

Feature Article

Revealing your value through meaningful messages

Mary Dunne

Health Research Board, Dublin, Ireland

Abstract

Our role, as librarians and information specialists, must be viewed as relevant and important to stakeholders. Yet key services traditionally associated with libraries now appear to be easily available elsewhere and people often underestimate what we do. We can help redefine these perceptions by changing the way we communicate. Value propositions are simple, yet compelling, messages that summarise the benefits stakeholders will obtain by using our services and resources. These statements are written for a specific audience, based on what they value and what we offer that is special and unique. This article provides the tools to create your own value proposition statements; so that you may articulate your true value in a way that matters, to those that matter.

Key words: librarians; libraries; marketing; communication.

Introduction

Health librarians and information specialists are doing important, innovative work, and our role is evolving to meet changing needs. But is this evident to our stakeholders? That is, are we effectively communicating our value to our funders, patrons and others who increasingly believe that their information needs can be met elsewhere, and underestimate what we can offer them? (1-3). Competition for scarce resources means we must be persuasive that our role is essential. We can do this by taking control of the messages we convey, because “through words that work, we have the power to transform our image and to command our full value” (4, p. 32).

Developing messages

The idea of using short targeted messages in libraries is not new (5, 6). Social media, particularly twitter, has taught us about the value of brief, eye-catching communication. These types of messages are most often produced spontaneously in response to a current event and demonstrate our responsiveness and expertise. Other types of messages, however, require more consideration and the collaborative input of the library team. They are designed to help shape conversations about us and our services by

simply and clearly summing up the benefits of our services for specific audiences. It is worth investing time in their creation because these are the messages you want your stakeholders to remember. Even the process of creating your messages is itself useful. The act of reflection required to craft them, if done well, ensures that you clarify your purpose and consider how well you are achieving it.

Although many librarians and information specialists don't think of what we do in business terms, we should perhaps think like a business, while acting like a librarian (7). Resources and services do not simply appear, nor are they produced by the “library”. They are created, organised and provided by staff who have chosen or crafted them specifically for the needs of their communities. For too long we have been content to be the invisible provider, assured in the knowledge that people think libraries are good things, and so will always exist. Yet, now more than ever, people can choose from a large number of information providers. When considering using a service they assess benefit versus cost (time and effort as well as price), and compare with alternatives. How we communicate about ourselves influences this assessment.

Value propositions are used by those in business as a promise to their stakeholders of value to be

Address for correspondence: Mary Dunne, Health Research Board, Grattan House, 67-72 Lower Mount Street, Dublin 2, Ireland. E-mail: mdunne@hrb.ie

delivered (8, 9); and may be used as part of our communication strategy (10). They are statements that explain how we can solve our stakeholders' problems or improve their situation, and why they need us rather than the competition. So each statement informs a specific audience about the unique benefits that we can offer them.

Their use has been recommended by numerous librarians and information specialists (11-16). For some, a value proposition simply describes the particular value of a service. However it is hard to distinguish these messages from other librarian-created slogans. A value proposition is better thought of as the result of a more rigorous process that is based on the point of view of key stakeholders and aligns your value explicitly to their needs (17). This process ensures that you make a reflective and meaningful examination of what you do, and perhaps more importantly, why you do it. There are three steps, during which you consider:

- Your stakeholders – what do they value?
- Yourself – what is your personal and professional added value?
- Your competitors – who are they? What are your strengths compared to them?

When you understand these aspects you should be in a better position to communicate clear, appropriate messages that immediately articulate your value in a way that matters, to those who matter.

Developing value propositions

Our stakeholders

Marketing literature consistently advocates that communication is centred on the voice of the stakeholder (3). Your library has many stakeholders, and each will value different aspects of your work. For example, managers in your funding organisation will value how you contribute to the organisation's mission, goals or key indicators (2, 18, 19). Start by reviewing these aspects of strategy for your organisation and governing bodies, and explicitly map your contribution to their achievement. Then note any keywords that you can incorporate into your value proposition statements to funders.

Communicating well with your patrons is another priority. Trying to be all things to all people is not a good business or marketing strategy, so be selective when choosing your audience (20). You can segment

patrons by their profession, education level, or by their familiarity with resources from novice to expert (21). Then establish what each group values.

Some information about value can be ascertained using software and analytics programmes that analyse patron queries and their use of your online resources. But a patron-centred approach means that you need to gather more in-depth views. When planning surveys, focus groups or interviews consider: why patrons use your services; how they benefit; and what they value most. Particularly rich information can be found by mapping the conversations of your community (22). What are people talking about? Where, and how, can you join the conversation? All of these approaches mean that you can speak to stakeholders in terms they find relevant; giving your communication better impact.

Ourselves

For the business community, the second aspect in a value proposition is the product. Our "product" usually refers to the library and its physical resources. But much of the value comes from the library staff – we find and organise collections, design interfaces, choose and create resources, instruct on their use, lead literacy and other campaigns and so on. Yet this is often unreported. When we speak about ourselves we generally speak in terms of what we do. We catalogue resources, perform searches, teach and so on. But these are simply the mechanisms we use to achieve our purpose. It is more powerful when we add why we do what we do. In my own library's value and impact study we found evidence that using our library services brought about positive affective, knowledge-based, behavioural and competence-based change for our patrons (23). That is why we do what we do and these are the types of benefits we need to communicate. So, messages that report what you do should also include why. This is often associated with positive change for stakeholders and helping them achieve their goals.

