


Holding Our Ground at the Edge: Influencing Perceptions of Library Value

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Abstract

Who judges the value of our libraries? Administrators look at costs and benefits, so librarians generate reports about the use of library spaces, resources, and services to demonstrate return on investment. But potential library users simply decide if we can satisfy their needs. Some people form a judgment based upon an initial perception or brief encounter, some hold fleeting opinions, and others become entrenched in a specific perspective – sometimes for years. A perception may be opposite to reality, but it is owned by the perceiver. Influencing perceptions is a strategy that can support the success of a library. If researchers do not perceive that the library can help them achieve their goals, they will not use it; if administrators perceive that the library is not supporting the institutional mission, they will not fund it. Managing a library in which perceived value is struggling is challenging, especially for a solo librarian who recognizes that “I am the library, the library is me, and as such we are both judged.” Strategies to create positive perceptions include demonstrating commitment and relevance, which are often necessary to establish recognition of value. Perceptions may be formed at orientation and they can be made or unmade in a passing conversation with an administrator. Here we explore some strategies used at the Marine Resources Library in Charleston, South Carolina to demonstrate relevance and commitment, and to create a positive perception of the library’s worth to graduate students, professional researchers, and administrators.

Keywords: Perception, communication, library administration, library orientation, information literacy, training, marine scientists, graduate students, building layout, volunteer workers in science.

Introduction

The success of an academic or professional library is largely demonstrated to administrators by data demonstrating library impact in support of the institution’s teaching and/or research mission (Murray and Ireland, 2018). Underlying many of these data, however, are the numerous individual and group experiences in which information is acquired, space is utilized, services are provided, skills are developed, and learning occurs. These interactions are ultimately dependent upon the willingness of an individual or an instructor to use the physical or virtual library or to engage the librarian for an information transaction or learning experience. This willingness to use the library is closely tied to individuals’ perceptions of the library’s relevance and commitment to meet their needs. Library managers who understand user perceptions are well positioned to address this influence upon user behavior.

Perceptions are developed and possessed by individuals and may be formed both based on actual experiences of the library or preconceptions about the library. From a library management perspective, perceptions can seem quite unfair. Negative perceptions about the library may be factually errant; based upon unrelated information, experiences, or hearsay; or rooted in a poor past experience with a library employee. Perceptions can be persistent or fleeting, affecting behavior for years or for moments. Nevertheless, the perception belongs to the perceiver and influences their decisions about using or supporting the library. This presents a challenge for the librarian: How can perceptions be influenced?

Negative stereotypes about librarians still persist today. A key perception about library employees that can impact the willingness of users to engage them for assistance is accessibility. Accessibility is interpreted differently among individuals, but it is more complex than just being available. Projections of warmth and informality can make a librarian appear more approachable, thereby increasing the perception of accessibility and the willingness of library users to engage them (Muszkiewicz, 2017). From a faculty perspective, successful communication grounded in the development of personal relationships between librarians and faculty is a key determinant of perceived value and use of library services (Creaser & Spezi, 2014). Outreach to faculty is, therefore, a key component of demonstrating accessibility.

For librarians serving graduate students and professional researchers, a further challenge is assuring these constituents that the librarian is qualified and competent to provide meaningful assistance at their level of research, particularly for those who are confident in their self-sufficiency (Martin-Yeboah and Atuase, 2019). While these researchers are achieving mastery of their discipline, however, they do not always use library resources and services as efficiently as they could. Faculty perceptions of the contribution of librarians to student learning has been shown to be a function of perceived frequency of librarian-student contact, co-influenced by the faculty member's own level of focus on improving students' literature research skills (Kelly, 2019). Thus, the perception of the value of a librarian in the learning process is not formed simply by achievement of learning outcomes.

Perceptions of the physical and virtual library can impact user behavior. The frequency and duration of library use has been shown to be correlated with a perception of the library as a place where learning can happen (Kim, 2017). Library spaces have been in transition from silent places of solitude to comfortable, collaborative, and technology-rich places of exploration and creation, where solitude may still also be found. Just as a physical space that doesn't match today's learning style will be avoided, the library website and third-party tools integrated therein must enable library users to accomplish their goals in their own way. Anything that is perceived to hinder the learning process will be substituted with something that better meets the user's preference. The popularity of Google Scholar over subscription scientific index and abstract databases is an example of such substitution.

