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Planning Serendipitous Liaison Outreach

John Glover

Virginia Commonwealth University, jglover2@vcu.edu

Bettina Peacemaker

Virginia Commonwealth University, bjpeacemaker@vcu.edu

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Chance Encounters

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John Glover • Bettina Peacemaker
jglover2@vcu.edu • bjpeacemaker@vcu.edu

VCU Libraries

Preparing for Serendipity

Friendly Face in the Crowd

This summer I attended a workshop on instruction and student learning. While there, I met a new faculty member from a department I serve, we scheduled a meeting, and I talked with her about the library's resources. Subsequently I have taught multiple library instruction sessions for her classes, which have in turn led to research consultations with undergraduates. With mobile device handy and a mindset in place for outreach, I was able to develop a chance meeting into the beginning of what I expect to be a fruitful, long-term relationship.



Word of Mouth

In Spring 2010, I ran into an instructor on the way to work. A quick "hello" led to a discussion about library resources, which led to a consultation and an instruction session. The instructor then told a student to see him for research consultations. Subsequently, that student told some of her friends that the consultation was useful, and word spread. A chance encounter on a street corner at 8:45 a.m. in the morning, before even reaching the office, led to one instruction session and four research consultations.



Starbucks and Serendipity

Providing patrons an opportunity to ask for help isn't harassment, and smiling, waving, or saying "hi" at the coffee shop doesn't cost a penny. While it's true that some patrons don't want librarians "invading their space," some patrons really do value seeing you face-to-face, as opposed to getting one more e-mail.

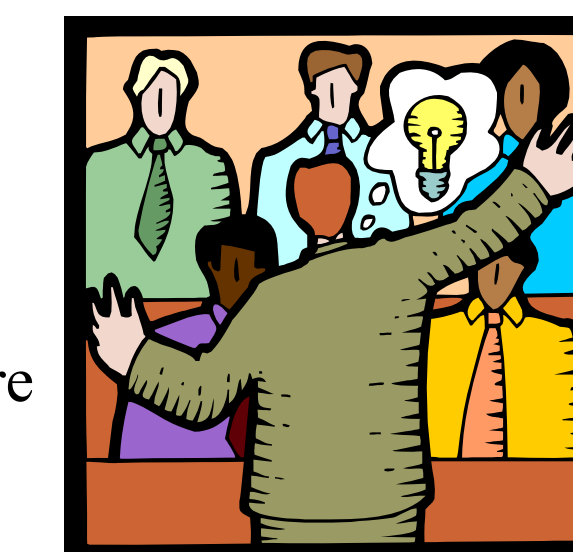
- Keep your planner or phone handy and schedule a follow-up on the spot.
- Listen for cues like "I was at the library the other day..."
- Try asking open-ended questions about patrons' reading or research.



Workplace Encounters

Your library, or the larger institution it's part of, is an obvious place to make connections. Running into patrons at non-library events may be easier than you think: HR brown bags, lectures, or professional development activities all have potential to connect you with people you serve directly but may not see every day.

- Faculty members take computer and technology classes too, so talking with classmates can be productive.
- Connecting on Facebook, LinkedIn, or Twitter can put your face in front of more patrons, which will sometimes nudge them to get in touch.



Your Friendly Neighborhood Librarian

Outreach activities, serendipitous or otherwise, will increase your visibility around campus. Students and faculty will start to recognize you outside the library, which is a great opportunity for enhancing your liaison work. I am regularly "recognized" on the street, and in the past, I always referred questions back to the library, but patrons rarely followed up. Now, I answer the question wherever I am, often with the help of my iTouch, and response has improved dramatically.



Around Town

Casual social events, even outside the immediate campus, can be a valuable opportunity to get to know your faculty and students. The VCU community is made up of over 50,000 students, faculty, and staff, so it isn't unusual to run into potential library "customers" away from campus—even in your own community. You can use these low-pressure encounters to put a friendly face on the library and establish a low-tech social network.

- You don't always have to be "on" away from the office, but be prepared in case an opportunity presents itself.
- There's no need to aggressively "sell" anything here. Just being friendly is a great starting place.



Roving Reference, Redefined

Mobile devices have made roving reference a realistic reality. With an iTouch or iPad, a campus-wide wifi network, and a mobile-ready library Website, we can answer almost any question almost anywhere. We have demonstrated a database search at the student commons, scheduled appointments across campus, and answered reference questions on the street.

- Consider what device will work best for your environment and audience.
- Think about what reference sources and applications you need.
- Don't forget your mobile device when you are around campus.



Making Luck Work

A lot has been written about the role that luck plays at work and in our lives (see Webber for a practical discussion), so why not use chance to our advantage in a library setting? As liaison librarians at Virginia Commonwealth University, we are challenged with establishing and maintaining relationships with thousands of students, faculty, and staff across a large university. We pursue traditional areas of outreach, but even with the most strategic planning, some opportunities are still missed. Limited resources are also a common reality, so how can we leverage serendipity in our everyday work activities to supplement structured outreach?



We are always on the lookout for opportunities to promote services and resources in unexpected situations and settings. A little effort and willingness to move a small distance out of our comfort zones has proven remarkably successful in reaching elusive patrons. Serendipitous outreach may be difficult to document and thus less inherently appealing when it comes to evaluating our annual efforts, and yet in certain ways it helps us meet our outreach goals at least as effectively as formal outreach methods.

Further Resources

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