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It All Started With a Button...

Jill E. Luedke and Sarah K. Laleman Ward

Jill E. Luedke will conclude her art history thesis this fall, thus completing her requirements for a dual masters degree in Art History and Library Science from Pratt Institute. She has interned at the Brooklyn Museum of Art and School of Visual Arts, and worked at the Watson Library at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Sarah K. Laleman Ward received her MLIS from Dominican University in 2005, transitioning to librarianship from the exciting world of theatre in Chicago, IL. An internship at the Watson Library at the Metropolitan Museum of Art brought her to New York, and she is very glad she decided to stick around.

Abstract

As librarians at an art and design library that is also part of a larger institution, we find it necessary to continually come up with new and innovative ways to make our library a welcoming, appealing, interesting and relevant place. Of particular popularity are the buttons we make using images from resources available at the library. For outreach, we give them away at every opportunity, including orientations (while wearing the “librarian” t-shirts we made) and faculty meetings. We also use them as teaching tools, and as incentive for participation in library instruction sessions. Our student workers and staff members have a range of talents and interests that can be maximized to promote the library as well. We encourage librarians in other settings to expand on our ideas and use the resources at hand for creative library promotion and marketing projects.

Introduction

Every library faces the challenge of how best to promote library services and resources in an appealing, memorable and inexpensive way. A creative environment such as an art and design school establishes the expectation that everyone and everything be creative and unique. This higher expectation for creativity drives us to invent new ways to champion the library and its resources. As new librarians, we are blessed with a certain level of energy and optimism that can fade over time in any profession. We bring this enthusiasm with us daily, and it compels us to discover innovative ways to highlight the uniqueness of our collection and market our services. It is our goal to paint a picture of the library as a living thing, infused with a distinct personality rather than a repository for dusty books. Working in the Adam & Sophie Gimbel Design Library, one of three libraries comprising The New

School Libraries, allows us the opportunity to concentrate on the special things we can offer in our specific library setting. The Gimbel Library's collection is focused on art, architecture and design in order to support the curriculum of Parsons The New School for Design as well as the increasingly interdisciplinary curricula taught throughout The New School. This focus on art and design provides ample opportunities for creativity, marketing and outreach that can be applied anywhere. The basics behind our ideas are simple and inexpensive and can be adapted to any environment. All it takes is a little support, some good ideas, and a sense of adventure. The purpose of this article is to illustrate anecdotally some of the creative ideas we came up with and implemented for outreach and library promotion in this setting.

Our primary patron base is comprised of undergraduate art and design students. Also included are art and design graduate students, faculty members, students and faculty from other departments, university staff and outside researchers. The New School Libraries belong to the Research Library Association of South Manhattan, more commonly known as "The Consortium," which expands our user group to include students and faculty from several other schools. Our library's collection is particular and focused, so most people come to our library for a specific need or with certain expectations. The type and scope of our resources often surprises our patrons who expect to find just books.

And Then There Were Buttons

In an effort to increase library visibility we do a lot of informal and casual outreach. About a year ago, we acquired a button-maker which we use to make one-inch buttons out of images photocopied from library resources. We now incorporate the buttons into many aspects of library outreach and day-to-day activities. Initially, we planned to use them as a teaching tool in library instruction classes. Our first educational activity using the buttons was a pilot project last year during an intensive summer session with students who speak English as a second language. To demonstrate how our collection is arranged and to help these students understand call numbers, we gave each student a button card. Button cards are postcards that contain information about a book, including a citation, call number, brief description and finally, a button with an image from the book. Using the information on the button card, the students had to locate the book in the stacks. This exercise provided a hands-on way for students to learn about call numbers and the arrangement of the library, and they left with a souvenir as a reminder of the lesson. We specifically chose books related to their course work and final projects, which provided relevance beyond the initial library exercise. Each instructor created a unique assignment for their classes but they all involved researching a block or two on the Lower East Side of Manhattan and solving a design problem they identified in their specific area. The presentations involved three-dimensional representations of their proposals as well as slide shows of images, statistics and historical information. At the end of the summer, we attended the final project

Reaching Out

For the Fall 2007 Orientation Week, we contacted student and university organizations to see where we could create a library presence during various orientation activities. Orientation week is an extremely busy time for everyone on campus so we picked events that would be the most appropriate for our planned outreach. We chose events that provided us with the opportunity to reach many new students and faculty in large and casual group settings. We requested a table for the libraries at the Annual Welcome Block Party, which is a carnival-like street fair with food and games and a place for new students and faculty to learn about different organizations and departments. We also attended a New Faculty Orientation meet-and-greet where we introduced ourselves to a number of faculty members from various departments. To make a lasting impression at these events we came up with a few small marketing strategies. The plan was to implant the idea of accessible, interesting, and helpful libraries in the minds of our community in a simple and direct way.

First, we designed and ordered black t-shirts with "librarian" printed across the front in white. Since this was not a library or university sanctioned item, we paid for them out of pocket. They cost approximately \$20.00 each. Three librarians participated in the t-shirt plan with great success. Initially, people laughed at us in a good-natured way, but then proceeded to ask us questions, which we were happy to answer. The t-shirts allowed for easy identification of the librarians and more importantly broke the ice and encouraged people to ask questions about any number of library-related topics. We also distributed our buttons as an additional means of promotion and "sticky" marketing. In the spirit of library solidarity, we incorporated images that represented resources from all The New School Libraries. For example, we used images from sheet music to represent the music library and programs, and charts and diagrams from social science texts to represent the social sciences and humanities collections. We used the buttons to represent what can be found throughout the university libraries, and people were excited to find something from their particular discipline among them.

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The Libraries table at the Welcome Block Party, Fall 2007.



