

Distance students

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Citation:

Leong, J 2009, 'Marketing electronic resources to distance students: A multipronged approach' in Eleonora I. Dubicki (ed.) *Marketing and Promoting Electronic Resources: Creating the E-Buzz*, Routledge, Abingdon, Oxon, pp. 71-86.

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Marketing Electronic Resources to Distance Students: a Multipronged Approach

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When students are surveyed regarding their expectations and satisfaction with library services, it is common to receive suggestions for services or guides the library might offer. In many cases these suggested services already exist. This has been shown to be true in surveys of distance students at the University of New England, Armidale, New South Wales, Australia (UNE). Distance students' varying, and often limited, knowledge of what their home institution offers, coupled with low expectations¹ and remoteness from the physical library pose particular challenges for librarians.

What is involved in effectively marketing electronic resources to distance students? How can students be made aware of the wealth of resources available? How can they be helped to achieve proficiency in their use? What initiatives result in increased usage? In seeking to answer these questions, this chapter advocates presenting relevant quality resources which are accessible any time/anywhere. It also affirms offering support at the students' point of need. The value of incorporating into the academic curriculum a requirement to utilize electronic resources is highlighted. The final section examines the

effectiveness of a range of stand alone approaches which may be used to promote resources.

A product worth promoting

Marketing means more than simple promotion. It includes offering products and services which are of value to your client group. For an academic library marketing electronic resources, determining the right product mix requires a good understanding of what disciplines are taught in the institution and at what level. It is also important to understand the pedagogical approach taken in various courses, as this influences the level of use of resources. With this information it is possible to determine the best mix of available databases to purchase. Techniques to evaluate products are outside the scope of this discussion, but these should include analysis of ease of use and product trials which allow students to provide feedback. The quality of the interface will affect return visits as shown by surges in use experienced by Academic Press and the American Institute of Physics after they moved to platforms with simplified access.² The best product mix will include subscription databases, but also free Web resources, electronic course reserves and electronic examination papers. To meet anticipated needs, libraries may require digitization projects or may lobby vendors to offer new products.

Efforts to offer good products are relevant to all users, but for remote users the importance of accessibility any time/anywhere is paramount. Distance students are typically workers studying part-time³ and are time poor. They often need to be able to

study late at night or on weekends, times when academic libraries may be closed. While all staff and students benefit from off-campus access to electronic resources, this is essential for distance students. The development of a common sign-on for multiple uses, removing the need for multiple passwords, has greatly assisted distance students. The use of transparent authentication software, such as EZproxy, is equally important. Access is further simplified when students do not have to sign on each time they access another resource during one session.

A message which comes with great clarity from students is that they see accessible resources primarily as full text resources.⁴ Comments made by UNE distance students in 2005 supported this view. Some of the statements made by students include:

- “The most important area to address is to increase the number of online journals available.”
- “The number of electronic journals that are subscribed to isn’t as big as I’d like, especially as that’s the only library service I use, being an overseas student.”
- “I don’t like to send for photocopies because there is too much delay. Electronic access is preferred ...”
- “Make more books / papers on the recommended reading lists to each unit available to view in full via the net.”
- “My main frustration is the huge expense and time lost due to lack of direct access to relevant full text databases for psychological journals.”

Students have a strong preference to use databases which contain a high percentage of full text materials. Many will prefer to use full text databases of medium relevance over more relevant citation or abstract-only indexes. The marketability of indexes at UNE was significantly enhanced by the addition of SFX links to citation / abstract indexes. This allowed students to connect to full text articles, where available, from indexes. Fisher and Pride point out that the price of service may include not only fees for service and transportation costs, but also time spent waiting and level of convenience.⁵ Students are clear that they wish to have online full text material at a time which suits them. This knowledge can inform us regarding the products and access services we choose to offer and how we promote them.

Supporting self-starters

Even if a library does not mount a promotional campaign to distance students, some will come looking for resources to support their study. They may have been instructed in course materials to use the library to enable completion of assignments or may just be independently aware of library services. For these students, effective use of electronic resources will be enhanced by a well-designed web site which provides advice on how to search competently and makes it easy to discern what to use for particular purposes.

