

Promotional strategies for information products and services – aligning with the serious and entertainment facets of information consumers' lives

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Abstract

Purpose – Libraries are subscribing to many expensive information products/services available through information aggregator/provider services. It is a concern for them, as well as these services, to get users (also referred to as consumers) to fully exploit the products/services, and especially new and innovative additions and features.

Design/methodology/approach – The column will be written against the background of research from Information Behaviour as well as a touch from Marketing as reported in the Library and Information Science (LIS) literature.

Findings – To improve the use of information products/services, and especially new products/services and features, libraries, especially academic libraries, as well as information aggregator/provider services, need to address consumers on various levels. In the case of academic libraries, the librarians, faculty members, and students (under-graduate and post-graduate) should be included. To appeal to the seriousness and entertainment facets of the lives of consumers, a variety of targeted competitions and prizes can be used.

Originality/value – Although publications have appeared on using innovative methods such as Web 2.0 and collaboration with students to market products/services, we are not aware of articles focusing on competitions and prizes specifically addressed at the serious and entertainment facets of the lives of consumers.

Keywords – Librarians, Libraries, Library services, Marketing, Competitions, Prizes, Work life, Leisure life

1 Introduction

Many conferences abound with exhibitors representing databases, journal publishers, information aggregator/provider services, and providers of open access products. Examples include Emerald, Proquest, EbscoHost and ScienceDirect. They use a variety of strategies to draw people to their stands and to get them interested in their products and services. They offer pens, mouse pads, sweets, stress balls, bags, and note pads, as well as prizes such as tablets or limited free subscription to their products and services. To qualify for prizes people normally have to fill in a competition form or leave a business card for a lucky draw. I am thinking of conferences such as Online Meeting, Internet Librarian, European Association for Health Information and Libraries (EAHIL), and the annual conference of the Medical Library Association (MLA). Numerous information aggregator/provider services are competing with each other. Developments and challenges for on-going change and improvement are very strong. Each wants new products and features to be noted.

On the other side of the coin libraries subscribe to these products/services. They invest substantial amounts, and need to justify their subscriptions and purchases. They need to get their users (and non-users) to exploit the products/services they subscribe to, to their full potential. These groups are also described as consumers of information, the term that would be used in this paper, except when referring to the specific group served by a library where the term “users” will apply. Everybody is very busy, working under time constraints and focusing on getting daily tasks done. New features and services are provided – but often not fully noted or explored.

This contribution follows on a recent call by a publisher of information resources to participate in a competition on improving marketing efforts. The prize was attendance of an international conference. The second author for this paper, Liezl Ball, entered but never heard if her submission was received. Participating in the competition, however, raised our awareness of the many exciting opportunities there actually are for adapting the marketing of information products/services, and to appeal to the needs of consumers to be “rewarded” in some way. At a recent conference of the SA (South African) Online Meeting, concern was also frequently noted for libraries to get their users to use in particular, electronic books and full-text services. These two issues stimulated our interest in reflecting on the very important issue of promoting the features and add-on services that result from on-going developments.

This contribution will thus address the following:

- Brief (selective) background on promotional strategies reported in the Library and Information Science (LIS) literature.
- Brief reflection on what can be learned from studies of information behaviour.
- Brief reflection on stakeholders to be targeted in promotional strategies, including the library environment.
- Suggestions on addressing the life world of information consumers in promotional strategies with reference to the serious side (work, studies, research) and entertainment (fun, pleasure).

Although the discussion will focus on academic libraries, the principles are also applicable to other types of libraries such as public and school libraries.

2 Reflection on stakeholders

With regard to the use of information aggregator/provider services, there are many stakeholders in individual library environments. For academic libraries there are those evaluating products and making decisions on what to include in the library collection. There are librarians involved in various tasks ranging from management, organisation of information resources (i.e. cataloguing, classification) to reference services, information literacy training, searchers on behalf of faculty and post-graduate students, and support to other students and staff members. There are faculty operating on various levels, ranging from junior staff members to full professors and established researchers. There are students, ranging from various levels of under-graduate studies to masters and doctoral students. In promoting the use of information aggregator/provider services, these groups all need to be targeted in promotional efforts. For purposes of discussion the following groups are distinguished as possible targets:

To be targeted by information aggregator/provider services	To be targeted by libraries	To be targeted by faculty
Librarians	Librarians (i.e. inter-collegial promotion of services)	Faculty members
Faculty	Faculty	Masters and doctoral students (i.e. post-

		graduate)
Researchers	Masters and doctoral students (i.e. post-graduate)	Under-graduate students
Students	Under-graduate students	
	Researchers	

Information aggregator/provider services can engage with individual libraries according to the institutional structure and institutional needs (e.g. regarding teaching, and disciplines covered in the course offerings), but also according to some general guidelines as will be explained in the next sections – especially where they hope to strengthen the subscription to their products. We also want to point out at this stage, that the responsibility and the expenditure for promotion as discussed in this paper would be for the information aggregator/provider services as well as individual libraries.