Jill, in her “librarian” t-shirt at the Welcome Block Party, Fall 2007.

As noted earlier, we bring the buttons to all the orientation events we attend and they remain extremely popular. Faculty and students enjoy rummaging through the bowl of buttons to find ones they like, and we always make sure to tell them that the buttons are made using images from library resources. Also during orientation week, we kept a bowl filled with buttons on the circulation desk. Following that week, after the buttons had been removed from the circulation desk, we had students come to the library specifically asking about them. One student claimed her roommate had picked up a cool button at the library and she wanted one as well. The buttons have likewise made an appearance at one American Library Association Annual Conference, one Art Libraries Society of North America Conference and several Art Libraries Society of New York events, with great success. They seem to appeal to all ages and disciplines.



Buttons!

We continue to use the buttons in our regular library instruction sessions as incentive for participation. Since we do not allow food in the library, a food or candy treat is not an option. The buttons are a natural substitute and are generally well-received. Students who take part in brainstorming activities, write on the white board for us during mental mapping, or take an active part in the discussion receive a button of their choice at the end of a class. The button incentive for class participation has been such a success that students now readily volunteer to participate so they can add more buttons to their collections.

Tapping into Patrons as Resource

In order to promote the library and its resources specifically to the Parsons community, we contacted the editors of Parsons Magazine (PM). We shared a table with the PM staff during the Annual Welcome Block Party so the idea had been percolating for a while. We intended to write a brief article introducing the library to the PM readers. We had in mind an article that would feature our collection and resources and let people know where to find us. We also planned to include footnotes for each of the other articles in the issue pointing out library resources relevant to the topics covered, and then create short bibliographies for each article to have on-hand at the library. Ultimately, the only piece that made it to press was the article introducing the library. It was featured on the last page of PM issue #4, and painted a friendly, accessible image of the Gimbel Library without overwhelming the audience with too many details. This introductory article was another way for us to increase the visibility of the library within a targeted community. We hope to collaborate on more issues of PM in the future.

In conjunction with outreach, our exhibition cases allow us to incorporate the creativity of our patrons into the library. Since our primary patron base consists of faculty and students at Parsons, we frequently exhibit their work. These exhibitions include final projects from class assignments, private collections and personal work from faculty. We prefer exhibitions of patron and community work over installing objects from the library's Special Collections or artists' books. This focuses attention on the patrons' interests and creativity, which allows them to feel more involved in the library environment.



Exhibition of student graphic novels, Fall 2007.



Exhibition of student graphic novels, Fall 2007.

Reaching In to Reach Out

Our student workers and staff members also have a range of talents and interests that can be maximized to promote the library. To better identify the locations of The New School Libraries, the Consortium libraries, and the location of other local libraries we approached one of our student workers who is a graduate in Communication Design and Technology. He created a large format, double-sided map that hangs in a glass window where it is visible from inside the library and from the outside lobby.

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Map of the Consortium and other libraries designed by Ryan Quigley.

In an effort for everyone in the library to get to know one another and learn everyone's name, we took inspiration from the online social networking site, Facebook by creating our own in-house, print version for our team. This was prompted by a student worker's concern that the staff and students did not all know each other's names. Our Facebook consists of a picture of the employee along with their name, job title and "fun fact" about them. This information is mounted on construction paper and magnetized to our supply cabinet.



Gimbel Library "Facebook."

Anyone Can Do It

Creativity and uniqueness are certainly not limited to art and design libraries. As we have already pointed out, acts of creative marketing can occur in any kind of library. Every library has enough resources for endless possibilities. Utilizing your in-house "human resources" is the easiest and least financially burdensome way to promote your library. Incorporating the talents and artistry of these people personalizes the library and displays its originality.

Embracing any reason to congregate patrons in the library is a major component of creative networking and outreach. There are numerous opportunities for after-hours social events. Your staff and volunteers can provide the social group, while your library provides the entertainment. Allow your staff to act as library advocates—remember, they are your patrons too. For example, hold a bring-a-friend soiree that includes an overview/introduction to a library database, behind-the-scenes look at Special Collections, or a tour of the Archives. Since your staff are comfortable with the library, they act as non-threatening liaisons to their patron friends. This is especially true in settings where the patron base is more comfortable researching via Wikipedia than with library resources. The point of this soiree is to make your patrons feel the library is accessible, relevant and enjoyable; therefore, the event should be fun, casual and not overwhelming. During this event, you can also invite the guests to provide feedback about the library. Ask them for suggestions on improvements, acquisitions, space utilization, etc. Other targeted groups could include faculty from a specific department, local interest groups, or businesses from the greater community.

Exhibitions in the library provide a unique way to showcase the library's strengths, and exhibition receptions always lend themselves to a convivial atmosphere. Remember, exhibitions need not be limited to art and design. Take

inspiration from your local historical society, natural history, science or other museum. Exhibitions could consist of library resources, staff resources, or other institutional resources. Look to your staff and patrons for ideas. Perhaps your staff or patrons have personal collections to display, or maybe they are amateur craftsmen/artists themselves.

Conclusion

The key to creatively marketing the library is three-fold: be fearlessly creative, ask for ideas and be supportive. Fearless creativity may come with practice, but in general, do not be afraid to take chances or look silly (do you think anyone else thinks "librarian" t-shirts are cool?). Whatever you choose to do, go forth with conviction and positive results will follow. If you're stuck in a creative rut, ask for ideas. Remember your staff, volunteers and patrons have a vested interest in the library too. Survey them, or brainstorm ideas together. Finally, and probably most importantly, be supportive and encouraging. If someone has an idea, let them run with it. Encouraging and promoting creativity fosters more creativity.