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Librarian like a Rock Star: Using your Personal Brand to Promote Your Services and Reach DistantUsers

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Abstract

The business world has been using corporate branding and relationship marketing to build customer loyalty and satisfaction. In recent decades, individuals have applied the tenets of branding to themselves to create the idea of personal branding - marketing yourself as your own brand. By thinking in terms of personal branding and relationship marketing, distance education librarians can more effectively reach out to remote students and build long term relationships that are beneficial to both students and librarians.

Introduction

The profession of librarianship has many stereotypes, from the fussy librarian in a hair-bun to the tweedy intellectual with the elbow patches. Librarians are known to love quiet and to shush loud patrons. Librarians are not often thought of as rock stars, and it was with great joy and surprise that Dan the Librarian, my personal brand, received a thank you email saying, “You are an official ROCKSTAR.” (R. Hoksch, personal communication, October 1, 2009).

Everyone likes to have hard work and professionalism acknowledged and getting thank yous is always appreciated. In times of tight budgets and uncertain futures, however, academic librarians’ ability to show that kind of positive response from students and faculty goes a long way toward proving the value of the individual librarian, and the value of the library, to the parent institution. It is easier to cut positions or funding from a library that is not seen as useful to the people who rely on it than from a library that is appreciated and defended by its users. It is difficult enough for librarians to be appreciated by people in person. It is even more difficult for librarians working with remote users.

A library, of course, is much more than a collection of books and journal subscriptions. A good library is fundamentally about the needs of the people who use it and the ability of the librarians and staff to fill those needs. Assuming the collection has what users need and the services are efficient, there are a variety of things librarians can do to make themselves valued by their users - particularly by those studying off campus.

Many qualified librarians have written books and articles about library promotion, public relations, and marketing, and this paper does not presume to cover an area of knowledge already so ably covered. In spite of the title, this paper is not even about shameless self-promotion - an area of the literature that could, perhaps, use more quality information. This article builds on all those things but is, fundamentally, about librarians

getting credit for what we do and what we do well. Ultimately, it is about managing and effectively using your reputation.

The first part of this article discusses the business concepts of relationship marketing and personal branding as they relate to librarianship while the second discusses the situation of remote students who make up the target audience. The third part focuses on creating a personal brand using Dan the Librarian as an example and using the brand to build relationships

Marketing and Branding

Theories of marketing and public relations create the context for two related ideas that can help build a librarian's reputation and keep customers returning: personal branding and relationship marketing. More than enough has been written in the library literature and in other fields about marketing, promotion, public relations, and advertizing for most readers to have a more-than-basic understanding of them. Judith Seiss in The Visible Librarian (2003) sets out some simple definitions that might help frame this discussion for libraries.

Marketing is determining who you serve and with what products. Publicity is getting the word out that you can help people do their jobs better-faster-cheaper. Public Relations is talking to people about their needs and your strengths. (p. xvi)

Personal Branding

The idea of corporate branding - building an association in the minds of customers for a particular company or product line rather than an individual product -has been around for quite some time. By promoting a brand rather than a specific product, businesses can promote all their products, make it easier to introduce new products and create in the minds of consumers a meaning (positive, it is hoped) for their brand.

Applying the idea of corporate branding to individuals also has a long history (think of P.T. Barnum or Mae West) but went un-named until recently. "In a 1997 article in the trendy management magazine Fast Company, however, influential management guru Tom Peters gave a name to the next self-help management movement: personal branding." (Lair, Sullivan, & Cheney, 2005, p. 307). In an age of social media, the idea has migrated from a strictly business connotation and is applied to individuals. Celebrities and media commentators have created their own personal brands for years. In the library world, bloggers and commentators from Karen Schneider to the anonymous Annoyed Librarian to Paul Pival, our own Distant Librarian, do the same thing. They become known in a wider context by taking advantage of opportunities to get their thoughts published in columns and blogs, but the library profession knows them by their reputations and the quality of the things they write.

Corporations use brands to elicit a kind of shorthand in the mind of consumers. McDonalds = food that costs and tastes the same anywhere in the world and Jeep = Four-wheel drive are examples. When consumers hear or see the brand name or catch-phrase an association is created, and corporations

spend a great deal of time, money, and effort to ensure that consumers make positive associations.

