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Relax, Be Earnest: Marketing a Serials Deselection Project

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Abstract

Many libraries use the fear of public outcry as a reason to limit interaction with their communities while in the process of deselecting materials. This paper proposes that well-written policies, process transparency, and a properly managed promotional plan are the best approaches to building goodwill and support among concerned constituents. “Throwing away books” does not have to be done in secret. A process for transforming internal goals into external communications and marketing events is provided along with a discussion of the partnerships and resources needed to accomplish that transformation. Outcomes of the project, including reutilization of space, updated library policies, and reactions from the community are also presented.

Introduction

Let’s face it—deselecting materials is a necessary evil. Librarians have been aware of the benefits of a well-weeded collection for years and yet the process continues to fill us with dread. Especially the thought of our users discovering that we are doing it. As one librarian states, “don your black clothes and come to the school [or library] in the dead of night to haul your double bagged discarded books to the dumpster” (Allen, 2010, p. 33). We have heard horror stories of library users arguing with libraries for removing materials. Some deselection projects have stopped dead in their tracks after powerful users made their disagreements with the project known to higher levels of administration.

Despite those obstacles, the need to move out undesired books and journals to provide for more appropriate use of library space is ever present. So, while some libraries may take the secretive path to deselection, this paper advocates for more, rather than less, communication with users about these projects. As the experts in the field, librarians have the best ability to decide when it is time for some materials to go, and librarians involved in these projects should prepare themselves for those difficult conversations about why they are removing materials to the users who have concerns.

While the subtitle of this paper is “Marketing a Serials Deselection Project,” the term marketing is used very broadly. According to Kennedy (as cited in Richardson, 2014), “marketing [is] ‘a strategic

communication with your library patrons. It’s an intentional conversation” (p. 43). Any form of communication with library users or stakeholders is, in a sense, marketing.

Project Need, Goals, and Methods

As many academic libraries have discovered, space is at a premium. Student study space, computer labs, and dedicated service spaces (i.e. meditation space or athletic department tutoring spaces) are becoming more desirable than collection space. The Kraemer Family Library (KFL) at the University of Colorado-Colorado Springs (UCCS) performed a bound serials weeding project during early 2014, when staff members were asked to reduce the library’s serials collection by over 50%. The work needed to be completed in approximately six months and was further constrained by limited tools, personnel, and budget.

UCCS is a medium-sized institution with full-time enrollment around 8,500. The library is centrally located and shares its building with the campus Information Technology Department and the University Student Center. The main doors in and out of the library lead to the outdoors and the west side of campus and open up to the main circulation desk and reference desk. The rear doors lead to the student center and open up to a smaller circulation desk and the bound periodicals shelving. User traffic is heavy with some visitors using the aisles nearest the bound periodicals solely as a walkway between the outdoors and the student center.

The project had formed largely due to the need for more student collaboration space and seating. It began slowly in early 2014, just before a new Electronic Resources and Serials Librarian was hired, through the examination of JSTOR archive collection holdings. These electronic holdings were compared to print holdings, and thus the project was born.

There was very little in the way of documentation to follow to implement the project. The Collection Development Policy was from 1992 and had not been reviewed or fully practiced for many years. The task of deciding how to meet the project goals and manage its implementation fell almost solely on the Electronic Resources and Serials Librarian beginning in late March 2014. The deadline for completion was the beginning of the fall 2014 semester. No commercial collection analysis tools were available, therefore entitlement lists from vendors compared to holdings reports from the integrated library system using Excel was largely the method implemented to determine which materials could be withdrawn.

Over the course of the project, 1,620 print serial titles were reviewed. Of those, the subject librarians chose to completely remove 1,031. During the months of June, July, and August 2014, 37,225 serial volumes were either donated or recycled from an original count of 74,551. Although KFL did not quite reach its goal of removing over 50% of the bound serials volumes, the volumes and shelving were removed and new furniture was placed in time for the first day of fall classes.

Prior to the removal of deselected serials, the UCCS student newspaper printed an article calling for the “spring cleaning” of the “dusty old tomes” held in the library due to lack of use (Wefler, 2014, p. 9). During the project, the library kept a recycling dumpster at the library loading dock for holding and hauling away the withdrawn serials. This prompted a few students to voice their concerns to the local television news station. An investigative reporter visited the library and spoke

to the Dean of the Library. A few days later, the station aired a brief news clip containing the Dean’s interview and video of volumes being tossed into the dumpster. After the completion of the project and the rearrangement of library shelving and furnishings, another article was printed in the student newspaper, this one providing simple quotes such as, “I like it, it’s roomier” (Deveyra, qtd. in Skelton, 2014, p. 1). The lack of further concerns after the airing of the news clip and the change in layout at the library meant the communication efforts of KFL were effective.

Transform Internal Goals into External Communication

When planning for this project, the library focused on what was best for the students. The project’s goals were based on information KFL had received from student surveys, from an article in the student-run newspaper calling for removal of outdated journals, and from other libraries’ weeding projects. Having goals that stem from user needs helps build a foundation for communicating the necessity and benefits of a deselection project.

Once goals for the project are defined, the formation of a chart to document marketing messages which can be used to support and describe the goals is a method which helps prepare library staff for any communications that may be needed throughout the project lifecycle. Documenting in the chart the goals, messages, and message delivery methods provides a source of information for future communications. Planning ahead will ensure that libraries are responding to concerns with confidence and authority.

