A New Approach to Marketing and Outreach for Engineering Libraries

Ms. Ellie Ransom, Columbia University Libraries

Ellie Ransom is the Research Services Coordinator for the Science & Engineering Libraries Division at Columbia University. She is the liaison to the School of Engineering and Applied Science and the departments of Mathematics and Statistics. She works to create a robust workshop schedule for the science and engineering departments on campus. Ellie has a B.S. in Mathematics from North Carolina State University, a M.S. in Applied Mathematics and Statistics from Georgetown University and an M.S. in Library and Information Science from Pratt Institute’s School of Information.

Krystie Wilfong, Columbia University Libraries

Krystie Wilfong is the Collection Assessment and Analysis Librarian for the Science & Engineering Libraries Division at Columbia University. She designs marketing materials for all workshops and events for the division. She also selects for the departments of Chemistry, Physics and Astronomy. Krystie has a B.A. from Gettysburg College and a M.S. in Library and Information Science from the Palmer School of Library and Information Science, Long Island University.
A New Approach to Marketing and Outreach for Engineering Libraries

Abstract: This article describes the marketing and outreach efforts and related assessment activities of the Columbia University Libraries Science & Engineering division. Our marketing and outreach plan incorporated a three step approach to connect with our user base. The steps included launching a monthly newsletter, marketing our extensive electronic resources, and implementing a robust workshop schedule. Our assessment of these activities has shown continual growth of campus interest in our services and resources.

Introduction

University administrations seem to believe that the growth and accessibility of electronic collections, justify the closure of library spaces. Institutions have converted science libraries into makerspaces, faculty offices, institute suites, etc. Columbia University closed its Engineering Library in 2014. The print collections were dispersed based on circulation activity over the past five years. The most heavily used print titles were relocated either to the new Science & Engineering Library or our Mathematics Library. The less used material was sent to our offsite storage facility. Our staff recognized that it was essential to work closely with the students and faculty who used the Engineering Library to assure them that services like reserves, reference, and instruction would continue to be offered. We also recognized that it was important to communicate the availability of our ever-growing electronic collections. This all occurred following the consolidation of 4 departmental libraries 3 years prior. For over a year, students and faculty had to adjust to new locations for collections, course reserves, and services.

A strategy within our Science & Engineering division has been to move away from the traditional role of subject librarians and towards a team approach. Four vacancies were reconfigured to support this change: Research Services Coordinator, Collection Assessment and Analysis Librarian, Emerging Technologies Coordinator, and Digital Science Librarian. Our team worked together to develop a three-step approach for outreach and marketing to our users. This approach included creating a regularly distributed newsletter, starting an electronic resource promotional campaign to advertise our large electronic collections, and offering workshops throughout the academic year to fill gaps the curriculum did not support.
Literature Review

Kathy Dempsey defines marketing as “taking steps to move goods from producers to consumers. It’s determining what people want, delivering it, evaluating consumer satisfaction, and then periodically updating that whole process” \(^1\). She goes further in specifying the difference between marketing and promotion stating “promotion is furthering the growth or development of a product or service. It’s not just aiming toward good will; it’s encouraging people to use that product or service by telling those people how it would benefit them” \(^2\). Dempsey also suggests the need for a communication plan, which should be an outline of how you plan to interact with your target audience \(^3\). We cannot effectively promote if we do not know our target audience, what we have at our disposal, and how we can deliver it. A well-structured marketing plan will successfully lead a library into a productive future.

Many libraries have initiated formal marketing plans in order to structure their promotion and outreach better. Summey describes the effort at Emporia State University to create a marketing plan that would increase the success of their distance learning library services \(^4\). Robinson emphasizes the need for a marketing plan at The George T. Harrell Health Sciences Library at Penn State University after a series of retirements changed the staffing structure \(^5\). Thorpe and Bowman describe how a marketing plan helped their efforts to promote a new discovery tool at Indiana University Kokomo \(^6\). All these schools found the benefit in developing a structured approach to promotion and outreach.

Promotion by way of branding is one effective technique used repeatedly in libraries. A brief environmental scan shows the usefulness of branded campaigns. Arellano illustrates a campaign at Adams State University which promoted their reference service with a cartoon image of a man with a large beard called the “Bearded Librarian” \(^7\). This cartoon image played on the distinctive look of a professional reference staff member and helped students recognize who they could seek out for reference help. Dartmouth College explored the library’s research impact with “Inspiring Ideas”, a campaign in which librarians asked users to provide testimonials on how the library has helped them in their research then branded the promotional materials with “Inspiring Ideas” \(^8\). Oxford Brookes University used a Dracula theme during their annual Fresher’s Fair, which included promotional signs had witty slogans like “Finding information doesn’t have to be a pain in the neck” \(^9\). Each institution developed on a theme to create an effective branding that pushed their promotional efforts to the next level.