Context

The Marine Resources Library (MRL) in Charleston, South Carolina, USA, is located at the South Carolina Marine Resources Center (MRC). Functioning as a branch library of the College of Charleston (CofC), the library is a collaborative enterprise of the College, the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources (SCDNR) Marine Resources Research Institute (MRRI), and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) National Centers for Coastal Ocean Science (NCCOS) and National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) laboratories. Library constituents are primarily professional and faculty researchers, and master's students of the CofC Graduate Program in Marine Biology. The 4,160 square foot library is staffed by one CofC faculty librarian and one library technical assistant. The MRL print collection contains 793 serials and approximately 38,000 volumes, while the online collection is the

primary focus for ongoing resources and monograph package purchases coordinated by CofC Libraries. I am now in my fifth year as the MRL librarian, following in the footsteps of a librarian who served there for 25 years. The library budget covers acquisitions and personnel, but no discretionary funds are directly available for other needs. The administration of the College of Charleston Libraries and other institutional partners must be petitioned for all non-budgeted purchases.

Challenges

Near the beginning of the 2015-16 academic year, I arrived at MRL and, before attempting to make changes, sought to understand the existing situation. The library had experienced seven months without a dedicated librarian; stand-in librarians from CofC and the two MRL library staff kept operations functioning, but staff morale was low. Changes in administrative leadership of institutional partners had contributed to reduced communication, resulting in some tension and mistrust. The physical library appeared very dated, with old uncomfortable furniture deterring people from working there. The website was long overdue an overhaul to better promote and facilitate access to the growing suite of online resources and services. After communicating with a number of graduate students, members of the faculty, researchers, and administrators, it became apparent that the general perception of the library was of fading relevance. Conversations with administrators about commitment to ongoing cooperative funding suggested that the library's future was uncertain.

Strategy

Recognizing that the relevance and commitment of the library were being undervalued, I developed a strategy to improve user and administrator perceptions:

- Immediate action
 - Relevance: improve first impressions of the physical library as a matter of urgency to positively influence user/administrator perceptions, and staff morale.
 - Commitment: engage new graduate students more effectively at orientation to create a strong first impression and lay a foundation for future interaction.
- Short term action
 - Relevance: engage library constituents to understand and respond to their needs.
 - Commitment: Identify new services to equip library constituents for their work and volunteer in support of their work.
- Longer term action
 - Explore partnership opportunities.

Improve First Impressions of the Physical Library

Immediate results in the physical space were achieved at no direct cost by rearranging furniture and equipment to optimize space use and to improve appearance and function:

- Tables and carrels in the study area were moved to increase access to electricity from the limited number of electrical outlets.
- Several carrels were converted to tables.
- Unsightly and damaged furniture was removed altogether, and the contents relocated elsewhere in the library.
- Three surplus computer screens were removed from storage and set up on three tables for use as second screens by laptop users.

- A new touch screen dual scanner station that had been hidden from view was relocated near the library entrance and is now the first thing that people see from the entrance.
- A prime 300 square foot space with a 17-foot harbor-view window that was occupied by the least-used resources (microfiche reader, storage cabinets, file cabinets, and map cases) was freed up by moving these to the least-frequented end of the library.

The chairs in the library were very old and uncomfortable, but no funds were available to replace furniture. To upgrade seating, I regularly drove to the College surplus warehouse and surveyed seating cast off by other departments. Over several months of trading and re-trading chairs with the warehouse, seating in the library was much improved at a cost of a few hours and a little fuel. Students, the primary users of library study space, were very grateful.

Engage Incoming Graduate Students More Effectively at Orientation

With an eagerness to make library orientation for graduate students an engaging experience and a constructive foundation upon which to build, I have focused more on interacting with the students and getting to know them as people, rather than trying to teach as much as possible about the library in the 60-minute session. A third of the orientation session is devoted solely to the participants and librarian introducing themselves and communicating their interests and aspirations in the field of marine biology. Importantly, I communicate a commitment to help students however I can and repeatedly emphasize that I encourage students to ask questions and to feel okay about interrupting me at any time. Then a light-hearted and sometimes humorous introduction to general library information, policies, and the website communicates the essentials for students to start using the library. To conclude the orientation, I explain my research interests and how they are designed to inform and improve the services I provide to students. I encourage students to contribute ideas during the course of their program of study as to how the library could better meet their needs. The emphasis on people over resources during this orientation has successfully communicated a commitment to students, which has been reflected in subsequent interactions.

