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# Got Library?: Musings on Marketing Information Literacy

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I attended the inaugural Institute for Information Literacy in Summer 1999 as a Track One participant. We studied six key areas: learning theories, teaching methodology, program management, assessment, the history and theory of information literacy, and leadership. The choice of these core issues and activities drove the participants to think creatively about their roles in student learning. Yet there is another endeavor we should pursue to advance the concept we know as information literacy: the field of marketing helps fill in the crack between management and leadership. Libraries and librarians often struggle with marketing, as evidenced by our patrons' ignorance of our basic services and resources, and by our lingering, stereotyped image. If we really want to push the concept of "information literacy" into the mainstream, and be identified as a major player in the movement, we need to pay attention to some "media literacy" issues and take cues from current marketing tactics.

Good marketers are able to boil down their services or goods to key concepts that attract their target audiences' attention and that remain memorable past the actual advertisement. They intentionally avoid describing every detail of their product and instead strive for simplicity. The point of the marketing is to grab attention and to give the audience basic information so they realize that they want or need the product. Pity the marketer who clutters perceptions or confuses their audiences with unmemorable terminology. Long, drawn-out definitions or explanations are a no-no. Instead, good ads are short and sweet.

Think of some of the effective and memorable advertisements you have seen. From a very informal and unscientific survey of my friends, here's a short list of what we consider good marketing campaigns:

- Taco Bell chihuahua (OK, it could be annoying, but you have to admit that it was effective)
- CapitolOne Mastercard (where the ruthless Vikings almost raid the house)
- GAP khakis (swing dancing)

- "Got milk?" and milk mustaches
- Vintage Energizer Bunny (another one that was annoying but effective)
- Absolut vodka bottles (print campaign)
- Pets.com sock puppet dog

It's not hard to recognize the characteristics that make these advertisements compelling. The marketers are using devices like humor and other emotional appeals, metaphor, anachronism, and surprise, juxtaposition of the familiar with the unfamiliar, strong visual or musical imagery, and simplicity (in text and in concept). Of course there are the old marketing stand-bys of the celebrity spokesperson and anything with kids or dogs. All of the advertisements offer a brief, digestible message. Even if you don't watch television, you can still identify some print commercials you are fond of or at least found memorable.

The library world is not without its good ad campaigns. The Celebrity READ series is quite compelling. The posters are simple and straightforward, and it's always fun to see the staging of different celebrities and their choices of books. The series does a great job of targeting different audiences with celebrities from a variety of age groups (the Olsen twins to Nicolas Cage to Barbara Walters), professions (lots of actors, musicians, and athletes, but also chef Emeril Lagasse and scientist Stephen Hawking), and cultures (from the cast of *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman* to WWF stars Chyna and The Rock, and from Michele Kwan to Spike Lee).

If the Celebrity READ campaign lacks anything, it's the element of surprise in the message. A library urging you to read is a strong message but a predictable one. Conventional literacy is obviously an important part of what libraries strive for, but, as you know, libraries have expansive missions and multiple dimensions. These "new" services are the ones our patrons are going to be less familiar with and therefore, less comfortable. Predictability itself can be an effective component of advertising. Marketers use predictable messages, images, and music to keep their audiences comfortable. The comfort allows for more ambitious and daring marketing ventures without risk of alienating the audience.

The new @ YOUR LIBRARY™ campaign recently released by ALA's Campaign for America's Libraries is a good example of the venture into a more daring realm. The conventional sounding message is charged with a strong reference to libraries' presence in today's technological world. It is also intentionally flexible, allowing individual libraries to customize the trademarked phrase, and assuring wide public recognition. The @ YOUR LIBRARY™ campaign will help libraries market themselves in a way that more accurately reflects what they are doing


Libraries on the local level can take cues from mainstream marketing. More specifically, proponents of information literacy can and should use some of the same tactics. To start with, the very term “information literacy” is a marketing black hole. It is a fuzzy and funny term that can mean vastly different things even among our library colleagues. Some educators and others outside of libraries have picked up on the term; for most people, it is a barrier rather than an incentive to know more. The audience for our information literacy plans usually consists of other librarians, faculty, and administrators, and these well-educated individuals respond to good marketing just as the general population does.

The other main thing we need to avoid when trying to promote information literacy is presenting documents like the foreboding ACRL Information Literacy Standards. I respect the work that was done to articulate the skills and knowledge we in the profession are striving for, and referral to the standards may be in order for a campus that commits to information literacy. The standards need to be drastically streamlined, however, for a campus merely considering them or for individual faculty members who want to use their ideas. At OLA’s conference this year, I enjoyed hearing Deb Carver’s report on Vision 2010, where she said, “If you have to refer to a written document to understand what you should be doing, you haven’t internalized the concept.” A good marketer might paraphrase that statement: the consumer should have a strong understanding and recollection of your product long past the moment of seeing your advertisement. As marketing librarians, we should be presenting our colleagues and administrators with information literacy concepts they can internalize.

In addition to simplifying the message, we can promote information literacy with humor, the surprise of familiar images combined with unexpected ones, and the use of strong visuals. (Work a dog into that promotion, and you’ve got yourself an award-winning ad.) Individual libraries might market through newsletters, posters around campus, student newspapers, or campus radio or cable channels. The comparatively deep pockets of state or

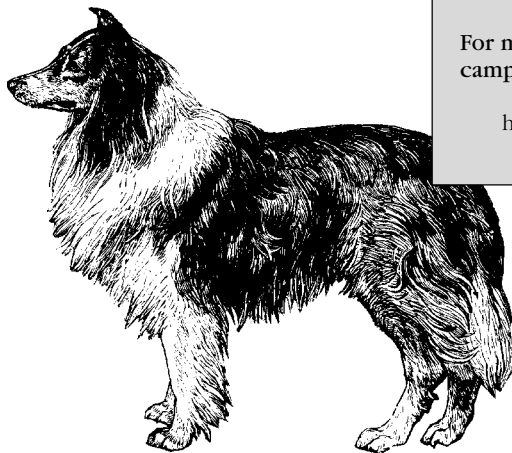
national associations might utilize trade publications of the target audiences or sponsor some slickly-produced television ads.

Marketing libraries and, specifically, information literacy does not mean that we need to “dumb down” our message. The purpose of advertising is simply to catch the audience’s attention. We can suspend our librarianly instinct of full information disclosure and complete documentation long enough to “give them a good show.” Even in an academic environment, we don’t need to over-intellectualize. The details can come later.

Our teaching colleagues, students, and the public still largely see libraries as rule-based, unequivocal, orderly and linear institutions. When we do our traditional jobs well, we make library work look deceptively easy. However, teaching and learning are multidimensional and decidedly non-linear activities, and information literacy deals with ambiguous issues. A challenge for us is to convince our students, colleagues and public that libraries are flexible and spontaneous, and as such are able to contribute to student learning. As we continue to stock our shelves with books, we should continue promoting our traditional messages. We can also stretch the perceptions of what we do and more accurately reflect our current selves by venturing into daring, creative, even edgy marketing campaigns. 

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For more on ALA’s @ YOUR LIBRARY™ campaign, check out this Web site:

<https://www.ala.org/@yourlibrary/>