To a lesser extent, bloggers and other individuals work hard to create a similar kind of association in people's minds. Readers of library bloggers like the Annoyed Librarian, the Distant Librarian and Information Wants To Be Free know what to expect from those voices because, intentionally or not, those bloggers have created associations in the minds of their readers. "Everyone has a personal brand, but most people are not aware of this and do not manage it strategically, consistently, and effectively." (Ramparsad, 2008, p. 34).

The original idea of personal branding coined by Peters did not focus specifically on the presentation of an online identity, but was more generally applied to individuals and their conduct in business. The idea has certainly grown beyond its roots in business and can now be applied by individuals in academia (the Cornell West brand, for example) just as it can be applied to people creating online identities as bloggers. It is this less-technological meaning that I wish to focus on, although it is important to acknowledge that online presence and presentation is an important aspect of personal branding, particularly in the current academic environment and particularly when focusing on remote library users.

Personal branding is not without its problematic associations and potential for abuse, either. It may be tempting for some to see in personal branding a triumph of image over substance. Rather than focus on self-improvement as the means to achievement, personal branding seems to suggest that the road to success is found instead in explicit self-packaging: Here, success is not determined by individuals' internal sets of skills, motivations and interests, but, rather, by how effectively they are arranged, crystallized and labeled - in other words: branded." (Lair, et. al, 2005, p. 308)

Just as in corporate branding, though, a critical component of a long-lasting and respected personal brand is that it evokes trust and quality. Consumers are not fooled for long and your personal brand will suffer if it is not backed up by quality work and effective action.

Another, perhaps more comfortable, way to think about your personal brand is as your reputation. "A bad reputation is like a hangover," said James Preston, Avon CEO in the mid-90's, "It takes a while to get rid of and it makes everything else hurt." (Caminiti & Reese, 1992, para. 26). Using the more businesslike term personal brand encourages a deliberate thoughtfulness in managing our reputations that, one hopes, helps avoid Preston's hangover.

Although the idea originated in the business sphere, the best summation of personal branding for librarians comes from school librarians -"A brand is an idea in the mind of your constituents created by what you say and do." (Abilock, 2007, p. 8). It is this idea in the mind of our constituents that individual librarians need to manage and build on.

Relationship Marketing

A style of marketing in which there is a congenial interaction between suppliers, distributors, retailers and consumers which thus makes it possible for marketers to build trusting long term relationships with each party in the selling chain and to be able to count on excellent service and cooperation. (Cross, 1995, p. 306)

The term “relationship marketing” entered the business lexicon in the 1980’s to describe the idea that a sales transaction doesn’t end when the money changes hands. Rather, it is beneficial for both the buyer and seller to develop a long-term relationship which provides support and help to the buyer and, it is hoped, a return customer who will spend more money with the seller.

It is a mutual interest between company and customer. It is not a new concept. In fact, it is as old as the merchant trade itself. It is the demonstration of deep and abiding regard for the customer and this is displayed in the products and services sold, in the interaction between company and customer, company and potential customers, company and suppliers, and so on. …Why have libraries not jumped on the RM bandwagon as they have jumped through the hoops of other business fads…? (Besant & Sharp, 2000, p 18.)

Academic libraries generally do not have a direct sales function, but they do have a history of building lasting relationships with different stakeholders, including university administration, researchers, instructors, and students. Indeed, one of the most important things that a good academic library can offer is a long term relationship with the people who use library services.

To many, the idea is so basic as to not really fall under the heading of marketing. SLA member and information consultant Ulla de Stricker (2000) puts it in a useful context:

Let me just jump in and say it now: Marketing isn't our issue. Relationships are. Marketing is misunderstood and misplaced if it isn't seen as a natural consequence of everything else we do— the systematic efforts we make to understand our organizations' inner workings; the probes we mount to ferret out our clients' and non-clients' challenges and deliverables; the ongoing conversations we have with stakeholders. In other words, if relationships are done right, marketing takes care of itself. (para. 4)

Relationship marketing is contrasted in business literature with what more traditional marketing that Besant and Sharp call “transactional marketing.” In a library context, transactional marketing would find importance in the number of transactions that can be counted. Think of the typical library emphasis on counting reference questions and circulation. While those quantifiables have an important place in assessment, “Just measuring user encounters or transactions isn’t getting the job done any more.” (Besant & Sharp, 2000, p. 20).

