To Market, to Market: Selling Libraries

By Brad Dennis, Education Library & Chair, Marketing Committee

Although the truism may be that “the library is the heart of the university,” provosts and presidents want to see data that justify continuing, much less enhanced, financial support. Academic librarians now find themselves in the business of marketing their products to their users. As a result, the University Libraries must not only provide essential resources to promote and facilitate the mission of WMU, but must bring faculty, students, staff, and the community through its doors—or, at least, to its Web site.

To respond to this challenge, a Marketing Committee was created in December of 2003 and given a fourfold charge:

• PROMOTE: To promote library services, collections, news and events to the University community and to the public.
• COORDINATE: To coordinate the University Libraries marketing activities.
• COMMUNICATE: To streamline and foster communication among library administration, faculty, staff, student employees, and the University community.
• PLAN: To develop a strategic marketing plan for the University Libraries.

To begin our work, the Committee set a priority for marketing by recognizing a primary constituency: the WMU faculty. We quickly concluded that the real key to marketing is to develop a strategic partnership with the faculty whom we serve as liaisons. In a recent survey of students by the Marketing Committee, we found that, according to 87.6% of the students surveyed, their instructors required use of the Libraries. This statistic indicates that the instructor plays a lead role in whether students use the library in the completion of their course requirements.

In response to this need “to inform faculty,” some library liaisons are already sending electronic newsletters to the departments with whom they work. The newsletters outline new and useful databases, special workshops, and other information that specifies relevant library services. A workshop later this year for other liaisons will facilitate wider development of such newsletters.

In addition, the Marketing Committee learned that shotgun notices and general articles did not have a significant impact and were not cost effective. According to Peter Heron and Ellen Altman, authors of Assessing Service Quality: Satisfying the Expectations of Library Customers, (Ablex/Greenwood, 1996), a marketing problem exists in that many libraries seem to be more interested in attracting non-users than keeping present users happy. The repeat user has proven his or her interest in the libraries and is more likely to be interested in other library services and events, thereby increasing the Libraries’ return on its investments, especially its collections.

To address this repeat user, the Marketing Committee has produced several printed publications such as table tents, bookmarks, and brochures that appear in each of the libraries. These notices promote WMU Libraries: its collections, services, and events. Moreover, the Libraries has moved outside of its physical walls. Displays promoting the University Libraries collections and services have been mounted at the Bernhard Center; low cost ads appear on dorm cafeteria table tents, and coordinated library news releases are sent to the Western Herald, the Western News, the Kalamazoo Gazette, and local television and radio stations.

“More Than Books” is the slogan that emerged because of a unique “reaching out to users” activity. For the past three years the University Libraries has participated in WMU’s Homecoming activities by building and racing our own soap box derby car. The Marketing Committee participated in the design and production of the car and used it to promote the Libraries. T-shirts for this event are created and sold to encourage team spirit and participation by the Libraries’ faculty, staff and students. A focus on the Libraries as “more than books” was readily noted as the colorful t-shirts moved out of the Libraries and to the racetrack! In its second year of competition, the car was displayed at the annual conference of the American Library Association in Chicago. That experience produced an article published in Marketing Library Services (September/October 2005). This past year our WMU soap box derby car won first place and was featured in several articles and on television.

As a student-centered library, we strongly believe that it is our duty to support and develop partnerships with important student groups whenever possible. The Marketing Committee became involved with voter registration in 2004 and partnered with the Western Student Association and other campus organizations including Students for Democracy and Get Your Vote On. Members of the Committee selected URL links and organized the content for a voter registration and information site titled “Smart Voting © Your Library.” The site was linked to the University Libraries home page. Members of the Committee also designed, created and delivered bookmarks promoting the site. The Western Student Association and the Division of Student Affairs were pleased with the Web site and created their own promotional flyer promoting the site and other events.

David A. Morrison, the author of Marketing to the Campus Crowd (Dearborn Trade Publishing, 2004), notes that college students are always ready to obtain “freebies” and are very interested in promotional giveaways. The Marketing Committee was given a generous donation from the Friends of the Western Michigan University Libraries to purchase promotional materials. In turn, the Committee distributed materials promoting the Friends of the University Libraries. To develop the “give away” advertising, the Committee worked with Promotion Concepts, a local firm, to create pens, magnets and water bottles with the logo and slogan: “Puzzled? We put pieces together © your library.” The items were then given to participants and visitors during several events, notably, the New Faculty Orientation session, the Graduate Assistants Orientation sessions, Bronco Days sessions, Freshmen Orientation sessions, the Graduate Student Fair, and the Medallion Scholars Event.

For many scholars and traditional users of libraries, the concept of “marketing” an academic library may seem to be an unnecessary activity. After all, aren’t libraries and the resources they hold an essential service for the faculty and students who are teaching, researching and learning? In some academic libraries, the answer may be “no.” The numerous services and resources available on the WMU Libraries’ Web site are simply too many and too complex to know and search easily. In an age when information is found everywhere, and most insidiously through search engines, the Web, and the public Internet, the uniquely valuable “private” resources and collections of our University Libraries do, more than ever before, need to be marketed to our users. And so, “to market, to market: selling libraries” has become not only a goal, but also an essential key to survival in the 21st century world.