Selective and (Subtle) Marketing of Library Instruction

Mark Aaron Polger  
*CUNY College of Staten Island*

Karen Okamoto  
*CUNY John Jay College*

How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!

Follow this and additional works at: [http://academicworks.cuny.edu/si_pubs](http://academicworks.cuny.edu/si_pubs)

Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](https://academicworks.cuny.edu/si_pubs)

**Recommended Citation**

Selective (and Subtle) Marketing of Library Instruction

Mark Aaron Polger and Karen Okamoto

Introduction

Providing a library instruction class is not solely attached to giving a library tour, assisting in teaching the whole class how to do their research assignment, or giving an orientation about the library. A library instruction class provides a unique opportunity for librarians to showcase the plethora of print and electronic resources in their libraries, market their services to students, market themselves as key experts in locating information, and promote select resources that are specifically suited for the specific class in question. The actual class, albeit only one to two hours in length, provides students with essential tools so they can be more prepared when doing academic research.

What is marketing and why should libraries be concerned about it? Nims (1999) explains that marketing is the systematic and planned process of carrying out market research, creating new services and products, and evaluating programs to improve these services and products. The needs of library users are central to the concept of marketing. According to Nims, libraries should be concerned about marketing because they are no longer considered the sole or primary providers of information. Libraries are competing with the Internet, bookstores, and online booksellers as information providers. Nims further writes that marketing activities have often been the responsibility of instruction librarians because they interact with patrons and they create new services. Marketing, then, is no stranger to library instruction.

Readers are probably already familiar with and already performing (and perfecting) the marketing activities that we outline below. Academic librarians have been marketing libraries for decades without even referring to their efforts as “marketing.” These activities are considered essential and integral to the profession. We present selective and subtle marketing techniques for library instruction sessions to raise the profile of your library and to make library instruction memorable to your students.
Part VII. Event Planning and Implementation

Before the Class Starts: Negotiation with Teaching Faculty

Contact the instructor about the objectives and desired outcomes of the library session. What does the instructor want his or her students to learn? Discuss what databases and topics should be covered. This is a great opportunity to market special library services and products to the instructor. For example, if your library has special collections or archives, you may want to work with the instructor to create course assignments that use these special library resources. Obtain a copy of the course assignment and review the approaching deadlines for assignments. Find out what the instructor has already covered in terms of the research process and available resources for the assignment. Look over the course syllabus to see what students are reading in that particular class. And last, but definitely not least, obtain a tentative list of student research topics. All of this information will be useful when planning and designing the actual library instruction session.

It is important to market an efficient system for requesting library instruction. Teaching faculty should be able to request library instruction with ease. Currently, many librarians make the process very easy by accepting requests via the telephone, e-mail, or in person. Giving multiple methods for faculty to request library instruction may give the appearance of flexibility on your part, but it may end up becoming labor intensive and inefficient. Develop a template to gather specific information from faculty members, and provide a consistent method for accepting requests. Providing an online request form on the library’s website may be the most optimal way. This keeps a record of the date of the request, the teaching faculty member, the number of students in the class, the course number and section, the preferred time for library instruction, and the course assignment. Request forms can be transmitted via the library website and forwarded to the appropriate librarian who will schedule the library instruction class.

Academic departmental meetings are a great place for librarians to market library instruction. At the beginning of each semester, subject liaison librarians should inquire with departmental secretaries if they can speak at their meetings. If they are invited, this gives librarians a great opportunity to market library instruction to their faculty. According to Ardis (2005), inviting librarians to be ‘guests’ in a class or departmental meeting gives them a platform where they can market the library to a targeted audience. At the meeting, librarians should bring key marketing materials like screenshots of the library website, sample subject guides, business cards, bookmarks, and brochures. Departmental meetings can be ideal venues for selective marketing of library services.

