Marketing virtual services(*)

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Abstract
This article discusses why marketing is of growing importance for scientific libraries and the underlying developments such as the loss of the information monopoly. Marketing is not only about promotion: an important task of marketing is to analyze the library services in detail, to examine their strengths and weaknesses. From that analysis, four groups of services can be distinguished. Standard actions help to improve your respective services. In the second part the promotional products of the Central Medical Library of the University of Münster will be reviewed. The library has set up an information cascade, comprising a weblog, RSS feeds, an Email newsletter, a printed journal and a wiki. Finally, the impact of the new “Millennials” generation is discussed.

Key words: marketing; library; Web2.0; wiki; Millennials.

Introduction
Marketing is especially important for libraries, because there's an ongoing discussion if libraries are needed at all. “The discussion if libraries add value to their organization will intensify in the coming years.” (1) The accompanying questions are “how can we add value to our libraries?” and “how can we assure that our customers take notice of the added value?” As I will try to show in the following, marketing can provide some answers to both of them. But, firstly, let us take a more closer look, why there is a discussion anyway: what are the reasons for the uncertainty about the value of libraries?

Libraries no longer hold the monopoly on information. Articles from journals can be obtained from a variety of non-library-sources: the author, PubMed Central, the journal’s homepage, or from a document delivery service. The library is only one of many distributors. In addition, through price increases, contracts, and copyright law, distribution is being hindered. The library has no monopoly for answering the user’s questions either. It is a well known fact that doctors at first ask a colleague, then they consult their own collection of textbooks and journals, perform a PubMed / Google search before eventually turning to a librarian. Undergraduates consult librarians only to retrieve books or for interlibrary loans. (2)

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In 1980, if one had to access Medline (Index Medicus) or articles, one had to come to the library. This was a Unique Selling Proposition (USP) because no other competitor could offer this very service of searching and finding at that time. This kind of uniqueness has steadily vanished since then. It all started with services such as PaperChase, which made Medline accessible to the end-user and delivered documents. As more and more content became freely available – without any library as a gatekeeper – the decrease of uniqueness or importance accelerated. Overall, the library’s USPs were on the
If 1980 was to be equated with 100%, then the importance of library content today may only be something like 50%, probably even less.

In addition to the loss of information monopoly there are several other threats for the library as well such as the loss of visibility: on the Internet, nobody knows who is actually paying for access to journal articles. If you do not brand your holdings in PubMed with your library’s icon, your faculty will not know whom to thank for the full text. Electronic resources can prevent faculties from visiting the library: physical usage is dominated by undergraduates. (3) But for researchers and doctors the library is a 100% virtual service. If I visit them at their department or laboratory, they usually say: “Well, I like your library – last time I went there was five years ago.” The formerly close relationship between librarians and users is quickly vanishing. Overall, loss of the information monopoly + loss of visibility + loss of face-to-face interaction has led to the loss of customer relationships.

Tight budgets have forced the heads of the hospitals to evaluate their libraries more closely. We have to prove our value – What is our return on investment: exactly how many Euros would the hospital save by financing the library? (4). In addition, libraries have to compete for money, space, staff, and attention both within the medical faculty and externally with other suppliers of information. Here are some of the competitors we have to face:

- **journals** – open access, repositories, pay-per-view, document delivery;
- **books** – Google books, Amazon, Wikipedia, Elsevier’s wiser wiki;
- **databases** – Google, Google scholar, publisher’s portals, journal agencies, governments;
- **questions** – Uclue (Google answers), Lycos iq, Yahoo clever, Chacha, Sms Guru;
- **social meeting place** – Facebook, Nature network, Elsevier 2collab.

Finally, clichés have to be addressed too: how librarians look; what do they do, what skills do they have. This is not only important for the reputation of the library but also for the perception of librarians as competent information specialists: “Remember to highlight that librarians do more than worry about whether or not books are properly shelved. Stress the role of librarians as providers of information, as instructors who encourage learning, and as global professionals who can quickly and efficiently access resources from around the world” (5).

**Products**

Marketing is not only promotion, but a comprehensive process of creating successful products. The real point is not to do good and then talk about it, but to analyze the demands and satisfaction of your users, analyze the performance of your library, analyze your library’s strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT analysis) (6). This analysis can be carried out informally, by interviewing clients at a focus group, or more formally by means of a survey or by performance indicators such as gate counts. The examined services are entered into a system of coordinates according to the estimated values of user importance and user satisfaction (Figure 2). From that portfolio four groups of users can be distinguished and certain standard actions assigned. The services that rank high in importance but low in satisfaction (upper right rectangle) are recommended for immediate improvement. Those of low importance and low satisfaction (lower right rectangle) are marked for medium-term improvement, while those services of high importance and high satisfaction (upper left rectangle) are marked for long-term improvement. Services that rate low importance but high satisfaction (lower left rectangle) are to be consolidated. One should always place one’s findings in relation to potential competitors.

Some years ago we made a comprehensive list of all our services and came up with a total of 64. (7) Our customers were asked to rate the importance of and their satisfaction with each of these services. Some exemplary services are shown as a portfolio graph below.

**Promotional media**

The information cascade of the promotional products of my library starts with the weblog *Aktuelles*, where you will find the most actual and current news. (Figure 3) The weekly newsletter is a summary of the most important weblog entries of the last week. The printed journal then highlights selected news of the latter months and instructional or policy issues as well. The cascade leads to the knowledge wiki, which includes answers to exemplary user questions.
Weblog
Weblogs allow for easy writing and publishing, the entries are listed chronologically and are therefore ideal for publishing news items and keep your users current. The weblog can be enriched by adding voting and rating systems (8). The polls are good incentives for low level interactivity. When we asked our users if they would accept higher prices for coffee while getting better quality we received over 100 votes and some 50 comments including one that recommended the library to stick to bad coffee because that was a unique selling proposition for a library.