Certain resources are of such self-evident value that minimal publicity will probably result in high usage as long as they are easy to locate on the Web. Past exam

papers and electronic reserve full text articles for individual units of study are examples of products which meet students' information needs. Judith Siess cautions that the real product of the library is not books, journals, reference service and so on.⁶ She states, "A good library provides its customers with *answers* to their questions, with *solutions* to their problems."⁷ Usage statistics show that students see full text resources packaged for a particular unit of study as meeting these criteria.

A unit-specific approach rarely includes all the useful resources for practical and philosophical reasons. Staffing resources would need to be expanded enormously to search multiple resources and prepackage useful items. The upkeep would be huge. University libraries also seek to enhance students' information literacy abilities to equip them for lifelong learning. This leaves the library with the challenge to design a web site which allows students to successfully navigate to resources useful to them.

On the Web, all resources appear at the click of a mouse button and may look similar. As a result, many users fail to recognize consciously the function of library resources such as the online public access catalog (OPAC), periodical indexes, or a journal collection. It accordingly becomes more difficult but also more necessary to communicate effectively via the library Web site.⁸

There have been a number of studies in this area and these illustrate best practices. The value of providing listings of databases and other resources by discipline is well recognized.⁹ A federated search facility is one approach to bringing resources together in discipline groupings. The quality of the search engine will impact students' responses and

the likelihood of return visits. What students like can be surprising and does not necessarily match how librarians rate the interface. Interestingly, a study of first-year biology students at the UNE in April 2006 revealed that those who had experienced searching both by using MetaSearch (Ex Libris MetaLib) search boxes and by direct searching, mostly using the CSA interface, had a preference for MetaSearch. This finding appeared surprising to most library reference staff at UNE. Their expectations had been that problems in accessing some relevant databases through MetaSearch federated search software at the time would have led students to rate this resource well below direct searching of native interfaces. However, these findings may not be generally applicable as the students were on-campus enrollees who received group instruction in which they were given search strategies known to lead to available full text for their assignment. A much larger study in Californian universities showed only 50.5% of respondents felt the SFX button met their expectations.¹⁰ This finding is possibly more typical of the experience of a distance student who has not had their expectations impacted by library staff training or had the benefit of search advice.

Quality help available on web pages, FAQs and advice to new users, pod casts, guides to using individual databases and online tutorials will contribute to students' ability to find and use good resources. The effort to produce and maintain these is, however, quite high. The usage of web-based standalone tutorials is generally low unless they are integrated into a course.¹¹ At UNE we had thought student interest in guides might not warrant the effort in maintaining them. Interestingly, in 2005, our distance

students rated the importance of the clarity of instructions in library guides on how to use databases at 6.14 out of a possible 7. A number offered comments such as:

- “I feel the instructions need to be more basic ie step by step for me as a mature age student.”
- “Online tutorials have been helpful.”
- “More interactive training systems need to be implemented.”

Where such resources are offered, their placement on the website is a key consideration. Students seem to have a problem both in realizing that help exists and then in finding it. Terminology is important and studies on what is effective are crucial. A Marshall University Libraries team found “Help”, “How do I...” and “Ask a Librarian” were preferred terms for students.¹² Headings such as, “How to search for articles” or “Find articles” have been found to resonate with students compared with “databases” or “indexes.”¹³ Gelman Library, George Washington University, has a large number of subject and database guides, and web page requests indicate heavy use. Courtois, Higgins, and Kapur attribute usage levels to three factors: a prominent link on the homepage to “Research Guides on Specific Topics”; the fact that most guides cover specific topics or assignment topics, rather than discipline areas; and links for guides under each subject area for article databases.¹⁴