3 Background on marketing and promotional efforts by libraries

It is important to make users aware of the products/services as well as their usage. If users are not aware of these they look elsewhere. In fact, low usage statistics can result in high cost-per-use figures and can result in the cancellation of high-quality products/services (Dugan 2011). Searching the subject literature, a number of reports could be identified, mostly on the marketing and promotion of library services as such. These include the use of specific methods such as email and Web 2.0 (Dugan 2011), Smith (2011) on the strategic marketing of library resources and services, Robishaw (2012) on the use of electronic tables of content to promote the use of e-journals, Khan and Bhatti (2012) on the application of social media in the marketing of libraries in Pakistan, as well as customised USB flash drives to promote library services (Matsoukas, *et al.* 2011).

There are also reports on promoting specific databases and services such as Henderson *et al.*'s. (2009) report on a project to promote the use of the National Library of Medicine Consumer Health Databases, Gall (2010) on promoting services to distance learners, Dugan (2011) on the promotion of business databases to faculty, Retzlaff (2006) on promoting a library's virtual reference and electronic reserves, Mith (2011) on the marketing of academic library resources and services, and Cerny and Holcomb (2012) on the use of a QR Code Scavenger Hunt (Ihunt) to promote library services to teens. Pulliam and Landry (2011) also report on the use of QR Codes to promote library services. Xia (2009) reports on marketing library services through Facebook groups, Enache and Simona (2008) on marketing and evaluation in libraries, and Sobel (2009) on promoting library reference services to first-year under-graduate students. Baltés and Leibing (2008) title their efforts "Guerrilla marketing for information services?", while Strittmatter (2008) appeals to the lighter side of academic work: "If you pour it, they will come: hosting a cocktail reception to promote services to faculty".

Kaushik and Arora (2012) report on identifying blogs in the area of marketing library and information services. There are also reports on the involvement of students in marketing efforts. Duke, MacDonald and Trimble (2009) report on a collaborative effort between Marketing students and the library to promote the library's reference service where they actually used student-generated surveys and marketing ideas. Collaboration between libraries and information aggregator/provider services has also been reported. Anbu K and Mavuso (2012) report on a pilot project conducted by the University of Swaziland and the Emerald Group Publishing Limited for a prototype for an SMS-based library alert service and marketing of library services. Betz *et al* (2009) report on the marketing of database services based on peer-to-peer outreach using what they refer to as the student ambassador program (SAm). Their strategy focuses on the promotion of Scopus and the Web of Science to graduate students on campus. The strategy is based on the provision of training and instructional and marketing materials.

5 Selective view of services and features that can be promoted

In this section two information aggregator/provider services, Emerald and ScienceDirect, are used to illustrate features and services that can be actively promoted and aligned with the serious/entertainment slant we are suggesting in the next section. It might in fact be worthwhile for information aggregator/provider services to use transaction logs (where possible) to determine how their products are used and whether the features and services they spend time on developing, is actually being used. More on the use of transaction logs can be found in Fourie and Bothma (2007). When targeting students, it is important to bear in mind that they are the up-coming researchers of the future – thus justifying funding that is spend on promotion during tight economic times.

5.1 Emerald

Selected features	Some comments on features and their promotion
Accessibility to visually disabled users – Text view	Incentives can be used to raise awareness of this option amongst librarians and faculty who can then promote it again to students and researchers. By means of an incentive-based questionnaire, data can also be collected on the usability of this feature.
Mobile view	Can set exercises, quizzes, and Scavenger hunts to encourage consumers to use this frequently so that it becomes part of their everyday information practice.
Exploration with the disciplines and types of material covered by Emerald	Can experiment with a variety of topics to explore the strengths of the subject content and the value of the reading lists. It might even be used to stimulate collaborative information seeking and learning between countries in cases where it might be possible to work on a topic from different perspectives.
Emerald research in the news	It might be worthwhile to see how consumers can pick up on research opportunities building on such research.
Generating ideas for research topics	The generation of research ideas as well as methods for generation such ideas can be explored.
Reading lists	Assignments and competitions can be set to assess the value and use of the reading lists.
Support for collaboration (e.g. tools for sharing articles, websites)	Assignments and competitions can be set to assess the tools that are available to support collaboration.

