
Kissing in the Dark: Promoting and Communicating in a Public Library Setting

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ABSTRACT

IN AN ERA OF EVER-DIMINISHING resources, effective promotion and communication of public library services has become vital to the survival of those same services. This article examines the central questions surrounding effective promotion and communication, and offers various tips and suggestions.

Within the public setting, the following questions are dealt with:

- Why promote?
- What should be promoted?
- How much promotion/communication needs to be done?
- What is the best way to promote/communicate?
- What are some of the potential pitfalls?

INTRODUCTION

When first presented with the challenge of writing this article, this author consulted that font of all wisdom, her father. He has spent his entire life marketing agricultural products to a variety of audiences. His words:

Promotion is like kissing a member of the opposite sex in the dark. You know what's going on, the person you're kissing knows what's going on, but no one else does unless you turn on a light. Promotion is the process of turning on that light.

WHY PROMOTE?

With apologies to William Shakespeare, to promote or not to promote; that is the question. Promotion takes time, costs money,

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LIBRARY TRENDS, Vol. 43, No. 3, Winter 1995, pp. 418-30

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and, if done poorly, does more harm than good to the organization. So, why do it? This question is especially pertinent to smaller library organizations which find themselves in the contrary position of being in the most need of good promotion, yet having the least resources available to accomplish and maintain it. Yet, to return to our analogy, if you do not promote, no one will ever know what you are doing. The "light" will never be turned on.

Now some people and organizations may like the darkness; it is safe, it is comfortable, and, if no one knows what you are doing, no one asks difficult questions, bothers you, or forces change. Unfortunately, no one is likely to use you or support you either. So the answer to the question of why promote is because you must. Not to do so is not to survive.

WHAT SHOULD BE PROMOTED?

What should be communicated? What is the difference? The answer to these questions begins with two more questions:

- What library product or service has relevance to your customers' needs as determined by a marketing analysis?
- What outcome is desired?

Furthermore, it must be remembered that, while all promotion is communication, not all communication is promotion. You might say that promotion is communication with an attitude.

Let us take as an example the interlibrary loan (ILL) service. Even with the advances made in technology, this service is still one of the most expensive that a public library can offer. Yet for small- and medium-sized libraries, it is a major claim to fame—"we can get anything for you via interlibrary loan." But can we? And how long does it take? What are the organization's costs of providing each transaction? If a library has determined that ILL service is relevant to serve customer needs, but the current system of ILL is slow or inefficient, it may not be a wise idea to promote this service.

On the other hand, if the same library is part of a high-powered consortium with daily delivery, faxing, BBS services, and so on, ILL not only should be promoted but promoted consistently and heavily. By the same token, if a library does have a sound ILL system but is only a one- or two-person operation, promoting ILL and processing the resultant increase in ILL requests may cause staffing problems in other areas. There, indeed, may exist higher-priority services which may preclude executing swift and efficient ILL requests in this example.

To summarize, any library product or service should be actively promoted when the organization has determined/ensured that:

1. the service is efficient, reliable, and responsive to identified need; and
2. the desired outcome is either an increase in usage, a redirection (substitution) of usage, or a deeper understanding of the service in general.

The ultimate outcome, of course, is overall improvement of service.

On the other hand, a product or service should not be actively promoted, but only routinely communicated when the organization is:

1. unable to provide the level of service to meet an identified need;
2. cannot absorb or handle a major increase in work activity within the service area; or
3. the product or service is administrative in nature, such as the fines policies.

At the risk of irritating ILL librarians, the author will continue using ILL and her own organization to further illustrate these thoughts. Note the use in the previous paragraph of the words "actively" and "routinely." When first beginning in my present position, the library was small, and ILL service was a godsend. We would offer it to everyone—sometimes before even checking the local collection or trying for substitutes. After awhile, however, problems began to develop. Response time was slow, requests became increasingly esoteric, and customers had a hard time understanding existing geopolitical boundaries which did not allow direct speedy access to a nearby major metropolitan library. What had started as a highly promoted service now has become simply a communicated one.

If someone asks for information or a specific item now, we will exhaust all possibilities within our own collection before suggesting an interloan transaction. It is not "actively" offered, it is "routinely" suggested, and only after all else fails and the caveats of ILL explained.

