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Branding matters: Reimagine your library services

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Susan Wengler

Branding matters

Reimagine your library services

While attending ACRL 2017 in Baltimore, I came upon a poster titled “Cultivating Curiosity: Intersecting Century-Old Services for 21st Century Impact,” which suggested that a simple rebranding of traditional reference services could markedly increase student engagement. I was intrigued by these findings but somewhat skeptical. *How could such a low-cost, low-tech strategy generate such high-impact results?* Thankfully, presenters Jennifer Hunter and Christina Riehman-Murphy of the Penn State University Libraries-Abington College were on hand to answer all my questions. Hunter and Riehman-Murphy outlined their program and outcomes, and they convinced me: *branding matters*. I left the convention center inspired, ready to bring their marketing blueprint back to Queensborough Community College (QCC) of the City University of New York (CUNY).

The Kurt R. Schmeller Library at QCC offers a wide range of instructional services, including a series of end-of-semester drop-in sessions. Our library faculty felt strongly that students had a need for last-minute help with research paper topics, sources, and citations. But semester after semester, attendance at these sessions was very low. I got to wondering if this particular program might be a good candidate for a marketing makeover. Perhaps our students did have a need for last-minute help, but perhaps we could do a better job connecting them with our services.

Start with the name

Hunter and Riehman-Murphy argued that simply changing the name of their existing drop-in sessions to *Research Parties* had triggered

a positive response. This made a lot of sense to me, as the combination of these two words is charming and unexpected, and together they send a clear message about what students can expect from the service. *Research* conveys the promise of academic support, while *Parties* transmits a pledge to social relationships. Students in need of research help may be motivated to attend a session if they believe that help will be delivered in a friendly, festive atmosphere. The theory seemed worth testing, so with permission from Hunter and Riehman-Murphy, we rebranded QCC’s Spring 2017 sessions as our very own series of Research Parties.

Craft a visual message

Next we needed a new flier to go with our new name. We wanted the flier to clearly present all event details, such as dates, times, location, and what kind of research help would be available. We also wanted it to express a positive, affirming, and social vibe. My Photoshop skills are nonexistent, and there wasn’t sufficient time to collaborate with the college’s marketing department. A talented friend with graphic design experience came to the rescue, creating a visually appealing product, which perfectly represented our new image.

The flier text highlights several features of the Research Parties: a warm welcome (“The

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QCC Library Invites You”), the opportunity for upward mobility (“Reach New Heights”) and access to knowledge and support (“Get Expert Help”). The academic promise is articulated (“Topics—Citations—Articles—and More!”), as is the social pledge (“Snack Will Be Served!”). Illustrations of hot air balloons and mountains underscore a theme of aspiration and ascent. Uplifting colors generate a feeling of encouragement and limitless potential. Print copies of the flier were posted throughout the library and the student center, and electronic copies were posted on digital campus signage and on the college’s website.

Leverage faculty

Beyond crafting a snappy name and creating a sharp flier, Hunter and Riehman-Murphy shared that word-of-mouth marketing by the Penn State-Abington faculty had a notable impact on student attendance. This idea also seemed sensible, as professors have relationships and sustained contact with students during class time, as well as the ability to communicate via email and course

shell announcements. Students may trust the professor and be open to their academic advice, especially related to a research assignment that the particular professor will ultimately be grading.

QCC librarians act as liaisons to assigned academic departments. In promoting our Spring 2017 Research Parties, each librarian emailed the full-time and adjunct faculty in their liaison departments, forwarding the flier PDF and asking for help in promoting the event. Recognizing that adjunct faculty often juggle

multiple work email accounts, we placed paper copies of the flier with a cover note in the campus mailboxes of all English and Speech Department adjuncts.

Party time

Five Research Parties were scheduled for the last week of classes in May 2017. Each party took place in the library’s instructional classroom, equipped with 24 computers and a printer, and was two hours long, held from either 11:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. or 5:00 to 7:00 p.m. Two librarians were recruited to staff

each event. Hunter and Riehman-Murphy had advised that having two hosts would lead to a more convivial, social atmosphere and would ensure that adequate instructional coverage was in place if more than one student was in attendance.

Students entering the room were welcomed by the librarians, and a sign-in table was set up to the right of the door and a large snack table to the left. The sign-in sheet asked for name, email, and “How did you hear

about the Research Parties (i.e., professor, flier, email, digital signage)?” Extra copies of the library’s APA and MLA style guides were available. The snack table was covered with a cloth and featured fresh fruit, nuts, pretzels, chips, candy, and water bottles. Students ate while they worked, and in a gesture of hospitality, they were encouraged to take extra snacks when they left. A copy of the flier was projected onto the classroom’s large center screen, reminding attendees of remaining session dates and times.



A copy of the Research Parties flier.

