Madison University Libraries 2008a) and a 3.5% increase in gate counts (James Madison University Libraries 2008b) at the main library building between the 2006/07 and 2007/08 academic years. Decreased use of the print collection was a trend recognized by JMU library staff, even before the new East Campus Library (ECL) opened in 2008. This paper demonstrates how simple marketing techniques and space planning increased both circulation and visibility of a portion of the print collection.

## MARKETING

More than forty years ago, Kotler and Levy first emphasized the broad reach of marketing by describing it as “a pervasive societal activity that goes considerably beyond the selling of toothpaste, soap, and steel” (1969, 10). Marketing has become so pervasive that it has now seeped into all parts of society, including an unlikely setting: the academic library. As the concept of marketing evolves from the commercial sphere into the world of academia, new definitions must be written and new relationships defined. The American Marketing Association defines marketing as “the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large” (2007). Whether we call them customers, patrons, or users, academic libraries are clearly offering resources of value.

Today, academic libraries recognize that marketing their services is important (Jose and Bhat 2007) and that the use of a marketing plan can help define marketing goals for the organization (Dubicki 2007). Good marketing benefits both the library and its users. Marketing helps make users more aware of the resources offered, thus encouraging more frequent use and justifying the cost of the resources (Gupta 2006).

Despite the benefits of marketing, academic libraries appear slower to employ typical marketing techniques than bookstores or public libraries. This may be partially due to negative attitudes towards marketing among academic library professionals (Singh 2009). Singh indicates that libraries are weakly market oriented, due mostly to a lack of marketing education among library staff.

Librarians may find it helpful to make use of marketing concepts such as the 4Ps: product, price, place, and promotion (Kotler 2001; McCarthy and Perreault 1990). However, applying these concepts is not always as straightforward as in the business world. In the research presented here, the product (books) and price (free to library users) are not manipulated. Our marketing work focuses instead on the use of place and promotion to increase the visibility of the product.

Resistance may also be due to an assumption that marketing will be too expensive, or require additional staff. Because libraries are frequently under financial pressure, marketing may be viewed as an unnecessary expense. However, libraries may employ low-cost merchandising tools such as signage (Verostek 2006) or digital promotional efforts (Cronin and O'Brien 2009). The marketing techniques described in this paper required little more than some dedicated staff time and a little muscle for shelf moving.

## LIBRARY SPACE PLANNING AND DESIGN

Because “a new generation of library users wants increased computer access” (Cohen, Cohen, and Cohen 2005, 24), the focus of library space planning and design has shifted from providing space for print collections and reading rooms to providing space and infrastructure for information technology (Bennett 2007; Dewey 2008; Robinson 2009; Thomas 2004). A natural outgrowth of this process has been the development of the Information Commons. The Information Commons has become “a well-established feature of library space design and has spawned its own professional literature and Web sites” (Bennett 2007, 166). An Information Commons design typically features a one-stop public services desk, a computer area, a café,

group study rooms, and spaces with soft furnishings for reading and quiet socializing (Bennett 2007; Dewey 2008; Thomas 2004).

A well designed Information Commons “takes advantage of natural traffic patterns and lines of sight to encourage interactions between staff and customers” (Adamson and Bunnett 2002, 439). Librarians who make use of space planning techniques from retail business researchers can avoid re-inventing the wheel (Folwell and Moberg 1993; Janiszewski 1998; Pieters and Warlop 1999). Koontz (2005) provides excellent library to business comparisons and suggests various retail interior layouts for libraries. Two outstanding resources available to help libraries with space arrangement, displays, and marketing are Woodward’s *Creating the Customer-Driven Library* (2002) and *Creating the Customer-Driven Academic Library* (2009). “For the most part, displays require more creativity than money, and this is where library staffs excel” (Woodward 2002, 117). These books contain recommendations for practical and inexpensive techniques to increase the appeal of our libraries.