Linking into the academic curriculum

The priority of students is to pass or excel in their unit of study. This reality means that the authority on how to approach their study resides unquestionably with the lecturer. One of the characteristics of distance education at the UNE has been the offering of voluntary and compulsory residential schools on campus. Several thousand distance students actually attend these schools each year. This provides an opportunity for librarians to meet with distance students both in and outside of classes. For several years, library staff have made use of the opportunity afforded by residential schools to walk around campus talking to students informally, answering questions, telling them about relevant electronic resources and gaining their input. Feedback gained shows that information on resources provided by faculty, combined with a clear requirement to use these resources for assignments, has a major impact on levels of usage. When queried on what databases they use and why, most students refer to a subset of resources of high relevance to them and state that they were told by lecturers to use them. As a case in point, the April residential school regularly attracts a sizeable cohort of psychology students. In 2005, informal feedback from this cohort showed almost all students used online journals and the psycARTICLES database, but they were, in most cases, unaware of psycINFO, the premier index for their field. Faculty were apprised of this situation and pleasingly students at the April 2006 residential school commonly reported being alerted to this major database by their lecturers.

When asked what they thought was the best way to tell them about electronic resources, students agreed that hearing from lecturers would work best. Education students consulted in April 2006 suggested that study guides could include specific

information on relevant databases, not the generic information currently included. They also suggested use of online bulletin boards and including advertising with the postal return of marked assignments. A group of Education students believed bulletin boards would have high impact.

Students may also be guided to which resources to use by assessment practices. A 2003 University of Pennsylvania study of Business faculty members found that 72.4% encouraged students to use specific web sites for assignments and another 10.3% required them to do so.¹⁵ 79.7% insisted on additional sources, but only 12.5% required use of library databases, with a further 41.1% encouraging such use. It should be acknowledged that web sites provide excellent and valid resources for these students, but greater use of quality subscription databases would be beneficial to many. Dewald found that part-time lecturers were less likely to recommend library databases and she identified a need to work with lecturers to ensure they are aware of the available databases and their value.¹⁶ She also recommended working with them to have students made aware of both good databases and websites for particular assignments.

While academics in other disciplines have differing practices in what they require of students, the need to keep lecturers well informed and to use them as marketing agents is, in my view, one key to effective marketing of electronic resources to the majority of students. Faculty will become more enthusiastic to promote electronic resources as they realize the positive benefits in higher quality student assignments. Galvin reported on collaboration to provide assignment specific pathfinders at Kingsborough Community

College in Boston.¹⁷ Economics and English professors, for whom she had created assignment pathfinders, commonly requested the service again as they found student use of scholarly resources increased. Keeping academic staff well informed and committed to promoting library electronic resources is labor intensive, but it will very effectively lead students to the best sources to meet their information needs.

A study of course coordinators done for the University of South Australia Library, seeking reasons for low usage of three specific subscription databases, found that communication about databases by email was problematical as the volume of email creates an information overload¹⁸. The study also noted a problem with the level of demand for a new product. “Only dramatically better customer benefits very well communicated will change behavior.”¹⁹ The recommended solution was a much more personalized information service which is not necessarily feasible or desirable, but the value of face-to-face contact with lecturers was an important point which was also made.

There are many reports in the literature of working with lecturers to embed information literacy skills and knowledge into academic curricula. This entails working collaboratively with faculty to map which abilities in information use and search processes are appropriate for each unit of a course. Course content and assessment strategies support and motivate students as they build these abilities and skills. Strategies include the use of reinforcement through repetition. The level of information literacy required is also gradually increased, starting perhaps at knowing how to find a book in the library catalog and working through to use of citation indexes to track academic

debate. While this idea does not immediately appear relevant to the marketing of electronic resources, it is an effective way to do so. From a short term perspective there may be a conflict between imparting information literacy skills and marketing relevant products. Students generally are not motivated to understand the information seeking processes and may be discouraged by early requirements to demonstrate high skill levels. Effective marketing may well take advantage of the immediate gratification culture by providing direct links to excellent articles in introductory units. Betty Ladner collaborated with faculty in the School of Nursing at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte to provide research resources outside of the online textbook to undergraduate students.²⁰ To overcome the frustration which students feel when grappling with the intricacies of online searching, pre-scripted searches were provided to PubMed. PubMed was chosen as it removed the need to sign on multiple times. The aim was to reduce student frustration and allow immersion in the research literature. Students were also given Yahoo search links to enable them to see the difference between scholarly information and much of what is available on the Web. Step-by-step guides to searching for scholarly literature were provided for those interested to learn more. Student feedback was very positive.