Savvy librarians have long known the advantages of building relationships with library users, ensuring their satisfaction and encouraging not only

return business but also their support with funding agencies. Indeed, the departmental liaison model of academic library service can be thought of as relationship marketing in a very formal sense of the term.

If relationships with our customers (library patrons, users, stakeholders - the term is less important than the idea it describes) are important for the goals of the librarian, how much more important are they for the distance education student who sees the academic support systems of a university campus as being remote?

The Loneliness of the Long Distance Student

It is axiomatic that students engaged in distance learning programs are isolated - geographically, of course, but also in terms of human connectedness or connectedness to the university. “Distance is both a characteristic and an obstacle in distance education.” writes Jianling Jiang, “The distance separates the students and the instructor, the students and on campus academic resources and the students from each other.” (2008, p. 24).

While Jaing’s study of isolation among students in distance education programs focuses on the online environment, many of the assumptions and conclusions about access to academic resources can be applied regardless of the course format. Librarians working with remote students have plenty of anecdotal evidence that students feel disconnected from resources and people that can help them, including librarians.

In online distance courses, the learners are not likely surrounded by a group of people or academic resources, but more likely to be alone with computers in individual homes or in public libraries. Many distance students are adult learners with full time jobs and/or other family responsibilities. Often the time available for distance course assignments is late at night after taking care of work and other responsibilities. Sitting in an empty room and facing a computer screen does not naturally lead to the feeling of connectedness. (2008, p. 25)

Other student support professions, such as academic advising or financial aid, are also faced with challenges in reaching out and connecting to remote students. Solutions range from revamping websites to seeking efficiencies in providing online student services (Kendall, 2005). In the world of librarianship, the idea of embedded librarians can be seen as an outreach effort that, if not targeted specifically at geographically remote students, is certainly applied to online classes. By searching ERIC or other education databases, it is possible to track a growing awareness on the part of administrators and student support personnel of the need to reach out to remote students. An Acknowledgement of this trend is provided in a 2007 Campus Technology article:

Systems and services for recruiting, advising, and support of online students have seldom been at the top of the list when planning online and distance learning programs.… The recent release (September 2006) of the Spellings Commission report, A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of US Higher Education, notes a lack of systems that track the progress of individual students over time and across institutions— and is sure to

increase the focus on these systems…The key to affordability for these systems probably lies in approaches that encourage a long-term relationship between the student and the institution. (Boettcher, 2007, p. 22)

The building of relationships again is the key to reaching out to remote students. Librarians, with a mandate to provide support for students' information needs that have a direct and immediate impact on student success, are in an excellent position to create those long-lasting relationships.

Imagine you are the disconnected student Jiang described in previous paragraphs - staying up late, alone, surrounded by glowing computer screens and far, both geographically and emotionally, from the support you need. Imagine what kind of librarian that student wants to work with. That student needs a librarian who is easy to find and easy to approach. That librarian needs to be well enough known that the student even thinks of a librarian when one is needed. It is here where the power of the personal brand and relationship marketing come to the fore.

Your Personal Brand

These two related ideas, personal branding and relationship marketing, work inherently well together and may even be considered to be part of the same marketing package. Individual librarians create an idea (or more often change a pre-existing idea) in the minds of students, faculty, and administrators about what that individual librarian is and does, thus creating a brand. Through consistent application of that brand, students, faculty and administrators know what to expect. Assuming the idea they have of the librarian is positive, they return for repeat business.

Creating a personal brand is, in many ways, simply being mindful of and deliberate about things that we do regularly and sometimes unconsciously.

Creating Your Brand

Understand what your brand already is. Academic librarians in general already have a brand, whether it is acknowledged or not - librarians are the people who know where the information is. While that is a mostly-positive stereotype, some customization or personalization would make it more effective as a personal brand.

