

Getting the Word Out: Adventures in Marketing Our Library

By Deb Perry

Think back five or six years... Personal usage of the internet suddenly exploded. The web wasn't just for businesses anymore. *Everyone* jumped online. Grandpa plugged in, grandma started forwarding jokes and the way we shared information, planned our day and entertained ourselves suddenly changed. Welcome to the future. With such a radical shift in communication methods, one fifth of US newspapers reduced staffs by half -- and I was part of those statistics.

After a decade as a newspaper editor, I was happy to join the Wells County Public Library (Bluffton) on the cusp of that change. Library marketing was unheard of at that time and no one quite knew what to do with the new girl. I remember overhearing someone say, "What's she going to do all day? Make signs?"

And, for awhile, that's exactly what I did. After all, in-house signage is how libraries have successfully promoted programs and services for...well...forever. To paraphrase the film, *Field of Dreams*: 'If you put up a sign...they will coooooome.'

Along with the introduction of the Information Age came a change in the way people used the library. Yes, there will always be those lovely library browsers who check out the bulletin board, peruse the signs, read the calendar of events. But many patrons now rush in and out without sparing a glance for our carefully constructed posters on the door. They don't seem to even "see" them.

So, how do people get their information now? If in-house signs aren't generating the response we want, how can we reach the community with our library programming, services and news?

Start with an Evaluation Card: Keep it Simple

One of the most effective tools that I use to keep track of the effectiveness of my marketing sources is a no-frills, dull-looking, very bland evaluation card (see sample card). I don't want to scare them with anything complicated if they are already in the door. Sized at a quarter page, a card is placed on every chair at every program/class/workshop/event. I explain that filling out the card registers them for a door prize and – since everyone likes something for nothing – more than 75-percent of the attendees complete the card before leaving.

THANKS FOR COMING!
PLEASE TAKE A MOMENT TO FILL OUT BEFORE YOU LEAVE

How did you hear about our program? (circle all that apply)
Bluffton News-Banner; other newspaper; library newsletter; library website; radio;
community calendar; outdoor marquee; indoor poster; staff member; a friend; other.

What was your favorite part of this program? _____

What suggestions would you make? _____

May we ask your age? _____ Do you have a library card? _____

What other programs have you attended? _____

Do you have suggestions for other programs or classes? _____

To be entered for the door prize, we need your name and address. _____

Perry's sample evaluation.

The answers on this card provide valuable information on several levels but, from a marketing standpoint, the most helpful is, "How did you hear about our program?" I pay special attention if the attendee has marked that they do not have a library card.

In this community, the most frequently circled method is 'Bluffton News-Banner', our local daily paper. 'A friend' comes in second (Note: I drive myself crazy wondering, "How can I

market for that?!"). Our library newsletter currently comes in third. The 'outdoor marquee' is gaining in popularity as 'indoor poster' rapidly loses ground.

Can you see how collecting this information can help guide your marketing?

Every community will generate different results and the answers change over time. But this deceptively simple card helps me judge where to put my efforts, inspires ideas for new marketing sources, shows me what needs improvement and which sources I should let go.

Newspapers

Since our own evaluation cards reveal how important the local newspaper is for spreading library news, I use it to our advantage.

Some newspapers love their local library. Others don't seem to know the library exists. If the major newspaper in your community is a huge conglomerate there may be little you can do to forge a closer relationship. But, it is worth a try. Find out who to speak with: a managing editor? a desk editor? the publisher? If you can find someone in authority who has a kid in toddler time – even better! Then ask for a short meeting. This is your chance to explain in person that you recognize how powerful their newspaper is (yes, honest flattery can help) and ask how YOU can make it easy for them to cover the library. Remember that newspapers are short staffed, and if you can give them quality news in a ready-to-use format, you have got a better shot.

I personally write the library's press releases for our local newspaper and include great photos in the correct size and format. Then, it is emailed directly to the designated person. At that point, they have a quick, copy-and-paste article without paying a reporter. Try to work out a plan with your newspaper. They may love how easy you make their job.

Also, look for other publications covering your area. In our small rural county, there are 13 small town newspapers, high school newspapers, home school newsletters, entertainment guides, TV listings and free advertising tabloids. Many readers are very dedicated to these small publications and it

can be a valuable way to spread library news, especially if the major daily newspaper will not cooperate.

Writing Press Releases

Don't be intimidated by the mere thought of writing press releases. Forget about fancy library terms. Avoid stilted language. Just know your audience and write it the way you say it (always running grammar check, of course). It's called your "voice," and it reflects your own personality. Just keep in mind that a cheerful announcement about a new preschool program should sound very different from the formal tone of a multimillion dollar building project article.

Once you have the main press release written it's easy to tweak it to fit different publications. While the major newspaper might relish a 1,000 word article with photos, the entertainment guide might want a 3x5" photo with a short caption, and the tabloid will only accept a three-sentence paragraph. Find out what each media source requires and provide it in a ready-to-use format.

A Picture Really is Worth a Thousand Words

Photographs work. Yes, clip art is nice and colorful borders are pretty. But a photo will make people stop and look closer. Think of it this way: do you prefer cookbooks with or without photographs of the finished dish? Would the locations in a travel magazine be as inviting without photos? Does the idea of reading a textbook without photos make you groan?

Then don't shy away from using color photographs in your library press releases, newsletter, website and signs. Fun photos gives people an idea of what to expect at a future event...and makes them eat their hearts out for missing a past one. And with digital photography, including great pictures isn't that difficult. Just be sure to have model release forms handy for patrons featured in the shot so you can get the correct permission for publication.

We used to print our newsletter with black ink on colorful paper. After begging my director for months, she finally agreed to let me try a

full color newsletter. I used the same, exact format: nothing changed except that all the photographs were now in color. Imagine our surprise when the local school principal called and said, "Hey, thanks for putting us on your newsletter mailing list. What a great job!" When we gently informed him that he'd been receiving our newsletter for the past 10 years he remarked rather sheepishly, "Really? I never paid attention to it before."

Color photos create a perception of professionalism, importance and quality. People are more likely to read it and less likely to toss it into the trash. Of course, it also costs more. To afford a full color newsletter we weeded our mailing list of dead wood, started hand delivering instead of mailing to local businesses and organizations, heavily promoted the online version (www.wellscolibrary.org), and encouraged people to pick up their own copy in person at the library.

Boiling it Down

It all boils down to:

- Get to know your audience.
- Use a variety of marketing methods to reach the broadest audience.
- Develop a relationship with local media.
- Be flexible.
- Quality counts.

Just don't get discouraged and keep trying different marketing methods.

Author

Deb loves spreading the word that the library is the best bargain in town and is quite proud that the Wells County Public Library was awarded the 2004 Sarah Laughlin Marketing Award from the Indiana Library Federation. She is also a freelance photographer and two of her works are in the American Initiative Collection of the Fort Wayne Museum of Art (www.debperryphotography.com). Somewhere in her closet are 13 Hoosier State Press Association Awards from her previous life in the newspaper world. Deb and her husband live in Wells County and they have two sons, one daughter-in-law and a badly behaved Cocker Spaniel. She volunteers as a 4-H judge and is active in her community and church.