Creating a structured plan is the first step in reaching users. This plan should include both of Carter and Seaman’s definitions for outreach, “services offered by libraries” and “promotion of these services” \(^10\). Users need to know what libraries have to offer in terms of services and resources as there is only so much they will be able to decipher on their own. An outreach plan does not require a large investment of financial support. A study by Dennis discusses outreach
projects that ranged in costs from $5 to $12,000 11. Aside from time and printing costs, there are many outreach efforts that will cost libraries absolutely nothing. Most social media platforms are free, as are the majority of features in MailChimp. With a bit of creativity, it can be easy to avoid any extra costs to a marketing and outreach endeavor.

Description of Three Step Approach

In the Science & Engineering division of Columbia University Libraries we have developed a marketing and outreach plan that incorporates three strategic areas: the development of a monthly newsletter, the creation of a structured electronic resource campaign and the development of a series of helpful workshops and other library events. We have also been able to assess the benefit and helpfulness of these campaigns. We formulated a plan to collect data and analyze our success throughout the entire process. It must be noted that marketing is a “continuous process or a kind of never-ending wheel” and should be continually assessed and updated 12. Continuous monitoring of our outreach and marketing efforts has helped us correct and expand our programs. Below we describe the development and assessment of our marketing and outreach projects.

Newsletter

The first area of our outreach approach revolved around effective communication, a challenge libraries often face. To combat this problem we created a newsletter that consolidated information into a brief summary. Since students already receive so many emails, consolidating our updates into a newsletter made it easy to send information only four times a semester. There is a level of email fatigue we all feel and we hoped to alleviate some of that on our students and faculty by limiting our email blasts.

Our newsletter is very brief and includes only the most relevant information keeping in mind how timely content is the most useful. We time our newsletters and their content based largely on what time during the semester it is and what events we have upcoming in order to get information to our users at their point of need. We have chosen to include thoughtful, timely, and subject specific updates including but not limited to:

- upcoming workshops and events from the Science & Engineering division
- upcoming workshops and events from the Columbia University Libraries
- details about contests we are hosting
- featured resources, such as new collection acquisitions or even software
- a featured staff member with photo
- hours changes
- science & engineering research themed images from our Instagram account
• links to all of our social media platforms

We used MailChimp to create our newsletters since it is free and provides attractive templates that are fairly easy to customize. We kept all of our images recognizable and relevant, never anything stock. We keep content brief and to the point to encourage our readers to digest the entire letter. We also include at least 3 instances of how to contact the Science & Engineering Library staff.

Starting this past Fall we created an email list that allowed individuals to self subscribe to the newsletter directly from MailChimp. To encourage patrons to subscribe we initiated a promotional campaign at the beginning of our fall orientations. The campaign centered on the theme of emphasizing the attractive aspects of our collections and services with a “want to know…” tagline. In Figure 1 you will notice our use of this theme with a tagline of “Want to learn about new technologies?” and a picture of an oculus rift. This promotion included a raffle for users who signed up during orientation weeks to encourage participation. Our largest increase in the number of subscribers came during orientation weeks. We continue to solicit subscribers by asking at every event and workshop for students to sign up for our newsletter.

![Figure 1. Newsletter Promotional Design](image)

To assess our newsletter promotional campaign we used the statistical dashboard provided by MailChimp as well as an externally created bitly link that was incorporated into all promotional materials. The bitly link was included on the print flyers, homepage spotlight ads, LCD screen ads, orientation week and workshop slides. We keep a running tally of the bitly clicks and have noticed a continual flow of usage throughout the semester. We were able to monitor the actual subscription conversion using the statistical dashboard in MailChimp. Since our newsletter promotional campaign started in August of 2015 we have seen over 200 bitly link clicks and 255 new newsletter subscribers. Figure 2 shows the trend in bitly link clicks and new subscribers. Our biggest surge in bitly hits and subscribers happened in August. This was due to orientation week and the promotional ads we incorporated into our presentations.
We monitor our open and click rates within the MailChimp statistical dashboard. An open rate provides a percentage of the delivered campaign that is successfully opened and the click rate provides a percentage of the links clicked within the campaign at least once. This view on usage helps provide an understanding of what email subject lines and content is most useful to our users. Since August, we have seen on average a 19.8% open rate and a 17.02% click rate based on our list of 255 subscribers (Figure 3). Based on the MailChimp designated Education Standard we are around average for the open rate but well above for the click rate. We hope to find ways of improving our open rate in the coming semesters.
E-Resources

The Science & Engineering Library has seen exponential growth in the procurement of electronic content. With this growth we needed to come up with a plan to promote the new resources and foster the acceptance of the electronic medium. Starting in the fall of 2014 we decided to conduct a unifying promotional campaign we branded “Free for You.” Using this tag line we were able to blend the promotion of several different electronic resources from various vendors under one design.