Engage Library Constituents to Understand and Respond to their Needs

In the short term, I introduced myself to professional library constituents (teaching faculty and state and federal researchers) and sought to learn about their library resource and service needs, both met and unmet. A survey was prepared and sent to researchers to solicit feedback. Priorities for action were primarily related to electronic resource access and instruction in the use of databases or how to access full text content. With electronic journals clearly being the preferred format for researchers from all partners, the website is also an important part of the research experience. The existing site was long overdue a redesign in form and function to better serve researchers.

Website redesign priorities that were identified and addressed included:

- Redesign of website appearance to make it more contemporary and attractive.
- Creation of a new library logo to promote the library brand.
- Improved access to search tools with a search portal on the home page.
- Promotion of new book acquisitions with a virtual bookshelf and installation of a dedicated iMac (retrieved from CofC surplus where it had been retired) to display it.
- Addition of a full text access techniques page in library guides.

In addition, I continued interacting with new graduate students at every opportunity (including attending social functions of the College) in order to both encourage them as they settled into the

groove of graduate school, but also to learn about their progress in identifying a thesis topic. This provided an opportunity to suggest resources to students and, once a topic was settled, to inform strategic acquisition of library monographs. When books of particular relevance to a student's thesis work arrive, I contact the student and give them the first opportunity to check the book out. Students have been surprised and very appreciative of this personal service approach. While initially focusing most on first-year graduate students, I am increasingly intentionally interacting with them during the full course of their studies.

Following a conversation with an administrator in which I recognized an institutional constraint that I could help relieve, I proposed to develop a conference/teaching room in the newly liberated 300 square foot space that would serve multiple purposes. It would provide me with a place to teach, add to the limited pool of meeting spaces in the SCDNR MRRRI building, and introduce a collaborative study space for students. I prioritized this initiative particularly because it demonstrated to administrators that I was committed to improving the library's utility while facilitating a cooperative project between two agencies. In the short term, the SCDNR funded the construction of a glass panel wall while CofC provided a ceiling projector, cables, laptop, and whiteboard, and purchased a new podium. The space quickly became very popular and well used. With many more people entering the library to attend meetings in the space, the other improvements were quickly noticed, and positive perceptions were communicated by numerous researchers about the changes that had been implemented.

Identify New Services to Equip Library Constituents for their Work

We have long understood that undergraduate library instruction is best experienced in the context of a specific assignment, which gives students an appreciation of its relevance to their immediate information needs. More advanced researchers are no different. Graduate students have been observed to respond best to training opportunities that teach relevant skills for success in their studies or profession (Baruzzi & Calcagno, 2015). Professional researchers are similarly willing to invest time in library workshops that they perceive will improve their workflow.

In 2016, I started offering regular training opportunities to all agencies partnering with the library. Sessions now include demonstrating features of Web of Science, Zoological Record, and ASFA databases; creation and management of an ORCID profile; streamlining full text access in Google Scholar with Kopernio; setting up emailed search alerts on four different platforms; and citation management with Mendeley or Zotero. Some of these sessions were offered and delivered via Skype to a remote field station, the coordinator of which expressed great appreciation at the staff being served in this way. Positive comments about monthly email offerings of training opportunities confirm that the library is seen to be actively supporting its partners. In FY2018-2019, 50 researchers and students participated in MRL training sessions.

Volunteer with Fieldwork

I cannot imagine a better way to demonstrate commitment as a librarian than to help somebody achieve their academic or professional goals. To engage SCDNR researchers, I am trying an unusual strategy that takes me out of the library to meet them where they are: I volunteer to help with their field work. A variety of hands-on opportunities exist to support SCDNR research, many of which involve getting hot or cold, wet, dirty, and tired – not a state in which I'd otherwise normally be seen in my role as librarian. To date I have participated in drop net surveys around artificial oyster reefs, nighttime horseshoe crab surveys at local spawning grounds, an inshore shark survey, an electrofishing survey, and SCDNR's fish tagging program. By participating, I am better known by, and acquainted with, SCDNR colleagues.