5.2 ScienceDirect

Selected features	Some comments on features and their promotion
Recommendations of papers by experts	Feedback on the use of such recommendations might be collected and rewarded
@ScienceDirect on Twitter	Librarians who are following tweets and actively contributing might be rewarded in some way
Online tutorials	Quizzes, etc. might be used to determine institutional experts', especially librarians', but also other staff members' knowledge and insight gained from such tutorials
Suggestions for product improvement	Consumers might in some way be competing for making meaningful suggestions on how to improve the product/service as well as the promotion. (This would also apply for Emerald, as well as any other information aggregator/provider service.)
SciVerse	Feedback on how this innovative tool is used to support especially post-graduate studies and post-doctoral research need to be collected.

6 Suggestions on addressing the life world of information consumers in promotional strategies

From the literature mentioned in the previous section, it is clear that there are some innovative and fresh ideas from the LIS literature on how to inform consumers about new features or developments a product/service may introduce. However, what is required is to get consumers to actually *use* these to such an extent that it becomes part of their daily information practices.

From Information Behaviour research it appears that there is a preference for using Google to satisfy information needs (many examples of studies are cited by Case, 2012). The insufficient use of electronic books is also a great concern. Earlier studies on Web information seeking (Spink *et al.* 2001) found that often searches are simplistic and that many of the advanced search options and even the ability to search for more than two search terms are often not fully exploited in the use of Web based search engines (to name but a few of the findings resulting from studies of information behaviour; more can be learned from Case (2012)).

The following sub-sections thus offer a few suggestions on how promotional strategies can focus on two interrelated worlds featuring in our lives: the serious world of work, studies and research, and the world of entertainment and leisure, focusing on fun, pleasure and enjoyment. In both these worlds rewards and the value of participation features strongly. In his theory of flow Csikszentmihalyi (1991) argues for greater flow between our lives of work and leisure, and how this can stimulate creativity; although this, *per se*, is not addressed in this paper, it might be the next step in promoting the use of information products and services.

6.1 Targeting under-graduate/post-graduate students by means of assignments

Assignments linked to a competition related to an information aggregator/provider service or a specific product/service can be used for both under-graduate and post-graduate students. This might be done in collaboration with faculty requesting them to set innovative assignments that will acquaint students from all disciplines/subject areas covered by the

service to get them acquainted with the scope and value of the content covered by the product and the features of its platform. Depending on the slants of assignments it might be used to raise awareness for the product/service in developing markets e.g. if a product/service wants to expand across continents or countries or to raise awareness from a group that already falls within the target market but who might be making minimum use of it. Such assignments could focus on the subject coverage, unique material, and diverse formats covered. Emerald is for example offering a good variety of journal titles covering Library and Information Science as well as Information and Knowledge Management, as well as reading lists. As for specific formats electronic books, newspapers or the coverage of conference papers might be a useful focus. Assignments can also take a comparative slant e.g. comparing two products/services, or to gain insight on the diversity of approaches between products/services focusing on different continents e.g. the value of a product/service strongly slanted towards the United States versus a product/service strongly slanted towards the Australian market for an African country. In addition to conventional essays or research reports, assignments can take different forms such as annotated bibliographies for under-graduate students and literature reviews, systematic reviews, visualisation of topics or bibliometric analyses for post-graduate students.

To stimulate interest from a consumer market, assignments, however, need to be linked to prizes. To appeal to students, different categories and different types of prizes can be included such as for best assignment overall, the assignment making most effective use of the resources of the specific product/service, or the most innovative presentation reflecting use of the product/service. Prizes can be aligned with the needs and interest of the group. Students (under-graduate and post-graduate) can benefit from prizes promoting their studies, their ability to network with people in their profession and that can promote their career opportunities, e.g. certificates that can be added to curriculum vitae (CVs), gift vouchers for books or other material, invitations to participate in promotions of the product/service on a local level, or sponsoring of attendance for local workshops and meetings.

6.2 Targeting post-graduate students by means of workshops

Post-graduate students are often overwhelmed when expected to find research information. Workshops and especially webinars (available for a wider group of people) can be organised to demonstrate how a product/service can be aligned with the research process. The importance here would be to co-opt researchers from a selection of subject areas that are expert researchers to use real examples from completed Masters and Doctoral topics and to ensure that it is not just explanations on how to use a product or service, but real scenarios and problem solutions they can relate to in their own research. This can especially be useful when fully aligned with the various facets of the research process such as reporting on literature on the main research problem, defining concepts, and collecting background information. It might also be an excellent opportunity to link to open access repositories where full-text might be found, repositories of thesis and dissertations, electronic books where the information is immediately available, reference management software, and to even add a short questionnaire where students can indicate information they may have needed. Writing this, I just thought that a link to sources for definitions and clarification of concepts might be useful.

