

The visible library: 5 ways to see and be seen in your university community



Introduction

A shared concern among academic librarians is feeling increased pressure to keep the library top-of-mind and promote the library as a relevant, solution-oriented, social, and highly visible space in the context of its community.

We had conversations with several librarians from prominent institutions around North America and heard what they are doing to meet this challenge.

Increase your library's visibility:

1. Have fun.
2. Get social.
3. Be "Team Library."
4. Inspire student excitement.
5. Tune in to faculty.

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"We've become invisible to a lot of our users. They use [the library] all the time. We just make it really easy, and then they forget we're there. And that makes it easy for administrators to assume that it's all online."

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Have fun

Your library does not need to be pigeonholed into performing just one function. By showing your library's lighter side, you'll draw people in. You'll establish lasting emotional connections and create a population of ardent library advocates.

- **Get more by giving more (away).**

Use goodies from vendors to entice students to visit the library.

"[Students] love bookmarks. Pens make sense. The pads and paper, they love. The little books with different-sized sticky notes go the fastest."

- **Redefine your space.**

Encourage patrons to come together, sketch out big ideas, and produce high-quality, cooperative work.

"We are trying to make our space – especially on the first level – more collaborative. We are calling it an 'innovation space.' We are hoping that the ability to talk and work with groups is going to draw people in."

- **Turn to technology.**

Get people talking about the library's tech capabilities.

"We have had a 3D printer for three years. We had a girl in the neuroscience department who took an MRI of her friend's brain and rendered it into a 3D model, and we printed it out. It's also used for fun things – there's always an uptick at Valentine's Day and Christmas."

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"My undergraduate college library would give out hot chocolate every night at midnight, and it's something I remember to this day. We are hoping to create that kind of connection for visitors to our library."

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Make the library “the place for that.”

“That” meaning exciting events and newsworthy ideas. You have exciting things to say – say them through the channels that will help you reach the right people at the right times. Define your library to key visitor groups in ways that are convenient, comfortable, and meaningful to them.

- **Share the wealth (of knowledge).**

Regularly communicate relevant information to your email contact lists.

“Our email newsletter goes out about nine times a year to a list of students, faculty, and subscribers both inside and outside the university community. The newsletter also goes to the administrators for all the departments we support. We try to include something catchy at the very beginning.”

- **Get social.**

Centralize your social media strategy so that everyone is represented.

“We have a dedicated librarian who is in charge of social media. She encourages us to help her by submitting ideas. There is a spreadsheet where we can add things by topic that she will pull from to post.”

- **Be where they are.**

Reach your key visitors in places – and in formats – that resonate with them.

“In the science division, our patrons are in labs. So we thought if we catch them while they are in their labs with flyers then they don’t have to go anywhere to find out the information we want them to know. It actually has been successful.”

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“We are trying to establish our identity – we want to define it for ourselves rather than having it defined for us. In certain areas like digital humanities, where there is a lot of activity on campus but no real locus of events, we are hoping to build a reputation for the library as the place for that.”

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Be “Team Library.”

Be your library’s biggest cheerleader. Draw people into your library by taking risks, taking the initiative, and taking the conversation outside the library. The people you encounter will associate you – and your approachability – with your library.

- **Think of library patrons as customers.**

Change your perspective to raise the stakes of your daily interactions.

“I use the term ‘customer’ because I like to be reminded that they have choices. They could choose to use my services or they could choose to use [a website]; they could choose to use my services or they could choose to use some other entity on campus that is not a library.”

- **Take it offline.**

A face-to-face or telephone interaction adds a personal touch.

“Some people might take well to emailing. But then some others might take better to talking on the phone with you.”

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“I think one of our challenges has been to open ourselves up. I think we have, in the past, just waited for the patrons to come. But in recent years we have been more outward-facing, and have been actively creating new relationships.”

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- **Show up.**

If appropriate and feasible, attend other departments' events. Not only will you see your university from others' points of view, but your presence will be noticed.

"Once a month, a different faculty member would give a presentation to the departmental staff. I would listen to what they had to say. I periodically get business for the library that way, but more often it's just the fact that I'm seen."

Inspire student excitement

Grab students' attention, build their trust, and play up the benefits of visiting the library. Show them the advantages, and let them tell their friends. An alliance with students can bring in an influx of students utilizing your resources and recognizing the value your library adds to your community.

- **Make believers out of them.**

Let your most enthusiastic students serve as a direct line to faculty.

"A student found something out at the library and wanted all of her fellow students to experience it. She said, 'Couldn't you come to my class and teach this?' And, of course, she wasn't a professor, so we told her, 'If you tell your professor to contact us, we will situate something.'"

- **Promote the perks.**

Encourage students to take advantage of the low-cost or free benefits of having access to your library.

"We did a campaign to tell people about the eBooks in our collection. Our message was, 'You don't have to buy these books; we have them available for you. You need to go through the library to get them, but we have them available.'"

