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The Role of Stories in Library Marketing and Communications

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Clarissa has been the Communications Manager for Western Washington University Libraries since 2013, and has fourteen years of experience working in academic libraries. This past November 2015, she was a presenter at the Library Marketing and Communications Conference held in Dallas, Texas, where she spoke about the value of sharing library stories based on examples from Western Libraries. She is an alumna of Western Washington University, with a B.A. in Humanities and M.Ed. in Environmental Education.

We in the library profession know that libraries offer a wide variety of services and resources to our communities and patrons, but despite the unique programs we host, the access we provide to print and online resources, special collections, and archival materials, or even research and writing assistance, finding proactive ways of effectively communicating this to our users can be challenging. Likewise, it is not uncommon for libraries to have to compete for financial support and human resources in an era of reduced funding and shrinking or flat base budgets. Combine these factors with increased pressures on resource access budgets due to journal inflation and the rising cost of subscriptions, and it is clear that we must find a way to effectively communicate the value of our libraries if we want to secure both the financial and philosophical support of our constituents.

It is no wonder that marketing and communications are becoming increasingly important to libraries, be they specialized, public, or academic. The recent Library Marketing and Communications conference held last November in Dallas, Texas, was one of the first devoted exclusively to this topic and generated enough support for conference organizers to consider making it an annual event. Interest in how libraries can utilize communication and marketing strategies in order to promote and ensure their longevity and success now seems more common than ever before.

Be that as it may, it is still not unusual to encounter people who bristle at the notion that libraries must “sell” their value to their patrons. Nor is it uncommon for those in the library profession to misunderstand what is meant by “marketing,” and instead focus on the execution of various disconnected events or tasks designed to address a number of perceived needs, which are based on assumptions rather than evidence. Subsequently, library marketing is often more reactive than proactive, centered more on promotions than strategy, (Lucas-Alfieri, 2015).

This approach often results in a series of disparate, un-coordinated, (albeit usually well-intentioned) efforts, and in the generation of a variety of activities which are difficult to assess or sustain. Often slightly more comfortable with terms like “outreach” than “marketing,” many librarians and library staff try to collectively address questions such as: “How can we



help people become aware of our services?” or “How can we garner financial or philosophical support from our constituents for the work we are doing?” without the aid of a cohesive strategic marketing and communications plan.

In considering these questions and in thinking about how to develop a marketing plan, it is helpful to conceptualize the work of our libraries in terms of library-related human interest stories. A compelling story that illustrates the impact of a program or service on a real person will always be more interesting than a list of facts or a collection of descriptive statements. I am reminded of the old adage creative writing students are often instructed to follow: “Show, don’t tell.” If we can show our constituents what matters most by sharing human interest stories that resonate with them, then we won’t need to worry about “telling” people why libraries are important or why they should care about what we have to offer; not only will they understand this, they will begin to share our stories themselves, because our stories *are their* stories.

For example, we could describe a special collection that is unique to our library, or we could tell the story of how that collection is being used in a class, how librarians are enhancing the teaching and learning in the classroom, and how this use enriches the students’ experiences. It is through this story that one possible mission-driven theme begins to emerge: the library as a partner in teaching and learning at our institution. If done well, this story can offer a platform for promoting both the collection and the role of the library in teaching and learning through our focus on user impacts, which allows us to get to the heart of what matters most. And the theme of this story could in turn point to additional potential stories that we can pursue and share in a number of different ways, whether in the form of articles, photo essays, social media posts, or some other format.



Students from WWU Librarian Paul Piper’s Spring 2015 Library 320 class, “Fly fishing in American Literature and Culture,” which explored both the sport and the art of fly fishing in American literature and culture, and considered the implications of fly fishing as a cultural phenomenon on gender, race, and environmental concerns by utilizing the fly fishing collection in Western Libraries Special Collections. After a student in the class mentioned that he had never actually done any fly fishing, Piper collaborated with two other professors to arrange a time for students to experience what it feels like to cast a flyrod.



Because we are intrinsically immersed inside the meaningful world of libraries, we are experiencing, witnessing, constructing and sharing these stories every day, whether we realize it or not. This means we can also choose to deliberately identify, develop and share these stories intentionally, in ways that express clear alignment with the missions and needs of our libraries. Not only will such stories resonate with people, they also offer us a framework for understanding all of our outreach and communication efforts, while simultaneously humanizing the “marketing” work we do. By using the stories of our patrons to reach our patrons, we can showcase our users, their needs, and what we are doing to meet them.