Tailoring the Class to Student Learning Needs

After determining the students’ research and learning needs, it’s time to prepare for the class. Identify sample database searches that use the students’ proposed research topics. By incorporating student topics into the session, you can maintain their interest and demonstrate how library resources are relevant to their studies and academic success. If possible, skim through some of the assigned readings on the syllabus to identify what has been and will be covered. If your class is for graduate students, you may want to demonstrate how to save database citations by creating an account with the database vendor or exporting citations to a bibliographic management tool such as RefWorks. Graduate stu-
Students may also be interested in creating e-mail alerts that notify them when new articles are published on their research topic. Consider other services and databases of interest to this user group, such as interlibrary loan and document delivery, databases like Dissertation Abstracts, and even quiet reading rooms and study carrels. For undergraduate students, easy, quick, and convenient database search tricks and library services could be the focus of your session. If you like to prepare slides for your library sessions, you may want to include the library logo on your slides and attractive images of the library. Include library contact information at the end of your presentation and encourage students to contact the library when they need help.

Your library might also consider redesigning the library's website for marketing and teaching purposes. For example, the library's home page and the entire website may be designed with library instruction and marketing in mind. Is there an area on the library's home page that features new and/or exciting services? Are popular and important links clearly visible on the home page? Is it attractive and user-friendly? An easy-to-navigate home page and website will make marketing the library during instruction sessions easier.

It is very important to know your audience before the class starts. If it is an ESL class, ensure that you use plain language in your handouts and in your presentation. It is important to speak slowly and repeat yourself often. For graduate students, we may assume that they have done considerable academic research and that they are familiar with the library catalog or with databases. However, it is important to determine beforehand their level of library knowledge. A graduate level accounting class that rarely visits the library may have students with limited information literacy skills. Accounting students may not write research papers, so they may not be aware of library services or resources. Science students may visit the library to study but not to make use of our vast collection of print and electronic resources. Librarians are fortunate, however, in that they can easily find out who their audience is. As Ardis (2005) writes, when librarians visit a class, they are guest lecturers who market the library to pre-defined groups of users; professors validate the importance of libraries and librarians by inviting them to speak.

**Simple, Straightforward Handouts and Signage**

Before starting a new semester of library instruction, evaluate the current state of your handouts and signage. Prepare a user-friendly handout that can be referred to after your library instruction session. It should contain just enough information for the level of the class, but no more. In addition to being a key marketing tool, handouts are educational, informative, and act as a quick and handy research guide when students and faculty visit the library. According to Jaeger (2009), key messages in handouts and signage should be short and simple.

Be consistent throughout your handout. For example, include the library brand (or logo) consistently across handouts and signage. Include the web address of the library website, and incorporate the major tools you wish to market. It is important to include a selection of resources that are relevant to the course. Keep the handout short, preferably no more than four double-sided pages. Handouts should be catchy and not contain too much text. Many students don't like to read more than is required. Include the most nec-
Part VII. Event Planning and Implementation

necessary information, such as search strategy tips and the name and description of key databases and websites. Include contact information for the library like the reference desk phone number and e-mail address. You may want to include your own e-mail address for individual research consultations, if you provide them. Use bold letters on key terms. Make bulleted lists. Include images and screenshots of database interfaces and search results. And do not be afraid to leave white space. Send a PDF file of the handout to course instructors beforehand, and if there is a course management system like Blackboard, see if they will upload the file to it.

Some library instruction classes are held in classrooms inside the library. Make sure signage is simple and straightforward. A simple font with plain language reading “Library Learning Lab” is a simpler term than using an acronym or a “high-tech” sounding term. It also results in a much simpler sign. Avoid trendy terminology such as “e-classroom” or “digital lab,” and make minimal use of acronyms since students may not know them.

In order to ensure that students do not discard handouts, make them memorable. Preparing multi-colored handouts or handouts in a different paper color than white may be more catchy, and students may keep them longer. Promote selectively and only market what is relevant based on their learning and research needs. For example, freshman students love to know that we have free textbooks for loan (i.e. course reserves) and that we lend out laptops. Make enough copies for the class (including the instructor) and make five more copies for those students who are absent from the class. It is important to hand out your business card to the instructor and to put your contact information at the footer of each page of the handout.

When preparing handouts for a class, ask colleagues to see their handouts for more ideas. Each librarian prepares handouts and teaches in a different style and covers different material.

Online Guides

In addition to preparing physical print handouts, consider creating online tutorials or other online guides (Erazo 2003). Create tutorials and guides with a target audience in mind. For example, if you are targeting first-year students, you might want to create a tutorial on plagiarism and the importance of citing sources. Similarly, you might want to create a LibGuide that targets a specific, required course, such as a first-year composition course. Promote these online resources during your instruction class.