The “Free for You” campaign has a simplistic look with a plain background and minimal words. A simplistic design allows for the creation of templates that leads to easy integration of new vendors each semester. We wanted to emphasize the quantitative breadth of our collection so we included a round figure of how many eBooks, electronic journals, and databases were available to our users. We pinpointed which subject areas each resource focused on so our users would know which resource was targeted to their field of study or research.

The promotional campaign had a 5 pronged approach with advertisements made for our circulation desk, LCD screen, newsletter, blog and twitter. We advertised each resource for a two week time period. Figure 4 shows a print poster, which was located on our circulation desk. We placed vendor branded giveaways in front of the poster as an added promotional tactic. We solicited these giveaways directly from vendors, who provided them to us free of charge. Figure 5 shows an LCD screen ad, which is located at the front of the library in a prominent position. Each two week promotion received a blog post that pointed our users to a book or journal of interest. We highlighted each resource in our newsletter as we were promoting them in the library. We incorporated the social media platform Twitter and tweeted pictures of our circulation desk display telling our users to stop by the Science & Engineering Library to pick up the giveaway and check out the available electronic content.

![Featured Resource](image_url)

Over 1,700 eBooks free for you.

For Civil Engineering:
- Structures and Buildings
- Ground Engineering
- Construction Materials
- Water and Wastewater Management

[Insert logo here]

Need help? Email us at ref-sci@columbia.edu
This past academic year we increased our promotional presence by integrating a spotlight content box on our library’s website pages that when clicked directs the user to the content’s platform. Figure 6 demonstrates this new spotlight box. The spotlight box is located on the top right hand side of our Science & Engineering Library homepage as well as our Digital Science Center homepage. The extension of this campaign to our digital presence online made sense in that we have a large community of users that use our resources online.

The preparation and organization for this campaign happens over the summer months. We reach out to our vendor representatives and ask if they would be willing to participate by providing high resolution logos and a small amount of giveaways. This is usually met with a resounding yes and appreciation for promoting their resources. In addition, since this prep work is done over the summer months there is little to do during the busy academic year.

The initial plan to assess our e-resource campaign involved reviewing COUNTER compliant statistics and measuring the difference in usage over the previous year. This metric was difficult to gauge and did not clearly show us noticeable trends in use. However, all
giveaways were taken during each allotted promotional week and we received a number of re-
tweets. Using Google Analytics we are able to pull click through statistics from the website
spotlight. Since September of 2015 when we started using the spotlight we have received 14
clicks. Although this number is not high, it provides evidence that users are interested in
searching publisher’s platforms to find further materials electronically. The spotlight also leaves
an impression each time someone goes to our site or logs into our terminals within our libraries.
For example, in 2015 we saw over 52,780 visits to our homepage.

Workshops

Beginning in the Fall 2013 semester, we created two series of 3 to 4 one hour-long
workshops held outside the library. The focus of both series was on the professionalization of the
engineering student. Requested by the Office of Graduate Student Affairs, we worked with the
Engineering Graduate Student Council to shape the subjects of these workshops. A selection of
topics for these workshops included writing and grammar, preparing for a dissertation, and how
to use LaTeX. The workshops were scheduled, organized, and advertised within one week of the
date they were to occur. Once each workshop was decided and planned, we sent out email blasts
to the engineering departments soliciting attendance. The timing for our planning was not ideal
but when starting something new you must begin somewhere.