I argue that if we can commit to thinking and communicating in compelling narratives directly related to our institutional mission, we will also begin to recognize a cohesion that exists among all of our various efforts, which will allow us to build a foundation for crafting a strategic communications and marketing plan. And in doing so, we can prevent the proliferation of disconnected piecemeal marketing activities undertaken merely for the sake of doing “something” in the hopes that our return on investment is worth the effort. We can stop hosting events just to get people in the door without thinking about what happens once the event is over, and we can begin to understand how all of our events, services, spaces, collections, and various attributes that we are working to promote are part of a mission-driven cohesive whole with people at its core.

Marketing and Communications at Western Washington University Libraries

Today’s library is dynamic, evolving, and inherently complex, often offering users more services, resources, and support than they realize. Western Libraries at Western Washington University is one example of such a multi-faceted, complex academic library. Comprised of numerous units, areas, divisions, collections, service points, initiatives, and programs, Western Libraries is also home to the University’s Learning Commons, which includes eight different program partners, (five of which are not managed by the Libraries), collectively constituting a uniquely complex and collaborative structure which provides an extensive array of services, benefits, and expertise to our students and our faculty.

Actively engaged in a wide variety of teaching and learning activities, Western Libraries is committed to supporting the needs of our students, our faculty, and our community of learners. Through offering access to customizable interactive workshops that utilize modern pedagogies, personalized collaborative instructional sessions involving multiple literacies, individualized research and writing support both for students and for faculty, specialized expertise in a variety of subject areas and disciplines, access to primary sources, archival materials, rare and special collections, and materials related specifi-



Students studying in a workshop classroom, a space created to support interactive and collaborative learning.



cally to the Pacific Northwest, Western Libraries is committed to enhancing, supporting, and enriching teaching and learning at Western in essential, creative, and dynamic ways. As the Communications Manager for Western Libraries, I witness first-hand the tremendous impact we have on our patrons and our community. I also face the challenge of identifying how to best communicate this so that people will understand what we offer them and why they should care.

Ned Potter, author of *The Library Marketing Toolkit*, explains that library marketing is challenging for a number of reasons, not only because the public perception of what it is libraries actually do is frequently outdated, but also because of a prevalent misunderstanding on the part of library employees of what library marketing should be able to accomplish. He argues in favor of a strategic approach that involves the use of repeated messages across multiple formats to cultivate an awareness over the long-term of what libraries offer so that when our users eventually need something, they will automatically think of us, (Potter, 2013).

This kind of strategy takes time, planning, and coordination to develop and implement, but thinking in terms of library stories can help us begin that process. We can start by asking ourselves questions that will help us identify some of our primary communication needs:

- Are there patterns in our assessment data indicating a repeated expressed need for services we actually already offer? Meaning, is there something that we wish our users knew about of which they seem to be consistently unaware? Or maybe there are key services or collections that have potential widespread benefits that are being under-utilized?
- What are some of the things that make our library unique? Why should this matter to our patrons? How does this uniqueness benefit them?
- Who is most impacted by our work and what are some of those impacts? Again, why should this matter to our patrons?
- Are we launching a new initiative or offering a new service that we need people to know about?
- And lastly, we should consider how all of these questions and communications needs relate to our organizational strategic plan, and to the work we are doing every day. How can everything be unified holistically under our mission?

For example, the current mission statement of the Libraries at Western Washington University is: “Western Libraries connects—people to people, people to place, people to learning.” This statement succinctly encapsulates much of what we do, and it is both memorable and direct. But the statement by itself might not be enough to illustrate what we mean, and if we cannot adequately demonstrate how our mission is embodied in our work, we will not be able to think, act, or communicate strategically. That being said, we realize the theme of “connecting” offers us a structure for unifying all of our various activities, and have therefore decided to promote all of our regular events and exhibits under the umbrella of “Western Libraries Connections.”