The room took on a cheerful and vibrant atmosphere, as each party got underway. Students toggled between multiple activities: consulting with librarians, working independently, speaking with one another, and enjoying the snack table offerings. The most frequently asked questions were related to finding sources in the library's databases, followed by writing a thesis statement and creating APA or MLA citations. Librarians moved around the room, interacting with students for varying lengths of time, depending on demand and supply. One student reported that she did not need the assistance of a librarian, she just liked the way the room made her feel.

The library reimagined

Our rebranding project worked. It really, *really* worked. As a result of the new name, new flier, and new set-up, student attendance went up 225% in spring 2017 relative to fall 2016. One party was attended by 16 students, a record number for a drop-in session at our library. Interestingly, 69% of students said they heard about this event from a professor, confirming Hunter and Riehm-Murphy's assertion that faculty are a powerful marketing channel.

In addition to these impressive numbers, we also received positive qualitative feedback from students and faculty. "This really helped me focus on my paper topic," shared one first-year student. "And the food kept me going!" An English professor, who frequently schedules information literacy sessions for his classes, commented on the unique value of social research consultations.

"These events have allowed my students to reimagine the library as a welcoming space of learning," he observed. "The inclusion of research

parties, wherein students receive one-on-one dedicated assistance towards completing their final papers, has greatly effected their writing."

Round two

The fall 2017 semester provided us with a second opportunity to test the Research Parties model. We repeated what had worked well in

the spring. Once again, afternoon and evening events were scheduled during the last five weekdays of classes; once again, two librarians hosted each two-hour party; and once again, attendees were treated to an array of sweet and savory snacks. But we made a few changes, as well. The promotional flier was updated to reflect the winter weather, with images of snowflakes and snow-capped mountains used to symbolize individuality and effort respectively.

In addition to posting print and digital fliers, we also used the template to create two 24-by-36-inch foam posters, which were then inserted front and back into a large A-frame sidewalk sign borrowed from the QCC Department of Public Safety. On every Research Parties day, the A-frame was prominently positioned in front of the library entrance, a high-traffic area used by students to access both our space, as well as a popular Starbucks vendor.

Given the tremendous growth in Research Parties attendance observed in spring 2017, we were uncertain what to expect in fall 2017. Maybe that initial rebranding effort had saturated the market of potential users, and our numbers would stay flat. Or maybe the popularity of those events had been an anomaly, and our numbers would go down. Happily, neither of these scenarios transpired. Student turnout at the fall 2017 parties went up *another* 29%,



A sign displayed on every Research Parties day.

relative to the very successful spring 2017 levels, demonstrating that we had connected even more students in need with this existing library service.

We continued to receive positive anecdotal feedback from a variety of Research Parties stakeholders. As she settled in for help finding scholarly journal articles, one student attendee proudly shared that she would soon be transferring to The John Jay College of Criminal Justice, a four-year school in the CUNY system. She also shyly confessed that she had never been to a library session during her time at QCC, nor had she ever used a library resource. After a librarian/party host remediated this situation with some just-in-time information literacy instruction, the student expressed relief that she was able to complete her assignment and amazement that she would be able to access these same databases at John Jay.

Library faculty report that they “love” the Research Parties events, which generate opportunities to work one-on-one with students on research projects. One librarian described these exchanges as her “very favorite part of the profession.” We even received an email from the college president, complimenting the department on our creativity and support of student success.

Our branding efforts will continue to evolve, based on evidence gathered during each program iteration. For example, 24% of fall 2017 attendees left the “How did you hear about the Research Parties?” line blank on the sign-in sheet. Next semester, we will pilot an iPad sign-in and provide students with a dropdown menu of “How did you hear” options, in hopes of drawing out these important insights into our marketing efforts.

Of the students who did complete that line, an increased number cited “Signs” or “Fliers”

relative to the previous semester, which may be attributable to the new sidewalk sign. Since most QCC students commute to campus by bus, this spring we plan to position a second A-frame sign at the college entrance bus stop.

We will also initiate certain changes to Research Parties staffing and instructional protocol. One librarian observed that at times,

there was a line for help as he “bounced back and forth among students;” therefore a third librarian will be scheduled to be on-call and available during all party sessions.

And finally, it was observed that many students used their smartphones to access assignments and syllabi during their Research Parties reference conversations. Recognizing this full integration of phone technology into everyday and academic life, librarian/party hosts will be encouraged to show every attendee

how to connect with the library website, databases, and chat reference service through the QCC Connect app.

Conclusion

There is a reason that Hunter and Riehman-Murphy were named recipients of the 2017 ACRL College Libraries Section Innovation in College Librarianship Award. Their Research Parties model resonates with students, faculty, librarians, and administrators, and their marketing strategies motivate people to engage with existing library services. Growth does not come exclusively from new purchases and new programs. Consider the sources, services, and relationships your library already has in place, and assess how their value is being transmitted to your campus. You may be overdue for some rebranding. *TL*



Announcement about the Research Parties events on digital campus signage.