The weblog is enhanced by two special news feeds, which we created by ourselves:
- a feed of everything going on in our faculty, merged from the press releases of university clinics, news items from the Dean, and from the students’ portal;
- a feed of medical news from all over Germany, merged from over a dozen resources such as scientific newspapers, blogs, and press agencies.

Because of the universal nature of RSS you can embed these news feeds in any web page you like.

Newsletter
In 1995 we sent the newsletter to our customers by e-mail; in 1997 it became a weekly listserv newsletter (9). This was our only way of distributing current news until the initiation of the weblog. Due to the low frequency, it was almost one week behind. But still many people stick to that format and we love providing the very format they love to use.

Journal
The printed journal summarizes the most important events and changes of the last quarter. (10) It’s a professional, high quality fully 4-coloured publication with 12 to 16 pages. Why do we use a printed format for marketing virtual resources? We promote printed resources on the web and web resources in a printed journal. This kind of entanglement significantly enhances the success of our promotional activities. Even (or especially) in our interactive world, printed media sometimes receives more attention. Overall, the printed format offers several advantages:
- it can be displayed in the library and in the staff cafeteria;
- it can be given to a nurse or a doctor directly into her/his hand;
- it provides a strong physical presence with a high attention value, a professional look and feel;
- some user groups still prefer to keep to the printed world.

An issue may consist of interviews with users who, for instance have just experienced an extraordinary library service; reports on what the library is doing with their money; lessons on searching PubMed; or reviews of new books and databases. Especially interviews are liked by the interviewees: they receive publicity. Afterwards we can use their statements in our promotional materials as well. We have also made “library statement contests” for gathering comments for promotional purposes (11).

Knowledge Wiki
All information streams lead to the Knowledge Wiki, which began in early 2008. For this kind of knowledge database, a blog is not very useful at all. The 100 customer questions & answers from the blog, which we used as a start-up, were outdated, not linked to each other, and not easily accessible because they were buried in the thousands of blog entries. Both to promote this special set of knowledge items to our customers and to benefit from the wiki features, we converted these answers into a wiki. This had the following advantages:
- tremendously easy creating, modifying, and linking of pages;
- a “Page History” preserves older versions of a page and makes it possible to restore it;
the reader can comment on the entries such as in blogs. If the library does not mind, the readers can even modify them;
- the list of “Recent Changes” to your wiki pages keep your users informed about what’s going on;
- of course, they can subscribe via RSS to every page. If you write for instance a page on PubMed and keep it updated, the user will be currently aware, if there are new features to that database;
- the library made the wiki open and collaborative, so every customer can change or add content if he likes (of course he has to be registrated by the library).

**Toolbar**
Stimulated by Guus van den Brekel from the Central Medical Library of the University Groningen, the Library built a toolbar that can be easily installed by their users (12). The toolbar docks on the users' browser and provides the user with a wealth of information:
- a search box for main library databases, whether it be books, theses, journals, PubMed etc.
- library blog entries (RSS feed), the previously mentioned merged news feeds of the faculty, and the faculty’ publications in PubMed.

As appetizers we added several attractive not library related resources to the toolbar as well, such as the German phone book, the university phone book, the Google PageRank, local weather forecasts, etc. The toolbar allows virtually unlimited extensions. It has been installed more than 2000 times and is used about 20,000 times annually.

**Summary**
In the Table below I sum up our marketing activities. Please pay attention to the two last columns. The time invested in blog, newsletter and wiki pays off very well. To write one entry takes only some minutes and all of these are heavily accessed. On the contrary, the journal and the podcast needs much more engagement. It took no less than 40 hours to produce one issue of the journal and two hours for a three minute podcast. So be sure you have that much capacity, before you start your own menu of marketing products!

**New users – new challenges – the Millennials**
Coming to the end, I would like to bring your attention to our newest user generation, the Millennials. That is quite a challenge to meet. Wan Wee Pin said quite rightly: “We must recognize that the Internet and search engines are now the main ways in which people look for information. Rather than try to change users’ habits, the library can change its approach and meet users where they are – on the Web, using the tools they enjoy using” (13). The simple questions are:
- Is the library ready for the Millennials?
- Is it prepared for this generation’s information needs and habits? And do we actually know these?
- Do we have to make our services as Google-like as possible?

Obviously, we could very much benefit from their knowledge if we find a way to integrate it/them into our services. Our knowledge wiki may be a first step.

<table>
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<th>activity</th>
<th>frequency</th>
<th>total entries</th>
<th>hits p.a.</th>
<th>minutes per entry</th>
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</thead>
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<td>1.000</td>
<td>360.000</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newsletter</td>
<td>weekly</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>40.000</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal</td>
<td>monthly</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>10.000</td>
<td>2.400</td>
</tr>
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<td>Knowledge Wiki</td>
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<td>200</td>
<td>n.e.</td>
<td>1-30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Podcast</td>
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<td>20</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toolbar</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>15.000</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Table 1. Frequency, entries, hits and time spent on each activity.
In a famous Scott Adams cartoon, the hapless engineer Dilbert has to ask the marketing department which features the new product should provide. The marketing guy becoming increasingly enthusiastic and begins to list incredible features, each one more science fiction and more impossible than the previous. When he finally demands time travel and telepathic user interface, Dilbert slaps him into his face: “I could write a program, that makes fish appear on the computer screen,” he suggests to the consternate agent. Hopefully, libraries will not become just that – fish on screens!

References

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