## EAST CAMPUS LIBRARY

James Madison University (JMU) is a public university situated in the Shenandoah Valley region of Virginia. JMU Libraries serve approximately 17,000 undergraduate students, 1,600 graduate students, and 2,500 faculty and staff (James Madison University 2009). Our mission statement is “Enriching our communities by building learning and information environments where people connect with ideas and each other to discover, create and share knowledge” (James Madison University Libraries 2010). In keeping with this mission statement, and in response to a need for increased access to digital services as well as individual and group study spaces, East Campus

Library was built with the Information Commons service model in mind. JMU librarians worked with architects to design a library that would offer collaborative learning spaces as well as access to digital technology and print resources. The new library was not intended solely as a place for academic work, but would also provide students with a place for “socialization, relaxation, and restoration” (Waxman et al. 2007).

East Campus Library opened in August, 2008. This five-story, 100,000 square foot library houses titles from the Library of Congress classes Q, R, S, and T, a variety of study spaces, a 24-hour computer lab, and a coffee shop. The Information Desk on the first floor is staffed by library assistants and student workers who handle circulation, reserves, and initial reference and technology assistance. The ECL librarians have offices on the second floor.

Two tall shelving units at the ECL front entrance serve to house the fire alarm system and to guide users through the security gates. When the library opened, these shelves were empty and used solely to delineate the entrance area. Immediately upon passing through the security gates on the first floor, users see the Information Desk. To the right of the Information Desk are 76 computer stations. To the left of the entrance, directly opposite the Information Desk, is a set of low bookshelves. During the first year ECL was open, these bookshelves were facing away from the Information Desk and towards a reading area with comfortable chairs by the front windows. Users standing in the lobby of the library would see only the backs of these shelves, which also served as a back for three benches facing the Information Desk (see Figure 1).

**[Insert - FIGURE 1** Schematic of East Campus Library first floor lobby, August 2008.]

These first floor bookshelves hold the ECL browsing collection, a rotating group of about 500 current fiction and nonfiction books leased from McNaughton. Like many other academic

libraries (Odess-Harnish 2003), ECL shelves this popular literature separately from the general print collection. Journals are shelved on the second floor and the permanent book collection is shelved on the third and fourth floors.

The primary purpose of the browsing collection is to promote recreational reading within the JMU community. Unlike most of the hardcover books in the academic collection, the browsing books retain their original book jackets. They tend to be the most visually appealing books in the library. The browsing collection shelves and nearby seating were arranged to provide a relaxing space for reading that would be undisturbed by the activity around the Information Desk. Yet during the 2008/2009 academic year, circulation of the browsing collection was low. Frontline staff observed that while students often sat on the benches across from the Information Desk, the browsing collection and reading area were not being utilized as much as expected. Desk staff occasionally overheard students making comments such as “The books are kind of hidden here” or even “There are no books on this floor.” Staff suspected that the long shelving created a visual and physical barrier to these resources.

### BROWSING COLLECTION SPACE AND SHELVING CHANGES

ECL frontline staff recommended moving the browsing collection so the books would be facing the Information Desk rather than the reading area. This change would make the collection more visible to users. While exploring the logistics of this change, staff identified three unused shelving units that could be combined with the existing shelving. By adding these three units to the browsing area and rearranging the original seven units, we created a double-sided shelving area with five units facing the Information Desk and five units facing the reading area (see



Figure 2a). This resulted in not only increasing total linear feet of shelving available for our growing browsing collection, but made it easier for users on both sides of the shelving to walk around and browse (see Figure 2b) – talk about a win-win!

**[Insert - FIGURE 2a** Photo illustration of browsing collection before and after moving shelves.]

**[Insert - FIGURE 2b** Photograph of browsing collection with new shelving configuration.]

Front desk staff observed an immediate increase in foot traffic around the browsing collection and in the reading area. Staff also perceived an increase in checkouts of books from the browsing collection. We decided to use circulation data from the browsing collection to objectively analyze whether the shelving changes had impacted user behavior. There was in fact a dramatic increase in browsing collection circulation after the shelving was reconfigured (see Figure 3).

**[Insert - FIGURE 3** East Campus Library monthly circulation of browsing books since library opening (August 2008). Black indicates circulation since shelving for browsing books was reconfigured.]

We investigated the possibility that the increased use of the browsing collection might merely be reflecting an increase in visits to the building. There was a slight rise in gate counts from 2008 to 2009, 4% for September, 3% for October, and 7% for November. Meanwhile, browsing book circulation increased 142% for September, 108% for October, and 98% for November. The slight rise in visits to ECL was not sufficient to explain the much greater

increase in circulation.

