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Academic Libraries Should Consider a Strategic Approach to Promotion and Marketing of e-Books

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Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Academic Libraries Should Consider a Strategic Approach to Promotion and Marketing of e-Books

A Review of:
Vasileiou, M. & Rowley, J. (2011). Marketing and promotion of e-books in academic libraries. *Journal of Documentation, 67*(4), 624-643. doi: 10.1108/00220411111145025

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Abstract

Objectives – The main objectives of this study were the following:

1) To determine the existence of a formal promotion or marketing strategic plan for e-books in academic libraries.
2) To identify the marketing and promotion tools being used for e-book marketing.
3) To understand the role of faculty in promoting e-books.
4) To explore the issues and challenges that the libraries are facing in promoting e-books.
5) To investigate the future plans for the promotion of e-books.

Design – Qualitative study involving individual interviews followed by thematic analysis.

Setting – The research setting was seven academic libraries with various sizes of e-book collections (~9,000 to ~500,000) and ranging from research leading to teaching focused universities.

Subjects – The interviews were conducted with 25 academic librarians, including 19 subject librarians, 4 e-resources librarians, 1 collection development manager, and 1 acquisition and metadata officer.

Methods – Using a multiple case approach, the researchers interviewed 25 librarians from 7 academic libraries. The interviews were

digitally recorded. The interview transcripts were coded and analyzed using thematic analysis. The researchers recorded information about the type and size of the university, number of e-books, and the role of interviewees, and then conducted a semi-structured interview. The following questions were asked:

1) "Do you have a promotion/marketing strategy for e-books (or e-resources)? If not, is there a need for one?
2) What are the marketing and promotion tools you use for e-books?
3) What are the issues and challenges in promoting e-books?" (p. 629)

Main Results – While none of the cases had a formalized marketing strategy, most participants (19 out of 25) acknowledged the importance of developing one. Those who did not find it necessary argued that their users had good knowledge of library e-resources, thus, marketing was unnecessary. Although there was a lack of a marketing strategic plan across all the cases, some of the participants were practicing e-book marketing and promotion to some extent. The interviewees mentioned a total of 20 different promotional tools. The most frequently used promotional tools were library websites, information literacy sessions, OPACs, and e-mails. Participants also noted marketing using online help tutorials and various events. The least frequently mentioned promotional tools were announcement boards, a library representative, blogs, bulletins, the display screen, and a marketing campaign. The marketing campaign was only mentioned by librarians from one library.

According to some respondents, there are faculty and course instructors who contribute in promotion of e-books dependently or independently from the library. Some recommend e-books as course reading materials, some add links to e-books on the virtual learning environment (VLE) reading lists, and some even go beyond that and provide instructions on how to use e-books. Not all librarians were aware of the use of e-books by faculty.

The authors also investigated the future plans anticipated by the participants. There was only one library that has appointed a marketing officer and intends to develop a marketing strategy. All other cases plan to improve on current marketing practices or expressed innovative approaches in marketing by "development of an information literacy project, use of online chat, promotion of e-books in course committee meetings, provision of a paper guide for e-books," CD case display of available e-books, and other strategies (p. 633).

Marketing a new service comes with its own issues and challenges. The most frequently mentioned issues and challenges that librarians were facing were time constraints, raising users' expectations, and e-book availability in the library. Also, accessibility was of concern to some participants.

Conclusion – This study underlines the importance of marketing a library's new resources, particularly e-books, and it confirms the lack of a strategic approach to marketing in academic libraries. Some participants recognize the importance of a strategic plan, and practice e-book marketing using a variety of tools. However, most tools are not marketing specific, but are either communication tools or part of service delivery. The authors stated that most interviewees had a reflective approach to marketing, since they were trying to improve the current marketing practices by innovative means or by adapting successful practices from other colleagues.

The authors recommend that establishing a well thought-out strategic approach would help overcome several issues and challenges raised by participants. It would help manage the tension between service delivery and promotion. Also, it would provide clear guidelines for developing a budget allocation plan for e-book purchasing. In addition, internal marketing would help establish a culture of user-centred service in the library, and highlights the importance of new services among library staff.

Libraries are always dependent on publishers' decisions concerning the availability of and licensing agreements for e-books. They are considered as "intermediaries in the information or document supply chain" (p. 638). The authors suggest future studies to understand the role of libraries in managing links between licensing issues and service delivery.

One interesting observation in this study was the absence of Web 2.0 tools as promotional tools. It seems that libraries do not fully take advantage of new technology for marketing. Another interesting finding was the inaccurate or indirect reference to the notion of word-of-mouth by respondents. In this study, word-of-mouth was mentioned as a marketing tool by only a few participants. No one perceived the role of academic faculty in promoting e-books by word-of-mouth. While word-of-mouth is considered to be an invaluable marketing strategy because it is a tailored recommendation by consumers to consumers (Alire, 2007), it was neglected by most respondents in this study. Overall, the lack of knowledge of marketing strategies and users' information seeking behaviour among academic librarians is evident.

Commentary

This article highlights the importance of e-books in the future of academic libraries. It points out that both marketing research and marketing practice are neglected in academic libraries. Overall, this article contributes to our knowledge of e-book promotion and marketing in academic libraries and encourages more research on this very important topic.

While the research design and a multiple case study approach were very appropriate for this type of study, the authors should have been more transparent about the methodology. The selection criteria for the cases are not reported. The authors should have elaborated more on their framework for conducting the thematic analysis and coding. The coding reliability is

not defined, since they did not mention how many people were responsible for coding.

Table 1 is nicely presented. However, the authors do not describe the role of each interviewee, since the job title does not clearly specify what a person might do, and it varies from one university library to another. It would have been better if they had provided more information about each participant's responsibilities.

While the authors reported the use of thematic analysis in this study, it seems that they applied a mixed method of content analysis (CA) and thematic analysis (TA). "In thematic analysis the significance of a theme is not determined by its frequency but by its 'substantive significance.' Patton refers to 'substantive significance' as the consistency of themes across and within study participants" (Floersch, 2010, p. 408). Also, it is important to identify to what extent the findings are consistent with the existing literature. As the result, TA pays greater attention to the qualitative aspects rather than generating numerical description (Marks, 2004, p. 56). In this article, the authors emphasized numerical description and the findings that could be discovered by conducting a survey.

For future studies, the authors recommend investigating the marketing and consumer orientations of library staff and understanding the issues associated with managing supply chain issues and the user side of service delivery (pp. 637-638). This work uncovers the dichotomy between strategy and practice among the participants. It refers to e-book marketing as a reflective approach, laissez faire approach, and short-term plan approach for an increasingly important information resource. It will be valuable to understand the reason(s) for the current practice in order to improve it. Another important study in this area can be related to establishing best practices in marketing by assessing the value and effectiveness of different promotional tools in academic libraries.

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