For example, stakeholders may value or want to achieve some of the following:

- Students – success, to learn, create knowledge, attain chosen career...
- Faculty – teach (fulfil curriculum), successful students, status, respect...

- Researchers – reputation, originality, intellectual safety and honesty...
- Health practitioners – safe, effective practice and continuing professional development...
- Funders – credibility, fulfil their mandate, return on investment ...

How do you connect, empower, enable, encourage, facilitate, guide, help, inspire, or motivate your stakeholders to achieve their goals?

An important element is the move from highlighting only extrinsic value (we can give you access to what you need) to highlighting potential intrinsic values (we can help you achieve success) (20). With so many information providers, this shift may be vital to how we are perceived and valued. In essence this means that you should know how you add value and why it's important. Then be prepared to talk about it.

Our competitors

The final aspect concerns our competitors. These are anyone our stakeholders perceive can meet their knowledge and information needs (24). So, if students, practitioners, or funders believe that they don't need a library because everything is on the internet, then unfortunately they are viewing the internet and probably search engines as an alternative. Of course, we can't (and shouldn't) compete with search engines in terms of size of collection, or providing answers to simple reference queries, so we need to focus on what we do that is different or better. The internet has not diminished the need for librarians. In fact, there is now a greater need to help people organise and understand the enormous quantity of available information (3). It is important to have examples of how you are facilitating this process.

Search engines aren't our only perceived competitors. Some organisations selectively pick publications and make them available through "libraries" on their websites. They may seem a cheaper alternative to a discrete librarian-run service. And administrators, volunteers and self-service technology are being used in some sectors instead of library professionals and paraprofessionals.

But these *competitors* (and others) can't actually do what we do. They are our competition only until our stakeholders truly appreciate and understand our role. Then they are revealed as potential partners and mechanisms of support rather than our

replacements. That is why we must clearly and frequently articulate what we do that is different or better than others. If we can articulate what makes us special it will make advocacy work much easier.

Creating messages

Our three value propositions aspects are brought together in *Figure 1*; illustrating that you are primarily interested in the overlap of what your stakeholders value and what you uniquely offer; shown here as the shaded areas. This is where you focus your message.

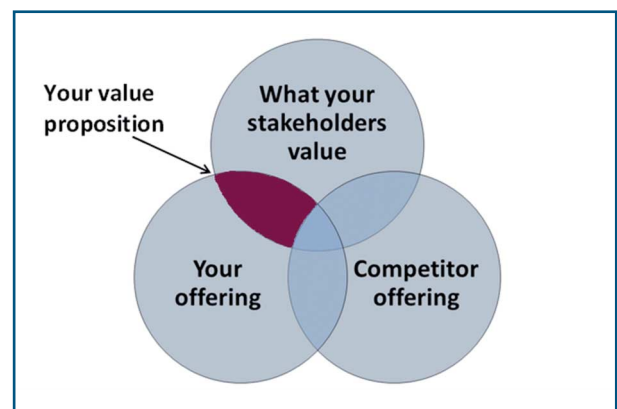


Figure 1. Focusing your value proposition

For example, for health practitioners:

- *We will help you connect with the people and resources you need for best practice*

or

- *[YL] librarians provide credible resources in one place, so you can make credible decisions in practice.*

And for funders (referencing keywords from the organisation's mission about improving health):

- *We improve peoples health and wellbeing by facilitating effective, evidence-informed practice.*

Effective messages are brief and simple, usually delivering a single idea (8). They need to speak directly to people, in their own words. Ensure they are credible yet aspirational. Highlight the values you want to represent, and to which health practitioners identify, such as learning, creativity, initiative, competence, and success (20). Value propositions are designed to engage and to open a conversation. You will be able to elaborate in an informed way because you understand what your

audience values, and what you offer that is special and unique. Remember this is a promise, so you are saying: if you use our services, or if you fund us this is what we will deliver, this is how you will benefit. You can use value propositions for your website, promotional material, corporate literature, and obviously in-person. So when you meet your manager in the lift, or practitioners in committees, or anytime you introduce yourself you can take the opportunity to remind them that you are a skilled professional with an indispensable purpose.

Conclusion

The idea of using value propositions to articulate the value of a library is not new; but we must ensure that they are written in a way that emphasises the important role of the librarian and information specialist. These messages should resonate with stakeholders but are also the means to take control of your brand, that is, your personal and professional reputation. People are used to finding resources at the click of a button but, beyond library logos, we often don't reveal authorship or ownership of our creations. Placing a value proposition at the top of a resource informs its users of the role of librarians, and that our specialist knowledge and skills brings personal understanding of their needs.

We spend a great deal of time helping people find particular resources. We also need to help them discover what we do. There are things you can do to facilitate this:

- communicate about things your stakeholders value;
- know how you add value and be prepared to talk about it;
- clearly and frequently articulate what you do that is different or better than others.

Value propositions incorporate these elements. They enable you to communicate your worth through a series of short messages that when combined reveal your worth. Unless we take every opportunity to convey our story, librarians will remain the ultimate hidden resource!

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