Offering workshops/webinars is not sufficient. Again, there need to be evidence of participation on a competitive bases and aligned with appropriate rewards. Students can complete multiple choice quizzes, again linked to small prizes such as discount vouchers, or for a bigger prize such as sponsoring of attendance of a local conference, they might even be invited to participate in a competition on best “working examples” of using the product/service as part of the research process. The involvement of doctoral students, and

challenging them for meaningful input, might even be linked to sponsored international conference attendance or sponsoring the editing of their dissertation/thesis.

6.3 Targeting faculty by means of competitions

Faculty can participate in competitions on setting meaningful and innovative assignments aligned with specific products/services. They can also be invited to submit reports on innovative means for embedding a specific product/service in their curricula. Winning reports can be published (as a bonus for Faculty), and again prizes can offer extra incentive. If the scope of a competition is more substantial such as competing on a report in the most innovative way of embedding a specific product/service in their curricula, prizes can include sponsoring of conference attendance and continuing education courses, and acknowledgment in promotions of the product/service.

6.4 Information aggregator/provider services targeting librarians

It is essential for librarians to be fully *au fait* and enthusiastic about the products/services they are subscribing to. They must be able to encourage and guide each other as well as their users (and non-users) to use information products/services, and to exploit new products/services. They should be keen users of these product/services themselves – especially with regard to those concerning Library and Information Science, Information Management, and Knowledge Management. They should note new features and services and use them. They should explore means to promote these.

Webinars might be an effective means to reach librarians. During participation in webinars they can e.g. offer presentations on features of the product/service and use in their libraries or research they might be doing on the use of the product/service or particular features or components thereof. Such research might be of great value if librarians can focus on a variety of smaller issues. This can be done on a competitive basis with appropriate prizes (similar to what has been mentioned earlier) serving as incentive.

6.5 Information aggregator/provider services targeting an institution such as a university

Information aggregator/provider services can work closely with institutions if they really wish to promote the use of their services in a specific institution. Two examples include:

- (1) Campus-wide competitions can e.g. be used to ensure all consumers are aware of the availability and value of new features as soon as these come out. These can be showcased on the product/service website, a Facebook page or by means of Twitter (nothing new about this). However, participants can be asked to answer a few questions on the new product/service e.g. by means of an electronic questionnaire, and then they are automatically entered into a lucky draw if their answers are correct. Thus there is incentive for them to note such developments. For this, prizes might be aligned to a “fun” element such as shopping vouchers, or the latest electronic gadgets. They must be tempted to participate. This might be taken a step further by drawing them into surveys to share their opinion on the nature competitions and prizes can take. Keeping this brief and to the point, might bring valuable data to the front.
- (2) In similar fashion they can be encouraged to get involved in the product/service’s use of social media such as Facebook and Twitter. They can e.g. be rewarded with small prizes for relevant twitter posts or Facebook postings aligned with new developments such as points towards a discount voucher for online shopping.

7 Promotional items

Although promotional items such as pens and mouse pads are certainly useful, it might be time to consider items that are specifically aligned with the serious needs of the group that is being targeted. Here not only the library, but also Faculty, can be included in promotion. Promotional items with the product/service branding can be incorporated as part of class subject assessments and the institutional information literacy training, e.g. flash disks, lanyards (to carry keys or flash disks), and cloths to wipe tablet and mobile screens. A survey can even be launched asking students for their input on incentives with a serious slant as well as incentives aimed at the entertainment and fun side.

Posters and video clips appealing to the sense of humour of the students' (the researchers of the future) can be distributed on campus and the library portal, or other social media preferred by students.

And where is the "entertainment" slant coming in mentioned in the title of this paper? On a local level, libraries may consider rewards such as vouchers for coffee shops, restaurants, movie tickets or other forms of entertainment – noting again Strittmatter (2008) on "If you pour it, they will come...".

8 Conclusion

There is a great need for libraries and more specifically information aggregator/provider services to ensure that consumers are aware of especially new products/services and features. This is to ensure that the time and effort invested in developing these are really making a difference. One way of achieving this is to appeal to the serious and entertainment nature of consumers' lives. Although some examples of competitions and prizes are mentioned here, much more could be learned from the consumer by means of focus groups, brainstorming, etc. Even though economies are tight, such promotional efforts may be more effective than current investment on glossy brochures and pamphlets handed out at conference exhibitions... (This is, however, not for us to comment on). All we feel strongly about, is the need to reach the target markets of the products/services in a way that will add value to their studies, careers and other facets of their lives, and their use of information.

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