We chose to take a more organic approach to our workshops and let our planning and
advertising techniques become more organized with each semester. In the second semester, we
decided on topics at the beginning of the semester and opted to include all science departments.
The topics covered in the second semester were still engineering focused but we advertised the
workshops to a broader audience, as they also pertained to all science departments. We created
elaborate flyers for our workshops that we posted electronically online and on LCD screens
around campus. We started our newsletter, mentioned above, in the third semester where we
advertised all of our workshops. We also began a signup form using Google forms to track who
was interested in our events and to send reminders. We also used these signup lists to share
handouts and presentations from the workshops to those that were not able to attend and as
reference for those that were. By the fourth semester we realized we needed to start printing out
flyers for our workshops (Figure 7). Campus cultures seem never to change fully and some
students have mentioned that they never read emails but they always notice flyers.
Now that we had a solid base for advertising and our workshops were getting easier to plan and host, we chose to add to our repertoire of offerings. We created a series of weekly drop in sessions that we branded our Library Clinics (Figure 8). Our clinics were meant to be informational and flowing, not a lecture style or hands on workshop. We hosted these in the library itself, right in the flow of traffic so we would be noticed. Topics for our library clinics included citation management software, 3D printing, arduino demos, oculus rift demos, and even Bloomberg terminal Q and As. We decided at first to hold these sessions on Friday mornings at a time that would be least disruptive to our patrons. Shortly after realizing that least disruptive also means lowest attended, we switched these clinics to our busiest time on Wednesday afternoons. Attendance immediately boomed.

Another series we added were our book talks, something we have always wanted to do in the library space. We chose to invite faculty members from a science or engineering department who have published a book. Our first book talk was a great success, and faculty as well as students showed up to listen. We had a handful of library patrons stop by and stay as they were...
passing through the library. We hope the book talk series will increase the library’s appeal to more faculty members.

Over the past few years we have developed these workshops to appeal to all science departments and not just the Engineering School. We have also refined our planning skills to have all workshops and events scheduled and planned before the semester begins. This has allowed us to create a marketing plan for all of our workshops and events. This plan includes advertising all workshops on our general Library Workshops page, including all events in our newsletter, creating flyers both digital and print to be placed around campus, writing blog posts about all events, creating Facebook events for all workshops, clinics, and book talks, and emailing student groups of interest. Most recently in an attempt to up our marketing campaign for the workshops now that we are hosting so much, we have put together a semester long “Upcoming Events” brochure (Figure 9).

We assess our library events in a number of ways. Using a web based tool for collecting library statistics named Desk Tracker we are able to record attendance as well as background on these events. The instructor initially counts attendance and Desk Tracker allows us to record these statistics electronically for long-term use. Over time we will be able to track trends in data such as demographics, timing, and subject.

To provide a qualitative analysis of these programs we have developed a short event survey. Initially this survey was distributed as a print handout after each workshop. More recently, we have decided to eliminate the print surveys for a more convenient electronic Google Form (see Appendix A). In this form we were able to incorporate more direct questions and analyze the responses in a more efficient manner. As a division we can review the responses and make adjustments to our events to fit better with our user base. As an instructor, the comments help to develop the programs and provide meaningful direction.
We make note of verbal testimonials regarding our events. For example, at our annual PhD Reception we asked individuals how they found out about the event. The details in our newsletter were most noted but some mentioned our print posters. During one of our publishing workshops a Biomedical Engineering student noted the usefulness of the material and requested a tailored event for their department. We have noted students attending workshops and taking notes for lab group members that could not attend. This has led to the Engineering School’s video team providing recordings for select workshops of interest free of charge. Comments and actions such as these validate the time and effort spent in promotion and workshop development.

Conclusion

Our outreach and marketing experiment has potential for growth and development. We have already seen organic growth since we began our attempts to advertise our services with newsletters, awareness campaigns, and workshops. Since previous changes to our outreach and marketing have not been based on formal assessment, we believe there is room for vast improvements. We hope to use the data we are now starting to collect from each of these three topics to make more informed decisions on how we proceed. We will continue to improve this approach to outreach and marketing in the coming years.

Works Cited:
2. Ibid., 16.
3. Ibid., 16.


12. Dempsey, 16.

1. How did you hear about this workshop?
   a. Science & Engineering Library website
   b. Email or newsletter
   c. Facebook
   d. Flyer or brochure
   e. Librarian referral
   f. Twitter
   g. Workshop calendar
   h. Other

2. Please rate your level of agreement with these statements about the session that you attended.

   Strongly Agree / Agree / Neither Agree nor Disagree / Disagree / Strongly Disagree
   The instructor presented the materials in a clear and understandable manner.
   The level of difficulty of the session was appropriate for my needs.
   The instruction session met my expectations.

3. Describe one thing you learned about in this session that you didn’t know before.

4. Was there anything not covered that you wish was discussed?

5. Please tell us about yourself:
   a. Undergraduate
   b. Master’s Student
   c. Doctoral Student
   d. Faculty
   e. Staff
   f. Other (please list)

6. Would you like to receive emails about other classes and workshops?