Once students appreciate the value of quality scholarly articles, information skills could be gradually enhanced by moving from direct links or pre-scripted searches to independent searching with appropriate help available. By gradually increasing the skill level required, the student will not be discouraged, but will graduate with the ability to continue to seek excellent information sources when the lecturer or librarian is no longer

available to prompt them. This approach is only feasible with close cooperation between the library and academic staff.

Standalone strategies

When serving a distance education population, we cannot passively sit at the reference desk and expect students to come to us ... our emphasis needs to be on advocating the services we offer and educating our clientele not only in the areas of information literacy but also in the simple knowledge of what resources and services are available. ²¹

Strategies to impart awareness of electronic resources mostly fall into three categories: using the contact opportunities afforded by individual students who are seeking help; providing outreach information on the web site; and proactively delivering information directly to groups of students. The first offers high-quality service to a limited number of students. The last category offers the highest impact with potentially the lowest cost outlay. The impact of providing information on the web is far-reaching, but also costly.

Responding to individual opportunities

Students who contact the library for help are usually open to receiving suggestions on useful electronic sources, whether in direct answer to their immediate question or as an add-on useful information snippet. Even if requested to do so, reference staff are unlikely to consistently promote add-on information either in face-to-face

encounters or when responding to phone calls. Time pressures and awareness of student concentration on immediate tasks are restraining factors. Staff are, however, comfortable in promoting databases of immediate relevance to the query.

In the traditional library, distance students were dependent on library reference staff to provide bibliographies of articles and to select books for them when the lecturer had not already given clear recommendations. UNE was proud of its reference and document services in this area and as it became possible for students to access materials electronically, library staff sought strategies to transit students to a more independent approach to locate relevant resources.

Our first strategy was to implement Project Self Help. We continued the traditional approach of sending bibliographies and book loans in response to subject search queries, but where students had requested information via web form or e-mail, we sent a series of push e-mails as well. In the first e-mail, we let them know the subject search results were in the mail, informed them that much of what they needed was available online, and let them know we were going to send the series of e-mails to help them build their search skills. We then sent e-mails giving basic information plus Web links for additional information on searching the catalogue, using the web, and finding and using indexes. We asked for responses (which we rarely received) and after a set period, we rang students to see how they were progressing with the information sent. Feedback on the value of this project was very positive, but it was evident that a good number of students had yet to find time to study the short e-mails. Project Self Help was

very time consuming and while it was highly beneficial for students who took advantage of the information sent, it reached only a low number of students. We discontinued the project, but have continued to use the prepared e-mails in response to basic queries on how to find information.

The current strategy in place at UNE still offers highly personalized service. In response to subject queries, distance students are still mailed books where the query is complex and shelf browsing is essential. However, for the bulk of their needs, students receive simple e-mails giving step-by-step strategies to go to and search the catalogue, relevant databases, Google Scholar, and so on. The strategies include key words to use in the search. A final e-mail summarizes what has been sent or e-mailed and suggests additional databases to try if more is needed. Eudora e-mail stationery proved very efficient for this, but any system for canned responses including simple Word files can be used.

[Insert Figures 1 - 3]

This approach has been very well received by most students and has resulted in less repeat users of the service, as the students transfer the approaches gained to other information questions. Sample representative comments made by students are below.

- “I can't thank you enough for the help you have given me. Thanks so much.” (third year Industrial Relations subject)

- “Thanks so much. I followed your step by step instructions and was quite successful. It was much better to be taught how to do this myself than be given a list of articles. I have learned how to use a great research tool.”
(third year Law)
- “... By the way the stuff you have been sending was of great benefit and for my 2 assignments done this semester I have received a Distinction and a High Distinction so I am pleased.” (third year Leadership subject)
- “A belated thank you for all your help last week with search strategies. As a consequence of your advice, I managed to locate and/or order everything I need for my assignment. You will no doubt hear from me again - when I find myself in more trouble!!” (first year student)

Each query has quite high staff costs with time taken averaging 44 minutes. However, it offers high-quality service when it is needed and gives students a positive experience either when first finding their way among the multitude of electronic products from which they must choose or when the query is too complex for them at their skill level. This positive guided experience gives students the confidence to use databases independently in the future. It also builds a good relationship with the library, making it easier for them to further seek advice when needed.