Surprisingly enough, this approach has not resulted in a dearth of ILL requests. Service has improved in two ways:

1. by seeking substitutes within our own collection for ILL requests, we are frequently finding things for the customer that fit their customer needs as well or better than the original request; and
2. those customers who do use the ILL service do so with their eyes open and therefore are not frustrated or disappointed in the service.

HOW MUCH PROMOTION/COMMUNICATION NEEDS TO BE DONE?

The appendix to this article, "How Many Times?" is posted on this author's office wall where it serves as a reminder that promotion

and/or communication always needs to be done and that every opportunity needs to be taken to do so.

There seem to be two types of "things" which libraries need to promote and/or communicate. The first is the "big event"—the major children's program, the author appearance, the annual book sale, the fund-raising dinner, the new automation system. The second is the ongoing "normal" (routine) things—regular services, hours of operation, the quality of the collection and staff, how much are fines, when is the book due, and so on.

Generally speaking, libraries are pretty good about promoting the big event. This is because this type of promotion is easily done. If an author is the big event and he/she has a big enough name, the event is distinct enough. One short phone call or a quick (one-page) press release to area media will be all the promotion needed—they will take it from there. The promotional effort has a definite beginning and end. Once the event is over, there is no longer a need to promote it. It is the second event type, the normal things, that causes problems.

How many times have you heard (or perhaps even said yourself) some variation of the following:

1. "We had somebody complaining that they didn't know when the book was due. We've always checked out books for three weeks. I just don't understand these people" (communication).
2. "You have videos (or compact discs or buying guides)? I did not know you had those" (promotion).
3. "It must be so nice to work here and read all day" (both communication and promotion).

Usually when these remarks occur, staff roll their eyes and mutter the unprintable without ever stopping to consider what those kinds of remarks indicate about the amount (and effectiveness) of promotion and communication going on within the organization.

Think about statement number 1. The issue of personal responsibility aside, the fact is that we operate in a busy world. Those who are not regular library users are not always tuned in to library procedures. One easy way for any library to improve communication is to make it standard operating procedure at the circulation desk to close each transaction by indicating the due date to the customer—"There you are. You have three items all due back on August 20. Thank you."

By making this a mandated procedure—a habit—a library will not only improve its communication but will also provide itself with an excellent defense for the inevitable, "Nobody told me when it was due" complaint (this author is always amazed at how

uncommunicative many front library desk people are; she has visited some libraries where not only do they not greet a customer, they do not even make eye contact).

Statement number 2 is the golden opportunity situation. Here is a chance for any sharp library employee, be it director or page, to not only answer in the affirmative but to further promote the service by adding such statements as, "why yes—we do have videos. They go out for two weeks and we've just gotten in some new children's Barney tapes. Would you like to be put on reserve for them?" That is not only excellent promotion, it is extremely good library service.

The issue of promotional opportunity is a particular soap box topic of this author. Far too many professionals equate "promotion" with handouts, posters, media spots, formal personal appearances—activities which are costly both in terms of time and money. The best promotion in the world is the "on-the-spot" promotion—e.g., you are at the grocery store and you meet a library customer who recognizes you and a brief conversation ensues. The customer happens to mention that the family car is in trouble and will have to be replaced. Opportunity is knocking. Any library professional worth his/her salt will at this point say something like, "Well, we've just obtained some new auto price guides. Give me a call later and I'll set them aside for you."

Kudos to the professional who consistently recognizes these types of opportunities and exploits them. The following example can be used as a test of how good a manager and disseminator of information you are. A regular customer approaches the checkout desk staffed by a nonprofessional. The nonprofessional recognizes the customer as being an avid reader of true crime books. Now suppose that the library recently received a copy of a hot new true crime book. Will this nonprofessional be able to promote that book to that customer? "Gosh, Mr. Brown, I think we just received a new book in an area you might like. Can you give me a moment to check?" How well do you keep your staff informed so that both professional and non-professional alike can do this kind of promotion effectively and regularly?

