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Author(s): Stockton, Christine

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Acquiring and marketing eBooks at University College Chester - it's all down to teamwork and communication

Christine Stockton
Director of Learning Resources,
University College Chester
Tel: 01244 375444 ext. 3300
E-mail: c.stockton@chester.ac.uk

On Tuesday 9 March 2004 Learning Resources invited University College Chester staff and students to the launch of our new 10,000 plus eBooks collection purchased through a deal with NetLibrary, negotiated by NoWAL (North West Academic Libraries). We booked the college boardroom, had hands-on access to the catalogue and hence to the eBooks, provided handouts listing relevant eBooks in subject areas, displayed print copies of eBooks from the collections, created a party atmosphere with helium-filled balloons and arranged for the Principal to cut a virtual ribbon to launch the collections. There is a separate story to be told of the NoWAL negotiations which delivered the largest bundle of eBooks in Europe to its member libraries. This article specifically describes the team work which made our local launch a success.

University College Chester - with six other higher education institutions in the North West - joined NoWAL in September 2003. NoWAL had already set up a working group to investigate a consortial deal on eBooks and had forecasts of costs available for the first meeting of the extended committee. Chester, like several other institution's there, had recently invested in a purchase of eBooks to extend access to learning materials to our users. Our subject librarians had been extremely creative with their budgets in order to purchase 148 titles outright. The NoWAL proposal gave us the opportunity to go from dipping a toe in the eBooks water to plunging right in. And having been invited to join NoWAL, we were keen to demonstrate our support alongside the larger institutions for initiatives to extend our services.

Our electronic resources librarian joined the NoWAL working group and so kept us closely informed of the lengthy discussions and negotiations leading to the official EU tender. Wavering by some institutions had left the NoWAL deal looking decidedly shaky over Christmas 2003 but with some resolve stiffening and the welcome addition of Keele University, everything went through. The eBooks would be available and their records could be loaded into the catalogue from February 2004.

From the outset, we realised that such large collections could only be managed automatically. In order to bulk load, our systems librarian worked with our system software supplier to create a template. This loads title and item records, moving the url onto the item. We also decided not to merge our print and electronic titles because each format has its own ISBN. Our OPAC

was amended to offer users a choice to search specifically for eBooks. As our database is MARC21 there were no conversion issues. Throughout this project we tested to make sure all was well.

The teamwork for the collection acquisition and launch did not have to be tightly managed. We provided many staff development sessions about the collection, which were well attended. All the staff involved had a joint vision about the importance of the collection and the launch events, and ensured that there was excellent communication with other relevant staff, in person or by email. There was only one small meeting to plan the launch event, with members working on their actions after this and keeping others informed. The subject staff spent time exploring and accessing the books and created lists of useful titles for each department and handouts which were made available at the launch. There were lots of good ideas from staff during the whole process, which were welcomed and acted upon.

Once we had decided on the dates and times for the launch events, it was important to produce publicity as soon as possible and ensure a high impact. We thought the publicity material from NetLibrary not eye-catching enough for this purpose, and our in-house graphics designers produced more colourful and informative posters which we also used for black and white flyers. To match the electronic medium we were promoting, and to appeal to our Principal, an IT enthusiast, graphics also designed a 'virtual ribbon' for the principal to 'cut' with moving scissors on a screen. We ensured that the Principal had full and very positive briefing material well before the event. We also engaged the enthusiasm and involvement of the college PR team with the realisation that this development would increase the appeal of the college to potential students. We were asked to provide two local radio interviews and photographs for articles in the local press. We ensured that the notice of the launch stayed at the top of the news page on our intranet, and the subject librarians contacted all the members of staff in their departments with personal invitations to the launch promoting resources and services available and a selection of vintage books (a departure from the usual 'the more up to date the better' theme for medical information), were also available for visitors to browse.

What lessons can be learnt from the day? Well, from the positive feedback we have received it appears we were successful in our main aim of raising the profile of the HCL. However, there are a number of other lessons:

- Do not underestimate the amount of planning involved. We began to plan at least six months in advance. Most HCL staff were involved to some extent, but those who took a lead role found it very time-consuming and had to fit it in around their day job. Helen Carter decided that once every leap year was probably enough for open days!
- Publicise the day widely. Having posters around the library is one tactic, but it will only preach to the converted. We also sent global emails, targeted individuals, and made full use of organisations' newsletters on a regular basis leading up to the day.

- Make sure you offer a range of activities so there is something for everyone. Note we introduced quizzes (with prizes), displays, a high profile guest speaker, taster training sessions and presentations on a number of information-related topics.
- And finally. ...It is worth doing! Not only did we raise the profile of HCL to our users, but the event was very good for staff morale. It provided an interesting diversion from routine tasks and everyone pulled together for a common cause. Fun but exhausting was the verdict from most of the staff involved.