During the Library Instruction Class

One of the most important things we can do is effectively market ourselves. We should market our skills, expertise, and services. During library instruction sessions, we want to convey our enthusiasm for information, research, and libraries. Topics such as bibliographic databases, information literacy concepts, Boolean searching, and bibliographic control may not be immediately exciting to our students. By being energetic, prepared, enthusiastic, knowledgeable, and even humorous, we will do a great job of marketing not only the library as a welcoming and necessary place for students, but ourselves...
as well. Smile! Be the approachable and helpful person you are for your patrons. The library instruction classes allow us to market ourselves as expert researchers as well as information seekers. We need to emphasize that libraries and librarians are about more than just books.

Marketing During the Library Tour

Take the class on a tour of the library. While libraries are becoming an increasingly online resource, the library-as-place is just as relevant and important for students today. Students need a place to read, study, have group meetings, type assignments, check out physical books and, of course, get research help. The tour can highlight key resources and services, showing students what is physically available in the library. A tour may also make the library less intimidating and more memorable. Key stops for the tour could include the circulation desk, reserve collection, the reference desk, the circulating collection, computing facilities, study rooms, printing stations, and the reference collection. You can also incorporate a library scavenger hunt as part of the class. Students enjoy this fun group activity, which incorporates peer learning and discovery while marketing the library.

Marketing the Library and Select Resources

Ensure that the library instruction class is not a monologue with you marketing your key resources. We're not database vendors who wish to sell products to libraries. Our focus is not related to making money. Our goal is to educate our users and selectively market specific resources to specific users. We want our users to understand that our services are free, and we want to teach them how to use them effectively. Library instruction should incorporate humor and storytelling and should foster participation from the students. In sum, the library instruction class should follow a dialogue model, not a monologue model. For example, asking students to raise their hands if they purchase textbooks for their courses is an important beginning to market the reserve (textbook) collection we mentioned earlier. Students are happy to learn that many of our professors put textbooks on reserve for free, which means they do not need to purchase all their textbooks each semester.

An example of using humor in marketing the library is a colleague of ours who dresses up for a library instruction class held on Halloween. Another example is showing humorous websites like www.malepregnancy.com as examples of false information. But use humor with caution; it can backfire and is not always effective. Librarians should practice their "routines" with the awareness that not every class will be receptive. Humor is not 100 percent guaranteed, and library instructors should not feel discouraged if humor is unsuccessful.

Storytelling, on the other hand, tends to have a better success rate than humor. Storytelling is a more casual and personal way to connect with students and market resources. For example, when talking about the many channels of information in the world, you may wish to ask students where they were when they were informed that Michael Jackson
died. You may want to tell students where you were when you found out the news of his passing. Ask students to generate a list of information resources that gave them the information of Jackson’s death. This leads you to subtly market the New York Times database, which gives access to old New York Times articles from the 1880s. Connecting the course content with personal experiences and stories humanizes you as the library instructor, and it eases the tension of the class. It also makes the class less formal and even the hierarchy between instructor and learner. When the hierarchy is evened out, there is more trust between learner and library instructor. When learners are more relaxed, it is easier to market select library resources because trust has been established.

Marketing your resources should be fun and non-pushy. Ask students about their experiences of trying to find an available PC workstation on campus. Many will express their frustration. This is an opportunity to market the “free laptop lending program” available at some college library campuses.

Emphasize that everything is free in the library, and all a student needs is his or her library card. Jaeger (2009) suggests developing catchy slogans or phrases to attract your users. Developing a catchy phrase for library cards like “your gateway to free stuff” may attract more users. For those libraries that provide free scanning and faxing services for library cardholders, mention to students that a library card acts a “free pass” to scanning and faxing.

Rockwell-Kincanon (2001) writes that marketers strive for simplicity in their messages. Students can only absorb so much in a single library instruction class. Try to target only a few, selected items. It is not recommended to market library instruction by citing the ACRL Information Literacy standards. Librarians should summarize their importance with a simplified message such as, “we help you succeed in your studies.”