It was not difficult to be inspired to implement this strategy, because I am an avid outdoorsman. But the real motivation is to partner with these researchers in accomplishing their goals, to get to know them and their research objectives, and to be seen among them working. This exemplifies my philosophy of “I am the library, the library is me, and as such we are both judged.” In other words, if my getting covered with mackerel guts during a shark survey or plastered with pluff mud during a drop net survey raises the profile of the library by virtue of my willingness to participate, then I consider it a worthwhile accomplishment.

Explore Partnership Opportunities

Since 2016 I have embarked upon an initiative to assess and improve the information literacy of incoming marine biology graduate students. In partnership with the Director of the Graduate Program in Marine Biology and a faculty volunteer, we have assessed students with a quiz and a narrated screen capture video of an initial literature search. I use this information to guide the one mandatory library instruction session I get with these students. A post-test of the same format of quiz and narrated screen capture video provide impact data. This ongoing partnership has demonstrated to faculty a commitment of the library to contribute to graduate student success. Building upon this, and information learned over several years, a new partnership to teach scientific writing skills to graduate students will launch in spring 2020.

Not all partnership plans have progressed. I have explored research data management strategies as well as the universal use of ORCID profiles to document publications, with SCDNR. Neither of these has progressed beyond conversations with administrators, although individuals have attended ORCID training sessions upon their own initiative.

Observations

Much like the folk tale about stone soup where reluctant villagers contributed sparse food to ultimately create a tasty soup that all could share, evidence of effort to make improvements at MRL inspired material contributions from some partners. After the initial trading of chairs and rearranging of furniture and equipment demonstrated a commitment to improve the library at little cost, the collaborative effort to construct and equip the classroom was able to occur. This success, documented with photographs in an annual report, ultimately resulted in further contributions by the CofC main library of new rolling whiteboards, high-quality office chairs, easy chairs, several tables and carrels, and a new mobile charging station and mobile-compatible power strips to improve the MRL study area even more. It took small steps to create a perception of commitment and future value, and to create momentum for further contributions.

Communication about resources and services has, through word of mouth feedback, proven to be instrumental in improving perceptions, especially of those who do not often use the physical library. The promotion of training opportunities, resources, and services has helped raise the profile of MRL within the research community at MRC. Of particular surprise has been the extent to which word has traveled about the improvements made at MRL, with positive reports from College administrators who do not, themselves, use the library. For good, or for bad, perceptions can multiply as communication about experiences and observations occurs.

While the evolution of MRL over the past five years has been one of slow and steady successful improvement and engagement with users, it has not been without difficulties. A few issues threatened to damage perceptions of the library with some professional researchers:

- De-acquisition (weeding) at MRL was considered inappropriate by some researchers, while others expressed that only space limitations could justify weeding. Weeding projects must be communicated as a positive process of improving the quality, relevance, and validity of library content or liberating space to accomplish important initiatives. In a psycholinguistic study of articles about weeding and emotional reactions of constituents, three best practices are acknowledged: communicating openly with library constituents, creating and adhering to a quality weeding plan, and addressing emotions and concerns (Agee, 2017). While a weeding project is an opportunity to build or utilize partnerships with library users, it is hard to please everyone.
- Budgets are a potential source of tension and conflict, and libraries require substantial funds. It is important to demonstrate to (and remind) partner administrators of how the library is supporting their mission so that they perceive the library as an investment rather than merely a consumer of resources.
- Impromptu conversations about the library require readiness. When unexpectedly asked by an administrator, “how are things at MRL?” or “what’s new in the library?” how do we respond? This can be a rare opportunity to communicate a new initiative or an accomplishment that impacts the institution. At worst, the impression can be given that nothing is happening, and the library is not in a process of evolution and improvement. Conscious preparation of a two-minute enthusiastic description of a current project or outcome can create a positive perception of the library’s level of relevance and engagement.

Librarianship “on the edge” can be uncomfortable at first, when concern about negative perceptions, potential failure, or even the survival of the library itself is high. Instead of worrying about what might happen, I focus energy on what I can do with what I have; I do whatever I can to serve and positively impact individuals, because it is with each individual that a perception is formed. The reputation of MRL, intertwined with my own reputation, is built one perception at a time in the hope that the positive perceptions of many will inform and justify administrative decisions for future support.

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