Do what you are good at. This may seem a bit simplistic, but focus on your talents and what you enjoy. Part of the success of your personal brand is that it expresses your strengths and, ideally, those strengths are things you also happen to enjoy. Ramparsad (2008) has some good advice that some might find surprising in an article targeted to businesspeople, "Love is an important element in this personal branding equation. It is about loving yourself…, loving others and loving what you do." (p. 34).

Be good at what you do. People who enjoy their jobs are more likely to have natural talent in them, but it is also important to keep improving. Attending professional development sessions, learning new and needed skills and keeping current with the literature of the field are all ways

to get and remain good at what you do. The important thing is to maintain a high standard for yourself. Over time, as librarians gain a reputation for providing excellent service, word will spread and that good reputation will encourage others to use the library.

Think in the long-term. Overcoming stereotypes and establishing a consistent reputation does not happen quickly. The idea is to emphasize, over and over again, the brand you are creating for yourself. Keep in mind that you will be living with this brand for a long time. “You can’t shame or humiliate modern celebrities,” says author and modern celebrity P. J. O’Rourke in Give War a Chance (1992), “What used to be called shame and humiliation is now called publicity.” (p. 125). Your brand is not about “publicity” in O’Rourke’s sense, but about relationships.

Know your audience. Your brand will be seen by distinct and different audiences who may take different messages away from how you present yourself. Your brand will be shorthand used by students, instructors, colleagues, library administrators and perhaps others. While it is probably not a good idea to show a different face to each audience, it is well worth considering the message you want to send to each group and how those messages can complement each other.

Have a message. I have chosen to emphasize some aspects of my job over others in creating my personal brand. While I am a departmental liaison, I have always thought of myself as more of a generalist than a subject specialist. Looking at the needs of the remote students I work with over a distance, I have chosen to emphasize approachability and helpfulness over subject expertise. Toward that end, I consistently refer to myself as Dan the Librarian in as many venues as practicable and, whenever possible, use the phrase “save time and frustration doing research.” Both taglines are short and easy to remember. Both emphasize the salient points that I want people to know about me and they don’t get lost in my long job title or in the details of subject expertise.

Build Relationships. As anyone working with remote students will acknowledge, there is no magic bullet for reaching a remote and distributed audience. Your personal brand won’t make it easier for you to send messages to students, but it will make it easier for them to think of you when they need it. The key is consistency, quality work and a little creativity.

Distance education librarians rarely get an opportunity to work with students face-to-face. The opportunity of creating an impression is most often mediated by phone, email, chat or some other communication technology and it becomes necessary to emphasize your brand in whatever way is possible. Dan the Librarian is the name on the library services page for distance education. Dan the Librarian has a blog for distance education students. Emails to students and instructors are signed Dan the Librarian. When I have an opportunity to travel to off-site locations for library instruction, my university name badge says Dan the Librarian.

This consistency has built a word of mouth advertising campaign. Instructors and other students now tell their colleagues to “ask Dan the Librarian.” I get emails addressed to Dan the Librarian and Dan the

Librarian has been asked to write a regular column in the Distance Education Department's student newsletter. This is all anecdotal evidence and the increase in questions over the last two years cannot be assigned specifically to the Dan the Librarian campaign, but students in off-site locations seem to remember it and make use of it. I like to think that it will be easier for Jiang's lonely student facing a glowing computer screen to remember Dan the Librarian when he or she is frustrated and in need of help.

Conclusion

Even reading many of the articles in business journals, it becomes clear that "relationship marketing" is a business interpretation of things we learned on the playground and from our parents and grandparents. Be a good friend. Be honest. Do a good day's work. It seems almost to be a return to the values of the "good old days" (if those days really existed) where the local shopkeeper knew his customers by name.

A personal brand is also nothing really new. People make stereotypes, for good and ill, all the time about classes of people, professions, businesses and anything else that people need a shorthand reminder for. This can, of course, be inaccurate and detrimental to individuals, but stereotypes also sometimes have positive effects. While it is annoying to be thought of as fussy and rule-bound, librarians are also thought of as helpful, caring and intelligent. The personal brand is an attempt to manage or control what people think of you and magnify the positive traits. In some ways it also works to improve quality - after all, your reputation is on the line.

Ultimately, this all comes back to reputation: Overcoming a bad one; creating a better one; and leveraging yours to achieve your goals. The thank yous are awfully nice, too.

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