Statement number 3 is a challenge both to one's promotional skills and one's communications skills. Responding to a statement like number 3 requires that the individual effectively correct a major misconception while not blowing an excellent opportunity to promote a deeper understanding of what goes into working in, or running, a library. Never miss an opportunity to diplomatically see that no misconception stands.

A defensive response will result in the loss of the promotional opportunity. A thoughtful measured response will increase the

promotional opportunity. "Well, it is nice working here, but I don't do much reading, especially at this time of year when I have to prepare our budget." A response like this is agreeable yet clearly states the fact that you carry budgetary responsibilities and helps dispel the idea that all you do is sit around all day and read: "Well, I do like working here, but most of my reading has to be done for professional certification." Again, a nice agreeable answer but one that clearly promotes an enhanced picture of a librarian.

At this point, it is important to note that none of these promotional tips cost a lot of money or require major investments of time. What they require are listening skills, people skills, and a comprehensive knowledge of your library's products, services, and professionalism.

WHAT IS THE BEST WAY TO PROMOTE/COMMUNICATE? PART I

Here is another one of those questions for which the answer depends on answers to other questions:

- How much money do you have?
- What are you promoting, to whom, and why?
- What need is being addressed by the promotion?
- What is the desired outcome?

A small library promoting its local history collection will go about these tasks in a far different manner than a large library promoting Internet access. Better signage may be an answer in one library and out of the question someplace else. But, as with most questions like these, there are a few fundamentals. The first one here is consistency.

This author's favorite story on this point is the one that has taken on almost "urban legend" status about the director of a good-sized library who, after having worked there for over three years, was asked at a speaking appearance what the fine rate was for his organization. He did not know. The message? Everyone, from the director on down, in any public library needs to have basic knowledge of fundamental policies and services so that those policies and services can be communicated and promoted in a consistent way.

Now, not every staff member needs to know everything about everything. But there are some underlying basics that must form the basis of common staff knowledge in order to be able to promote and/or communicate to the general customer. The mark of a good manager is the ability to:

- effectively determine what needs to be shared with staff and when to do so, and

- effectively develop staff to ensure promotion and communication which is consistent with established policy and consistent among staff members—i.e., everybody saying the same thing in similar ways.

Fines: Everybody needs to know the fine rate and communicate it consistently. Everybody also needs to know, and be able to communicate, the fact that fines are not meant to be punitive.

Selection Policy: Pages who are high school students do not need to be able to quote the selection policy. They do need to know that one exists and why one exists. Permanent employees need to know the same plus have a working knowledge of what to do in the face of a potential complaint.

Special Events: I worked in a library once where the children's department rarely let the adult reference department know about special children's programs. This was not good. It was also, on occasion, embarrassing. Before any press release or interview goes out, the staff needs to know first.

So, what is the "best" way to promote or communicate? Answer number 1, promote consistently. Library staff (and board members for that matter) cannot communicate or promote if they do not have the information, and nothing will be accomplished if the message is inconsistent. Think of a choir. In order to make beautiful music, every choir member needs to know the music and all members must sing together. Does your library know the music? Is it singing together?

WHAT IS THE BEST WAY TO PROMOTE OR COMMUNICATE? PART II

Answer number 2 to this question is promote honestly. This aspect is doubly important when it comes to the "negative" things that libraries occasionally have to communicate—service cutbacks, budget shortfalls, and so on (we will discuss more on this in the final section on Potential Pitfalls). This seems like such an obvious thing, but it seems to happen infrequently enough to warrant special attention.

Continuing with the example of ILL, simply because it works well as an example, the promotion in almost any library is: "Through interlibrary loan we can get virtually anything for you." The promotion should be "ILL is a service which supplements the existing collection by allowing us to obtain materials from other libraries for you. Please allow a minimum of two weeks for delivery. Some materials and formats may be restricted." That is a much more honest promotion of the service. Check your organization to see that this is a matter of written, posted, and verbal policy.

Another perennial favorite here is collection size and content. The promotion is, "we have a collection of 45,000 volumes." The promotion should be, "we have a collection of approximately 20,000 adult volumes and 25,000 children's volumes. The content is designed to: (a) support K-12 local curriculum needs, (b) provide a general selection of popular reading material, and (c) support the independent learning needs of the adults in our service area. Again, a more honest portrayal of the service.