### ROTATING DISPLAYS OF GENERAL COLLECTION BOOKS

In addition to promoting the browsing collection, we also wanted to promote our general collection books. We decided to create a book display on the first floor to promote books from the third and fourth floor stacks. We selected the empty shelving units next to the security gate to house the book display. These shelving units are located in the first floor reading area and are near the browsing collection.

In August 2009, we began populating the shelves with themed book displays. Typically we showcased 30 to 40 books per theme, with one or two themes being represented in the display at the same time. We used both print and digital signs for promotion. Display themes varied: some linked with programs on campus (alternative transportation, green building and design), others emphasized holidays (cookbooks in November and December and a “Love, Sex, and Reproduction” display in February for Valentine’s Day) or little known parts of the collection (photography books in the “science” library). All ECL staff had the opportunity to create displays. We used an online calendar to schedule display themes and dates.

Staff coordinated with cataloging and circulation personnel to create a specific ECL display “location” for the catalog. In addition to the online catalog location, we placed colored paper tape on the spines of current display books. When two separate displays were being featured at the same time, we used two different colors of paper tape. The tape served as an easy and obvious reminder to student workers that the books should be re-shelved to the display area

after check-in. After a display ended, we changed the online location, removed the paper tape, and re-shelved the books in the stacks.

We created both digital and print signs to promote and explain each display. The signs include the title of the display, the name of the library, and either a selection of book cover images or clip art related to the display theme (see Figure 4). The digital signs appear on video screens above the Information Desk in the ECL lobby, with smaller versions of the same images featured as news items on the JMU Libraries home page. We placed print signs on the shelves along with the book displays.

**[Insert - FIGURE 4** Themed book display with print signage.]

**[Insert - TABLE 1** Circulation Statistics for Rotating Book Displays and General ECL Collection, August 2009 through April 2010]

Table 1 provides statistics on circulation of the books highlighted in these displays in comparison to general circulation data for books in the ECL. We deliberately selected recently published and visually appealing books for the displays, so these same books may have circulated at a better than average rate even if they had been left in the stacks. However, this table gives an idea of the value of placing these books in a more visible location. The difference in the percentage of books circulating in the displays compared with the general ECL stacks was tested for statistical significance, using a test for comparing proportions (Fleiss, Levin, and Paik 2003). The null hypothesis of no difference between the two circulation rates was rejected, with an  $\alpha$ -level  $< 0.01$  (test statistic  $z=5.109$ ), indicating significantly higher circulation in the display books.

These displays also produced an unanticipated benefit. The display area established an obvious site for collaboration with faculty and other campus organizations. During the fall 2009 semester, a faculty member contacted the liaison librarian for her department to recommend a display about alternative transportation. This display turned out to be the most successful of the year in terms of circulation. In the 2010 spring semester, a student organization asked for a display of books to tie in with a series of events on campus related to eating disorder awareness. These were both good opportunities for ECL to form partnerships outside the library and highlight resources of interest to the larger JMU community. We consider these requests for displays to be great positive feedback.

## CONCLUSION

“The choice facing those who manage nonbusiness organizations is not whether to market or not to market, for no organization can avoid marketing. The choice is whether to do it well or poorly” (Kotler and Levy 1969, 15). In the Information Commons academic library environment, frontline staff are well situated to observe user behavior and provide feedback on their use of the library’s physical spaces and resources. “Marketing begins and ends with awareness of the library’s users” (Wagner 2005, xxii), and these staff have the daily knowledge needed to market the library’s resources well.

At JMU’s East Campus Library, frontline staff were the first to notice that users were not taking advantage of the browsing collection and reading area. They saw not only a problem but a possible solution, and recommended rearranging the shelves. We recognize that using formal research methods in addition to staff observations would have provided valuable initial

assessment data. However, conducting a user survey about library layout would have delayed implementing changes we felt were justified.

While implementing these changes to the browsing collection, we were inspired to create a book display using nearby shelving. We achieved all of this with no special funding and a minor investment of staff time. These small changes to the physical environment yielded large dividends in public awareness and use of book resources. Circulation of books may be decreasing in academic libraries, but initiatives undertaken by library staff can help fight that trend. At ECL, we learned that implementing a few simple space changes and inexpensive marketing techniques improved book visibility and user access, thereby increasing book circulation.

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