This strategy has helped us articulate the purpose of each regular library-sponsored event and exhibit so that we can develop a clear expectation of what we hope they will





Heritage Resource Distinguished Speaker event featuring Professor Laura Laffrado, holding her book about Pacific Northwest Writer, Ella Higginson, standing next to Clarissa Mansfield, who is both Western Libraries Communications Manager and also Laffrado's former student.

accomplish, which, in turn, has enabled us to better understand how each activity is part of our mission. For example, everything we do involves connecting our speakers, our faculty, our students, or our audience to our collections, resources, and expertise. This means when we plan our events, we should clearly identify our goals, and also actively seek out co-sponsors from other academic disciplines and departments throughout the University, thereby cultivating opportunities for collaboration while demonstrating our centrality and versatility to the university as a whole.

Likewise, while we strive for excellence in the promotion of a collection, event, service, workshop, or other resource, we understand that our communications work does not end once the event is over or the new initiative or service has been announced and promoted. In fact, the story itself lies in showing how the event, service, collection, or resource impacted our users. We should not only offer those who attended our event a personalized story they can share with others, but we should also strive to extend our reach beyond our attendees to those who were not there.

Best Practices When Crafting Library Stories

Once we identified two of the main mission-driven communication themes for Western Libraries, (“Western Libraries Connects,” and “Western Libraries as partners in teaching and learning”), it was easy for us to see potential library stories that express these same themes everywhere we looked. In the process of crafting our stories, we also developed some storytelling “best practices,” which are shared below:

- **Hook your audience early.**
Whether you decide to construct your story as a long-form feature, a photo essay, a Facebook post, or a newsletter article, always try to front-load your content. Begin your story with what’s most important, expressing early the thing that will hook your reader. Give your audience something that they will remember.
- **Use compelling images.**
Always use photographs to illustrate your stories. Photographs can say much more than you can ever say with words, and can serve as another hook to inspire your reader to finish reading your story. When covering an event, always use photos from the event itself. They can capture the emotion of the event, and they are another way of expanding your story’s reach. Not only can they help foster a sense of inclusion among those who attended your event, but they also place your patrons at the heart of the story and offer them a way to engage with you once the event has passed, (Bizzle, 2014).






Library Student Employees being honored at the Western Libraries' annual Student Celebration, Spring Quarter 2015.

- **Use the story-getting process as an opportunity for connection.**
Understand that the process of capturing your story presents you with opportunities to connect directly with your constituents. Whether through the interview process or subsequent conversations during the development of your story, you can engage meaningfully with the people who will help you tell your story. Through listening to their words, you will better understand their perceptions, wants, and needs.
- **Remember that if you let them, people will tell your story for you.**
Testimonials are effective and compelling quotes are often better received when they come from someone external to the library to whom your patrons can relate. Let your patrons help tell your stories. “Show, don’t tell” by directly involving the impacted people in your stories. Let their voices and personalities shine through by using their compelling quotes and images to bring their stories to life.
- **Maximize your stories’ reach.**
Once you have your story, think about where and how to share it in order to maximize its reach. Identify your primary outlets for sharing and posting stories, whether it is through your website, on your social media platforms, in local newsletters, in journals, or via local media organizations. Explore all of your options and think about ways to re-purpose and share your compelling content. Always follow up with the people who helped you get your story, whether through e-mail, social media, or conversation. Share the links, reach out to your contacts via social media, and try to involve them in the sharing and re-sharing of the story.



Concluding Thoughts

We should always remember it's the people who make the story. Marketing in libraries is about building community, and thinking in stories helps us identify and cultivate these relationships. We can communicate strategically about the value and impact of our libraries by using compelling stories that can be shared and re-shared, and this, in turn, will help us commit to what we value most. Having a strategic library marketing and communications plan with stories at its core will help us create cohesion among the many creative and innovative things we are doing which will help us prioritize where we put our energies and efforts.

The complex, evolving, 21st-century library is not just about books or resources; it's not just about our buildings and our spaces. Yes, these things are part of our story, but our true story, the story that really matters, is the story of its people. People create and need to use the resources we offer. The learning communities we support and make spaces for are made of people, and it's people who give us the unique collections that we preserve and share so that they can be used in innovative ways. And so when we think about the stories of our libraries, we need to focus on its people. Because our stories are their stories, and their stories are what will interest our community, our patrons, our students, our faculty, and our staff. Their stories are what people will remember. And their stories are what will elucidate the valuable and meaningful work we engage in every day. 

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