The most difficult area of promotion/communication in which to be honest is staff communication. This author heard one story recently where a manager was about to post what she knew would be a very unpopular work schedule. She posted the schedule the night before she was to leave for a week's vacation in order to avoid the outcry. This is not honest communication. There will always be "bad" news that needs to be imparted to staff. Communicating it in an underhanded way or, worse yet, not communicating it at all and hoping that the bad news will go away, does nothing but stress all aspects of the organization.

When in doubt as to whether or not to say something to staff, say it. Better to inform them of something that turns out to be not important than to withhold something that turns out to be vital.

WHAT IS THE BEST WAY TO PROMOTE OR COMMUNICATE? PART III

Answer number 3 to this question is, communicate simply. This author has seen promotional pieces from libraries that went on for pages. There are administrative memos where a single sentence ran on for ten or twelve lines while stuffed with lingo and jargon. The more complicated a promotion or communication becomes, the less likely the message will be understood. Additionally, in an administrative setting, the more complicated the memo, the more likely it is that staff will begin to wonder, "what is he/she hiding?"

To find out if a promotional or communications effort meets the simplicity test, share it with your most difficult coworker or staff member. If they can understand it and repeat the gist of it back to you correctly, you have succeeded.

WHAT IS THE BEST WAY TO PROMOTE OR COMMUNICATE? PART IV

It would be nice if, at this point, it could be said, "the best way to promote or communicate is the local newspaper" or "the best way is through handouts." But the truth is, if you answer the questions presented at the beginning of this section, and you keep the effort consistent, honest, and simple, any way will be the best

way. Select media/methods which fit the project—use what works. Every idea, every promotion, every item to be communicated, has its own set of “bests.” The professional literature is full of ideas and projects done by other libraries regarding clever and innovative ways of promoting events and services. But there are a couple of things that this author has done that work really well. Adapt what you read, what you experience, to your own situation. For example:

- *Monday morning memos*: These have become legendary. While these do not always get out on Mondays, this author does send a general staff memo out at least three times a month. These memos include my schedule, library board activities, new acquisitions of note, staff vacations, and so on. Every staff member gets one, and they have proven to be most effective in terms of consistent dissemination of information.
- *Cross-training*: Everyone in the author’s organization does a little of everything: shelve; the interloan person does YA selection; the children’s librarian catalogs. This not only allows for job variety, it is an excellent way for everyone to “know” the organization better, understand each area by being exposed to it, and therefore promote it better.
- *Personal involvement in the community*: One of the high points of this author’s career came two years ago when the high school junior class voted me in as grand marshal of the Homecoming parade. What better promotion could a public library want?
- *Staff-run staff meetings*: to find out what the staff really needs and wants to know, let them organize and run quarterly staff meetings. It is also an excellent way to see how communication both up and down the chain of command is going.
- *Library bulletin board*: If the facilities allow, establish a library-only bulletin board right at the main entrance. Post agendas, minutes, candid photographs, news clippings, suggestions, recent reviews, and responses—anything that has to do with the service. It is a great conversation starter.
- *Public postings of sensitive policies*: The most sensitive policy in any library is probably that of open access. My organization recently posted a notice to all parents that the library would not be held responsible for materials checked out by a minor. We prefaced this by reminding everyone that staff was available for guidance in materials selection. This policy has now been posted in four or five areas within the children’s department. This is another example of good communication that can also serve as an excellent defense when needed.

POTENTIAL PITFALLS

Now, back to the couple kissing in the dark. What if they should not be kissing each other? What if one of them is a really bad kisser and knows that improvement is needed? What if one is a really bad kisser but rejects the idea that improvement is needed? What if they are kissing so well and having so much fun that any illumination will ruin everything? What are the ramifications of “turning on the light?”