Use of co-browsing with a virtual reference service has a similar impact, but presents greater challenges in terms of staff skills and technological barriers. Many of the queries received at UNE are for advanced units and complex queries. The librarian and

the student benefit from staff having time to explore several strategies before suggesting the best one. To do this preparatory work in real time online might be difficult.

Nevertheless, both approaches have a place.

Outreach on the website

While it can be frustrating to have students you survey requesting the provision of information that is already available, others will successfully locate promotional materials provided independently. The value of good website design and help materials was covered earlier in the section, "Supporting self-starters". The website can also provide information on new resources on What's New pages, in blogs or by using changing graphics. To have more impact, this information needs to be highly visible and attractive.

Information about new products and services must be well presented to grab the attention of those to whom it is most useful. Take Web of Science as an example. Just the heading "Web of Science" can easily turn off the interest of users in the humanities field. Perhaps the announcement would be better headed "Treasure trove for scholars"? The value of the product should be clear to the reader quickly or they will lose interest. UNE has used large rotating banners in the website to advertise products with some success. Usage rose in response to these banners, but then leveled off pointing to the need for continuous change to attract interest. It may also suggest that the students do not have a high enough need for the information to increase the rate of return visits.

Direct delivery

Push e-mails are highly effective. A Psychology student studying a first year unit confirmed my experience that direct email is high impact saying, "If I saw an email on services from the library, I would definitely click on it." For a two-year period, two main approaches were used at UNE to promote use of electronic resources to a wide audience - an information sheet about library resources was added to most unit guides and, at the peak time for research into assignments during the semester, e-mail was sent to distance students outlining basic services and advertising electronic resources. Informal student feedback at the time was that the library communication was excellent. Unfortunately, as many of the resources were, at the time, available only on paper, it also resulted in work overload for the off-campus section of the library due to significantly increased loan and photocopy requests. Bulk e-mails also raise questions with regard to unsolicited e-mails, and legislation and institutional policies must be observed in their use.

Alternatives to using e-mail to promote services include asking students to join a listserv or request RSS feeds of information. UNE Library offers a listserv which is used to promote resources and spikes in usage can be observed after postings on particular resources. The difficulty is in getting students onto the listserv or RSS feeds in the first place. UNE found again that bulk e-mail was relatively effective with promotion by lecturers in online units also having impact. Recommendations to join the listserv in booklets mailed out with CD ROMs of unit material and on the library new student

webpage had some, but very minor impact. This suggests that an eye-catching method which provides a clickable link enhances response because it can be explored easily and immediately. As more and more students access online units, the ideal place for promotion is the portal where they initially login, perhaps using a news blog. Postings on bulletin boards within individual units or across units for a particular discipline may have even greater impact if they can be arranged.

Tom Reidel reported on an exciting approach developed at Regis University with federal grant funding.²² A Library Notification Module was developed to let distance students know of relevant resources subscribed to by the university. Links to resources already existed in online courses, but Riedel questioned whether students would recognize the value they offered and saw use of push technology as a way to increase the likelihood of students utilizing the resources. The Library Notification Module identified applicants as they moved to student status. These students received an e-mail, or letter if necessary, inviting them to set up computer access, giving library website and contact information, and providing directions to subject guides or other course specific resources. In the first year of operation, resources were hit by about 19% of recipients of an e-mail.²³ The numbers of those who were prompted to set up computer access and visit the website were higher. The first contact was very early in the students' first year and may have more impact if sent when students begin focusing on assignment work.