Mani (2008) writes about the mobile library instruction program she helped implement in her library. They used the catchy phrase “Library-On-the-Go” to attract users. The service comprised a laptop on a mobile cart with instructional materials. She also developed a logo that identified the name, service, and contact information. Brand recognition of this type is important in selective and subtle marketing.

Being employed at the City University of New York, a university with 23 college campuses, the authors know it is important to market the value of the library card. Many students are unaware that their library cards will work at all college campus libraries and that they can borrow materials at different locations and return them at their home library. Remember to bring your own library card to the library instruction class for students to see. Talking about things is not the same as showing them.

Bring an actual laptop that can be lent as well as reference materials, textbooks, newspapers, magazines, and academic journals. It not only educates users, it connects them to the content of the library instruction class. Much of the material presented in the class may be completely new to the students. Bringing in materials to show the class may decrease student anxiety and stress.

Since many students are accustomed to paying 10 cents for photocopies, it is important to market the scanners in your library, as the “free alternative” to photocopying. Market the scanning service as the “free” option and the way to save trees. This gives you an opportunity to market the library as a partner in being “green.”

Books have traditionally been associated with libraries. Promote them! Bring books that are relevant to the students’ topics and display them in the class. Pass them around...
and recommend relevant titles. Tell students how and where to check out and renew books, and if you have any special interlibrary or intercampus book loan and delivery services, market those as well.

After the Class Ends

The library instruction class may have ended, but ensure that students have not been forgotten. Some students may feel overwhelmed or dissatisfied because they now have an abundance of information but no idea where to start. Encourage them to make an appointment to speak with a librarian about their research assignments. Market your “consultation” service if you offer one.

It is also important to incorporate an assessment tool after the class. You may wish to include a questionnaire, a small quiz, or an assignment. It is important that we are making a difference in the students’ learning experience. Even a simple feedback form would be helpful.

Ask instructors if they would like to add you to their Blackboard course (or any learning management system) next term, if there is an online component. Whether the course is completely online or hybrid, ask ahead to be included. This ensures that there is a constant presence of a librarian. In addition, inquire if there is any percentage of participation that can be attributed to a library component. For example, if the instructor has a 20 percent participation grade, ask if 10 percent can be allotted to a library assignment or quiz. This would ensure the importance of the library to the course. You can post information, answer student questions, and provide library links on the course site. To have a longer-lasting presence or impact on students, try “embedding” yourself in a department and hold office hours for students and faculty. If possible, correspond with the course instructor and follow up on student progress on their research assignments.

If you have a large budget for business cards, it may be a good marketing strategy to hand out business cards to both students and the instructor after the class. You may wish to staple it to the handout you give in class. Conclude the class by talking about the “Ask a Librarian” service that may include live chat, text reference, e-mail reference, in-person reference, and telephone reference. Ask instructors for a follow-up class towards the end of the semester if they have the time. Keep in touch with the instructor. This shows a commitment by the librarian to ensure student success, and it markets the library service as ongoing. Many students and instructors are disappointed at the “one shot” library instruction class. Marketing library instruction as “ongoing” and not limited to one formal class is an effective way to keep connected.

It is important to maintain good relations with teaching faculty. We want them to continuously show how valuable we are as a service. We also want to keep them abreast of new services and resources. One such example of keeping the momentum rolling is offering faculty workshops after the semester ends. According to Graham (2008), faculty workshops allow teaching faculty to get more acquainted with the physical facility and print and electronic resources that can meet their research needs. Graham also writes that faculty workshops offer an opportunity for subject liaison librarians to market themselves and subject-specific library instruction.
Conclusion

Selective and subtle marketing of library instruction is an ongoing and multifaceted process. It involves identifying the needs of students and addressing those needs by developing library sessions that introduce relevant resources and services. As Rockwell-Kincanon (2001) astutely points out, good marketers know how to attract the user's attention and how to make their services and products memorable by distilling these products into key concepts. Certainly, librarians have been developing focused and targeted library instruction classes for ages. However, by framing library instruction activities as a potential marketing opportunity, we can provide user-centered instruction that not only supports our students, but helps raise the profile of the library and our profession.

WORKS CITED