- **Make your voice heard.**

Align your library with organizations on campus that students already turn to for information.

"We have done advertising through student groups, which has been really helpful and successful, because that is what students pay attention to. It is a voluntary database pertaining to something very specific that they are interested in."

Tune in to faculty

Faculty members are library patrons, too. Meeting their needs has a lasting impact on your library's reputation. Faculty members who feel a true connection with the library are likely to consult with you, learn your processes, or report to your university's administration about how indispensable your library is.

- **Connect the dots.**

When a faculty member reveals a professional pain point, use your resources to help find a solution.

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"Reference librarians meet the students when they come in, and they represent the library community. If they are interested and converse with the students and meet the students' needs, I think that is a good way to market the library as well."

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"I just listen. At some point I'll say, "I was thinking about what you said about X. Did you know the library does Y? I think that touches on what you're trying to solve. Do you think that the might be useful?"

- **Make it a two-way street.**

You and your university's faculty have a lot to teach – and learn from – each other.

"The professors who come to me for help are aware of their limitations. They come to me for whatever reason, but they also sit down and have intellectual conversations with me, which is a very stimulating part of my job."

- **Collaborate.**

Lending your time to faculty can earn you – and your library – lifelong supporters.

"If you are working with faculty members on a grant, often there is some kind of library resource or data associated with that grant. Those grants are something the university administration hears and cares about."

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"We have points of contact that liaise with us, which has been an amazing connection. We work together, plan workshops together, and they asked us to get involved in orientations. We get invited to all their social events. They send out emails for us. They share all the information they can and they post all of our information. It's an amazing relationship."

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Conclusion

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In our conversations, we asked librarians to pinpoint key factors that are making their libraries thrive. They reported that the valuable and irreplaceable aspect of a library is the library itself – its existence as a physical space. In the face of increasingly electronic resources, strained library budgets, and ubiquitous internet searches, library patrons are still reporting that they view (and turn to) libraries as destinations.

"What became apparent is that [customers] value the library as a space. It's an inspiring space. So I think that's an important thing to keep in mind as you are trying to retune your services and also then promote your resources. And even if you are trying to promote online resources, there is a place in the library where that can happen – not just online."

The contents of this paper were derived from a full white paper presented at Charleston Library Conference in November 2016.

Visit the **Taylor & Francis Resources for Librarians** page to learn more about our commitment to the librarian-publisher relationship.

References

Below is a list of librarians who participated in the panel discussion, focus groups, and interviews that Taylor & Francis conducted throughout 2016.

Charleston 2016 Panel Discussion, November 2016

Thurston Miller, Chemistry and Physics Librarian, University of Notre Dame

Doug Way, Associate University Librarian for Collections and Research Services, University of Wisconsin-Madison

Krystie Wilfong, Collection Assessment & Analysis Librarian, Columbia University

Interviews 2016

Thurston Miller, Chemistry and Physics Librarian, University of Notre Dame

Doug Way, Associate University Librarian for Collections and Research Services, University of Wisconsin-Madison

New York City Focus Group, August 2016

Linda Dickinson, Head of Collection Management, Hunter College

Rebecca Federman, Electronic Resources Librarian, New York Public Library

Denise Hibay, Head of Collection Development, New York Public Library

Heath Martin, Associate Dean for Collection Strategy and Management, Stony Brook University

Lynn Parlman, Electronic Resources Librarian, Fordham University

Ellie Ransom, Research Services Coordinator, Columbia University

Krystie Wilfong, Collection Assessment & Analysis Librarian, Columbia University

ALA Conference Focus Group, June 2016

Susan Berkman, Assistant Director of Collection Development & Technical Services, Nova Southeastern University

Harold Colson, eBook Coordinator and International Relations Librarian & U.S. History Librarian, UC San Diego

Deborah A. Kegel, Physical Sciences & Engineering Reference Coordinator Librarian for Computer Science, Electrical Engineering, Mathematics, Physics & Astronomy, UC San Diego

Alyssa Koclanes, Assistant Professor, Institutional Services/Technical Services, Eckerd College

ER&L Conference Focus Group, April 2016

Joanna Delvan, Electronic Information Specialist, University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences

Teo Doras, Assistant Electronic Resources Librarian, Florida Atlantic University

Marcus Fry, Assistant Library Director, Concordia University Texas

Bethany Goodwin, Electronic Resources Supervisor, Trinity International University

Rebecca Harrington, Electronic Resources Librarian, Florida State University College of Medicine

Katherine Hill, Electronic Resource and Distance Education Librarian, University of North Carolina at Greensboro

Helen Kula, Librarian, Institute for Management & Innovation, University of Toronto Mississauga

Scott Pope, Acquisitions Librarian, Texas State University

Dani Roach, Head of Serials & Electronic Resource Acquisitions, University of St. Thomas

Jahala Simuel, Reference Librarian, Shaw University

Sandy Srivastava, Electronic Resource Librarian, Southern New Hampshire University