The chart can be used for both internal (among library staff) and external communication efforts. An example chart that comprises some of the goals that KFL had for their deselection project and the messages and delivery methods that were used is offered here as a starting point for other libraries.

Goal	Internal Message and Delivery Method	External Message and Delivery Method
Identify bound serials to deselect.	Provide spreadsheets of data to aid in decision-making via emails to those involved.	If gathering faculty or others' input on which materials can be deselected, utilize email or web forms.
Move deselected materials out of the building.	Provide the project deadline and other expectations in face-to-face conversations with all staff members who are affected.	Provide faculty members, university departments, and nonprofit groups the ability to request deselected materials via the library's website or an email message. Set up flyers in the affected area briefly describing the project and warning users that it may be noisy at times.
Respond promptly to concerns from library users.	Keep all staff members informed of specific concerns and how they were addressed via email or in meetings. Provide them with the proper person to contact if further concerns are brought to their attention via email.	Create, maintain, and provide public access to a collection development policy which addresses deselection. Provide details of the project via the local television news outlet.
Keep staff members tasked with the labor-intensive job of materials management motivated.	Post pictures and supportive comments on social media sites.	
Increase the amount of student collaborative space that is available in the library.		Announce the changes in a library newsletter and on the library's website.
Complete the project on schedule.	Hold an internal project completion party. Provide gift bags to those people whose work was instrumental in the project's completion.	Invite the public to an open house to celebrate the completion of the project and to show off the results. Provide fun without hiding the fact that materials were recycled, e.g., using weeded volumes as art.

Table 1. Transforming goals into marketing messages.

Use Communication to Build Trust with Constituents

One of the most powerful communication tools to have at the ready in cases of deselection projects is an up-to-date collection development policy which addresses deselection. Allen (2010) remarks, "While weeding can be controversial, a carefully prepared and fully documented policy on

weeding (or deselection) can lessen or alleviate misunderstandings" (p. 32). Always have your policy at the ready should anyone challenge the library's authority to deselect and remove materials.

Another useful communication tool, as suggested by Jett (2014), is to sandwich negative statements inside positive statements. For KFL, a fitting

example could be, “The amount of seating/group study space available to students has increased significantly. Yes, because of a looming deadline we had to recycle instead of donate much of our serial collection to make that space. And, through our partnership with the Sustainability Office on campus for that project, we’ve identified four new classes of materials that we can recycle instead of put in the trash.”

Trust is a two-way street. Librarians should trust that their users are able to listen to and understand the reasoning behind materials deselection processes. By acknowledging concerns, and responding to them with a calm, practiced approach, library staff can better provide transparency and communication which are trust-building activities. Ease the fears of library users by explaining the ethical methods used during deselection. Sometimes the content of the materials are not being recycled in the way that users hope (i.e., donated to other libraries or organizations instead of becoming recycled paper). However, libraries use exchanges and charities such as Better World Books as often as they can. When those options are unavailable, the next best option is used. Due to the strict deadline with which KFL was working, donation was not always a viable option, but no materials were ever thrown in the trash. A partnership with a recycling company assured ethical measures were taken to discard the materials.

Create Partnerships for the Long Term

Not only is the creation and retention of mutually beneficial partnerships already an important goal of libraries, it is essential in maintaining good will with campus administration and library users. Some of the partnerships that KFL relied upon for the proper management of the deselection project included the UCCS Office of Sustainability, the provost and upper university administration, the local recycling company, and other local libraries and nonprofits.

Sandler (2014) states:

Leverage partnerships. Publishers, authors, and libraries share a common interest in promoting the use of scholarly content and,

to a lesser extent, library services that promote discovery and reading . . . Marketing is a two-way street: it’s about telling the library story, but also learning anything and everything about a targeted user community—who they are, what they do, what they need, and how well they think the library is addressing their needs . . . Market to the insecurities of the campus. Attack the gap between what users want . . . and the limitations of their own abilities. Libraries should be promoted as the difference between academic success and failure. (p. 196)

Building these partnerships helps provide another positive outcome when undertaking deselection processes. As stated in the example positive-negative-positive statement in the section above, the connection that this project secured with the Office of Sustainability provided a beneficial growth of the library’s recycling efforts that will last long into the future.

Conclusion

The marketing messages and programs presented here are only examples of what libraries can do and say to promote deselection projects. Many others can be used to match the expectations of individual library communities. For example, Røgler (2014) states:

Discarding is usually something that takes place in silence, without the user’s knowledge. The idea of throwing away books is uncomfortable for both librarians and the public. However, this attitude stands in the way of the library’s development. When the discarded books were transformed into art, we lifted them out in the public space. We dared to highlight weeding as part of professional practice. (p. 390)

The most important messages to convey are the library’s expertise in effectively managing the print collection, and that the library is willing to enter into a discussion with anyone who may be concerned. Librarians should overcome their fear of public outcry, and let their adeptness at providing the best selection of print materials as

possible be known to their users. “The aim of the various measures is to enter into dialogue with sceptics and work as a team with those who are positive” (Røgler, 2014, p. 395).

Deselecting print resources has long been a regular practice of public libraries and has evolved

to be a regular practice of research libraries as well. As such, it is a practice that deserves commitment from the libraries and librarians who utilize it. Sharing the benefits of the process with library users is part of that commitment. Start “throwing away books” out in the open and see where it takes you.

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