One final approach which perhaps offers greater hope than any other is to piggyback on the popularity of Google. An OCLC report found that 91% of English-

speaking college students resident in Australia, Canada, India, Singapore, the United Kingdom and the United States use search engines to seek information.²⁴ As more subscription databases are searched by Google Scholar and other search engines, and if we can just convince distance students to access the search engine via a library link which includes an authentication string, they will be able to follow an added link to see full text in resources subscribed to by the library. The potential to help students find relevant resources more easily is immense. A key marketing principle is to provide what clients want. Students want a simple approach to locate full text online resources. How much easier it will be to market use of Google from the library page to access more full text, then to succeed in imparting the plethora of concepts we currently try to communicate!

Conclusion

To market electronic resources effectively to distance students, we need to ensure that we have relevant quality full text online resources which are easily located and accessed. Our promotion should enhance awareness of what is available and its value to users. Advertising must be timed to attract attention when students have a need and this is primarily when assignment or other research is occurring. Long term take up will be greater if initial experiences are positive. It will also be greater where students have a clear need to use the library resources: a need which faculty can create by their assessment strategies.

Effective promotion is likely to be multipronged. Direct e-mail is the most economical way to reach most distance students. Also effective is providing information where students sign into their online units or within their unit information, particularly when it is tailored and highly relevant to their immediate needs. A well designed website is essential. Working in partnership with faculty to embed a staged approach to exposing students to resources is highly recommended. Finally, providing quality advice to students who approach the library for help will build good relationships and encourage return visits to electronic resources.

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Citation:

Leong, J 2009, 'Marketing electronic resources to distance students: A multipronged approach' in Eleonora I. Dubicki (ed.) *Marketing and Promoting Electronic Resources: Creating the E-Buzz.*, Routledge, Abingdon, Oxon, pp. 71-86.

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Figure 1: Start e-mail

Dear xxx

I have just started your subject search. I will be emailing search strategies and/or references, many of which you will be able to access yourself from home or work.

To access electronic resources from the University Library site you require a UNE username and password. If you do not have one already, register online now by going to <http://www.une.edu.au/library/> and clicking on 'online registration'.

Online help guides for the journal indexes are at <http://www.une.edu.au/library/electres/indexguides.htm>

Have you looked at the recommended readings in your unit guide? If not, consider requesting loan/copy of those resources that suit your topic.

PRIVACY STATEMENT

The information you provided is used to process your request. The subject search requests are kept on file for one year and are used either as a basis for creating a 'Frequently asked question' topic sheet, or as a reference point if you request additional information. You have the right to access and/or correct any personal information concerning you held by the University, subject to the reasonable convenience of the University.

Figure 2: ProQuest strategy e-mail

Dear xxx

You can access online articles immediately using Proquest.

The following search works well in Proquest.

keyword + keyword + keyword

Connect to the Web.

Go to the UNE University Library page at <http://www.une.edu.au/library/>.

Choose e-resources.

Select Proquest from the Quick Links on the left.

Enter your UNE username and password when prompted.

Type < xxxxx > in the first search box.

Type < xxxxx > in the second search box.

Mark the box next to 'Full text documents only' if you wish.

Marking the box for 'Scholarly journals, including peer reviewed' will ensure academic sources only.

Click on the search button.

ProQuest will present you with a list of matching articles.

To view an article from the list given, click on the article title or a format icon.

Click on Help (top right) for information on the various formats.

To print an article, you must be viewing the article contents as Full Text, Page Impage - PDF or as Text + Graphics.

You can email articles to yourself, either one at a time or by saving a number of articles to a marked list.

If an article is not available in full-text in ProQuest, click on the Find It button to discover its availability through other sources.

Please let me know if you need more help.

Figure 3: Concluding e-mail

Dear xxx

I have now completed work on your subject search. Let me know if you need more help with how to find relevant references for this search. If you wish the University Library to send books and articles to you, please place your requests through the External Students' Library Service. See <http://www.une.edu.au/library/external/index.htm> for contact options.

xx books have been posted to you.

Strategies / search results were sent from the following indexes to identify relevant journal articles

xxx

Strategies / search results were sent from the following full text databases to locate relevant articles

xxx

Should you need more information I suggest you go to <http://www.une.edu.au/library/elecres/indexes2.htm> and search in the following indexes / databases

xxx