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Marketing Column

Nichole Rustad, Column Author

Process Makes Perfect: Asking Your Target Audience What They Really Want To Know About You

Libraries often find themselves communicating programs and services to different audiences — students, faculty, donors and the community. So what happens when you are tasked with creating a marketing piece to pique donors' interest? How do you know what they want to know about you, and what do they already know? Accurately assessing what your audience already understands about your library services can be a challenging aspect of your project. This column describes how an academic library in Ohio learned more about its target market to create a piece that could bring about the results it wanted.

University of Dayton's Promotional Piece Story

In the University of Dayton Libraries, we began as a team of five for this project, including the libraries' dean. We had several meetings to discuss creating a promotional piece that would appeal to donors, but kept hitting the proverbial wall. We know what we do in the library and what services we provide, but would a donor care to know that? How do we make the piece look and sound interesting enough to keep the reader engaged beyond the first page? When we could

not answer our own questions, we decided to put a group of donors and library advocates, our Libraries Advisory Council, to work at its spring meeting.

The Libraries Advisory Council is similar to a group of library friends. Its members — alumni, patrons, interested members of the community, corporate professionals and members of the library profession — are invited to join for two-year terms, charged with supporting library initiatives and sharing their expertise and opinions. The Libraries Advisory Council was an important part of this process because it is a loosely representative sampling of our target audience of friends, alumni and prospective benefactors. The development phase of the piece was handled much like a marketing agency would use a focus group for an advertising campaign.

The internal team came up with eight descriptive, identifying words that we felt explained who we are and what we do, then used these words to create a word association exercise. Then we enlarged and made copies of photographs from our library and other academic libraries' promotional materials. Supplies for the brainstorming session included index cards, flip charts, markers, tape and other materials.

The session started with lunch and an explanation of the afternoon's activities, along with a summary of goals, objectives and questions to ponder. We explained our need for a new promotional piece and that with several brainstorming exercises, the group was going to share how they see us and what they would like to see from us. We knew they would be curious about the target audience, so we described it as being donors and people interested in hearing more about the University Libraries and what exactly we do.

The Advisory Council members were broken into four teams of four with a person from the internal team – referred to as coaches – assigned to each table to guide and observe. Notes about the table discussions were recorded for the postmortem internal meeting. The session leader provided instructions for each activity and described the role of the internal team members.

Activity #1 – Free Association Word Exercise

The internal team chose eight descriptive, identifying words and phrases: academic library, culture, discover, learn, responsive, relevant, connector and history. These words played a key role in getting the group's creative juices flowing.

Each person was given a stack of index cards with a word written on the top card and five blank ones underneath. In a two-minute lightning round, they were asked to write the first word that came to mind when they read the word on their stack, then put the card with the initial assigned word into a pile. Everyone passed the new word he or she wrote in response to the initial word to the person to the right and received a new word from the person at the left. Then the free association process would begin again.

We reminded them that at times this activity may seem challenging, but there were no wrong answers. At the end of the first round, internal team members gathered the cards and distributed a new stack to each participant. They completed three free association rounds in under 10 minutes. The quick time frame helped increase the energy and excitement in the room.

Activity #2 – Choose What You Like

By the second activity, everyone was relaxed and having fun. We pulled out the enlarged photographs mentioned before, along with the free association words, and spread it all out on tables for the participants to examine. Each person was asked to choose 10 words and five images that would effectively describe the library in a promotional piece. After they selected, they returned to their groups.

Activity #3 – See Your Library from the Outside

In the third activity, the groups were asked to work as a team to narrow down their choices to five words with five corresponding images. Finding common themes within the words helped with the process of elimination. Some groups created lists and ranked their words by how many times they were duplicated. Some teams elected a spokesperson to write on the flip chart, while others used their coach to write as the group discussed strategy. Meanwhile, coaches took notes of comments — positive and negative — for later reflection. Once the groups chose their words, they moved to selecting images. Since images carry different meanings and emotional responses for different people, this process took longer than the word selection, with more discussion amongst the teams about choosing images with the most impact.

Coaches reported hearing positive comments about our unique collections and how to properly highlight them. At the same time, we overheard some negative comments about aspects of our buildings' architecture. The internal team considered all of this unexpected feedback “bonus material.” It provided a look at our library from the outside — the perspective we were lacking in our initial conceptual discussions.