Up until now, the discussion has revolved around positive examples. ILL service, children’s programs, new acquisitions, and so on are all positive aspects of what libraries do and services that need to be promoted. Even fines are viewed benignly in most cases. But every library at some point in its existence is going to be faced with a promotional or communication challenge: a censorship problem, service or budgetary cutbacks, staffing problems, managerial disputes. And if good promotion and good communication are difficult to do under normal circumstances, it gets tougher under stressful situations. A few scenarios and questions to consider:

1. A local citizen is demanding the removal of *Our Bodies Ourselves*. The situation was mishandled at the front desk and is now in your office. Do you alert the press? Do you attempt to defuse the situation quietly? If the concerned citizen alerts the press and you get a surprise phone call, what is your response?
2. (A tougher call) the budget process has been sailing along. All of a sudden, at the very last budget meeting before approval, \$30,000 is slashed from your request. This cut is probably going to result in loss of hours. What do you do? How do you communicate this to staff and customers without either whining or sniping at the municipality? How do you ensure that all staff will respond professionally when the inevitable questions come from the public?
3. The library board has just approved a particularly onerous new fees policy. You do not like it, but you understand the need for it in the face of spiraling operational costs. What must you do to effectively “promote” this?
4. Your library is about to cut off service to a substantial segment of your service population residing in a neighboring municipality and contributing nothing to your operating budget. These people do have their own library, but yours is superior in almost every way. They have accounted for a significant amount of your business. You also need the money. You “promote” the closing well in advance, assured that the subsequent outcry will bring political

- pressure to bear and the neighboring municipality will allocate some funds to you and resolve the problem. The outcry never comes and neither does the money. How do you effectively handle this?
5. It has just come to your attention that in the newly passed salary ordinance, your staff members received the lowest percentage increase of any department. Keeping in mind that many staff members do not, as a rule, read the salary ordinance, do you tell them? Why or why not?
 6. Budgets within your organization have been tight for a couple of years. To make up for the lack of tax support, your library has done a superlative job in acquiring additional monies through grants, foundations, fund-raising efforts, and so on. Should you be promoting these accomplishments? Do you run the risk of "turning on the light" only to have the municipal board say that because you are doing so well, you do not need any more electricity?

Remember that famous axiom of science: for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. Every promotional action you take will have a reaction. What possible reactions are there, and can you or the organization live with any of the possibilities?

Finally, a word about the "art," not the "science," of communication. There is an old "politically incorrect" joke having to do with the Pope and a Jewish janitor engaged in a silent theological debate using only hand signals. The humor comes not from any poke at religion, but from the fact that each debater wildly misinterprets the communication of the other. At the joke's end, the Jewish janitor wins the debate but has no idea how he did it. The "message" was the same, but what was "communicated" was not. Good promotion and communication are entirely dependent upon:

- constant feedback (to which you listen) from your staff and customers,
- adherence to consistency, honesty, and simplicity.

Being a good communicator takes practice, just like being good at anything else. Good communicators (and, by definition, effective promoters as well):

- listen more than they talk,
- ask questions rather than make statements, and
- never assume anything.

As Abraham Lincoln once said: "Better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak out and remove all doubt" (Boyle, 1967).

CONCLUSION

In an era of diminishing resources, effective promotion in a public library setting is crucial. Promotion is constant, just like buying books or performing reference. The best communication and promotion is consistent, honest, and simple. Do not kiss in the dark. Turn the light on to show how good—and how important—your organization really is.

APPENDIX

How Many Times?

The first time a man looks at an advertisement he does not see it. The second time he does not notice it. The third time he is conscious of its existence. The fourth time he faintly remembers having seen it before. The fifth time he reads it. The sixth time he turns his nose up at it. The seventh time he reads it through and says, "Oh brother!" The eighth time he says, "Here's that confounded thing again!" The ninth time he wonders if it amounts to anything. The tenth time he thinks he will ask his neighbor if he has tried it. The eleventh time he wonders how the advertiser makes it pay. The twelfth time he thinks it must be a good thing. The thirteenth time he thinks perhaps it might be worth something. The fourteenth time he remembers that he has wanted such a thing for a long time. The fifteenth time he is tantalized because he cannot afford to buy it. The sixteenth time he thinks he will buy it someday. The seventeenth time he makes a memorandum of it. The eighteenth time he swears at his poverty. The nineteenth time he counts his money carefully. The twentieth time he sees it, he buys the article, or instructs his wife to do so.

"Hints To Intending Advertisers"

Thomas Smith

London

1885