Activity #4 – Take Out the Markers and Draw

Using the flip charts, the teams were asked to sketch out a design for a promotional piece using their words and images. Each team went a different direction with this activity, making it a unique and fun experience for all. One team thought about the theme of the cover, drawing a bird taking flight to represent the knowledge a student gains when using the library. Another team described how the words and images worked together in each section of their piece, taping their chosen images on each page. One team proposed repurposing an old book cover as a mailer using minimal copy and no images on the inside. Discussion of cost, availability of old book covers, and mailing issues consumed the group's time, so another viable option was not conceived within the allotted time. We should have prefaced this activity by saying the sky was not the limit for our marketing budget.

Do and Redo

The coaches gathered feedback and observations from the activities, using the sketches for reference. The internal team met once again to discuss the activities and a new direction for the piece. The communications and outreach librarian, communications manager and graphic designer worked together for three months to prepare mock-ups of the conceptual design for the fall Libraries Advisory Council meeting.

Libraries Advisory Council members were asked to examine the mock-ups in small groups.

Using Post-it Notes and markers, they provided feedback directly on the piece, then discussed it

in the large group. The response was immediately clear: They were not impressed. The last thing we expected was a lukewarm reception. After reviewing their comments, we realized we were still treating this brochure as if it was meant for all audiences.

The internal team went to work again, reviewing the feedback from the council to decipher how we missed the mark. The pages the group were most drawn to were those showing library impact on faculty, students and the community. From these conversations evolved a clear idea of what was missing: stories that not only illustrate the impact of the libraries, but also tug at the heartstrings to make people want to care about the libraries.

The Final Product

Over the next few months, the communications manager interviewed faculty, students and alumni identified as heavy users of our library. The five most engaging stories were selected for the promotional piece that highlighted the commitment to serve; the support of learning and developing researchers; a library built for an emerging research institution; serving students, shaping careers and inspiring ideas; and advancing with technology and trends. These themes evolved from the original brainstorming sessions.

Ideas surrounding the library being a welcoming place; the heart of academic life; a place where students can study, research and create; students participating in transformative learning through library services and spaces; and new technology and methods being implemented in these new times began to emerge and would later become the main section titles of the piece.

The communications and outreach librarian worked with a student photographer for environmental portraits of featured subjects and photos of library spaces. The graphic designer pulled other images from the library's photo banks and then compiled the content and images into an effectively designed promotional piece.

A call to action was included in the piece to encourage a visit to explore everything our library has to offer. A web page with a URL unique to the piece directed readers to more stories such as those found in the printed brochure; this allowed us to measure the impact of this specific piece.

The final printed version was presented at the spring Libraries Advisory Council meeting – one year after the brainstorming session. The feedback was positive all around.

What We Learned

Upon reflection, our internal team learned a lot from this yearlong project. We would like to share a few of our take-aways for you to consider before diving into your next big venture.

Assemble the right team. Gathering a group of individuals with a vested interest in your library is a key component for success. It can be a team representing your library's departments or an advisory group made up of individuals dedicated to your organization.

Let your audience do the talking. The group should be sample section of your intended audience, such as heavy library users or donors. Librarians themselves are often too close to

describe the services they provide in user-friendly terms. They end up using words people outside of libraries do not understand.

Look to the future, but don't ignore your past. The Advisory Council made it clear in the brainstorming sessions that they expected to see sections about books and special collections in brochures about libraries, much to our dismay. The internal team's original focus was to portray our relevance as an innovative and forward-thinking library. Apparently, being relevant in our donors' and Advisory Council members' opinions is the ability to connect our past to our future.

Sometimes, a do-over is OK. Not every project is going to have an open-ended deadline such as this one, but it is imperative to step away from your concept, even for a day or two, to review with a fresh pair of eyes. If you have another person or group of people to bounce concepts and ideas off of, take advantage of it. Not every idea needs to be implemented (remember the book cover?), but sometimes great suggestions come from the most unlikely sources. It is also OK to throw out a concept or design that is not working and start fresh.

The PDF version of our final piece, which we nicknamed our "image piece," is available for download at http://ecommons.udayton.edu/libraries_rptspromo/15.