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Selling Your Library to the College Community: A Look into Promoting an Underused Library to Ensure Student Support

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Selling Your Library to the College Community: A Look into Promoting an Underused Library to Ensure Student Support

Abstract

Academic libraries have a major impact on their community. Yet, academic libraries often face challenges regarding funding, overall usage, and relevancy to the institution in the eyes of stakeholders. This requires academic librarians to work even harder to promote their library to the community. The term *sales* may have a negative connotation among many people, but academic librarians have been suggesting that librarians adopt certain sales techniques to support their communities. This article delves into the need for librarians to use certain sales techniques to promote the library to their community with a focus on ensuring student support. Specifically, this article is based on a study at a small college library, but the techniques are applicable to libraries of all sizes in promoting services and resources.

Keywords

Management in Libraries, Advocacy in Libraries, Student Success, Community College

Introduction

Academic libraries throughout the nation are constantly changing to remain relevant. This has been due to a wide variety of factors, such as the advent of public internet access and distance learning. Budgets for academic libraries have always been dependent on an institution's overall enrollment. There has been an eleven percent drop in college enrollment since 2011 (Larkin & Nadworny, 2019). With decreased student enrollment this means that the library will see reduced funding in its fiscal year budget. The COVID 19 pandemic introduces more challenges for academic libraries. With many colleges and universities moving towards hybrid or online education modalities exclusively; libraries will require more e-resources and will need to reevaluate products from library service vendors, due to tighter budgets (Cox, 2020). These changes have required libraries to sharpen their customer service skills, to learn and embrace sales techniques, and to build better relationships among the faculty and staff. This article will discuss how sales techniques resolve pertinent issues at a small college library, how fixing these issues promote the library to the community, and ultimately improve student support services at the college.

Literature Review

Discussion regarding the use of sales techniques in academic libraries began in 2014. The articles in this review present three common sales techniques that every academic librarian should adopt if they want to promote their library to the community and increase student support. The first technique is to build positive relationships among the users of the library. Following this technique, librarians should find out about the needs of the community in which they serve and promise to help them with those needs. The final technique is to always remain engaged with the community.

Reference & User Services Quarterly published an article titled, "The reality is... everyone is selling something" by an academic librarian who had previously worked as a library services vendor. Smith describes how one successful library services vendor operated by building positive relationships among the librarians in his territory (Smith and Ryan, 2014). Academic librarians should engage with faculty and staff as often as they can to be successful in their communities. A good sales representative will meet with multiple keyholders at a library and determine the needs of the library (Smith and Ryan, 2014). Once relationships are established it is important to learn about the needs of the community so librarians can support these needs. Smith then discusses the importance of always engaging with stakeholders with the goal of becoming a priority (2014). Stakeholders do not often realize the value of their library and its services unless it is shown to them. The article is good for learning sales jargon, how sales work in general, and the different types of salespeople.

In, "Liaisons as sales force: using sales technique to engage academic library users" King and Solis, argue that many academic librarians view the term *sales* with a negative connotation (2017). Academic librarians should not have this attitude towards the term since using sales techniques will not change their role as a provider of resources to the college community. King and Solis point out that "sales conversations are natural parts of human interaction, in both professional and personal life" (2017). The overall goal of a salesperson is to help the consumer get a product that they want or desire. Academic libraries are always striving to provide resources that ensure the success of the faculty and students in which they serve. Furthermore, promoting library services with a sense of enthusiasm guarantees that faculty and students know that the library is a place that will support them and their goals. (King & Solis 2017). King and Solis's article is superb for leaders who have multiple liaison librarians in their library and desire to build better relationships among the faculty and staff.

In his 2017 article, "Academic librarians have something to sell", Steven Bell states, "What great salespeople do is build relationships" (2017). Building relationships among the faculty and staff is crucial since they can be the biggest supporters of the library if properly engaged. When engaging a faculty member, it is important to ask enabling questions which can help the librarian find out about the needs of that faculty member (Bell, 2017). Finding out about the needs of the faculty will strength the role of the library in the community if it can deliver on those needs. An important note from Bell is that "Successful retailers and libraries both excel at creating awareness about the resources and services they offer" (2017). Engagement with the community is an ongoing task that if properly done will ensure the success of the library and support the overall community. This is a great article for those interested in learning more about the relationship between sales and academic librarianship.

Background of Donnelly College

Donnelly College is a small private Catholic institution of higher education located in Kansas City, Kansas. The college has been around since 1949 with a special focus on underserved populations. The college is federally designated as a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) and Minority Serving Institution (MSI). Degrees offered include associate degrees in general education, bachelor's degrees in business and information systems, and certified nursing programs. Average enrollment is 300 FTE students a semester. Currently working in a former hospital building, the college is opening a brand-new academic building in August of 2020. The current library at Donnelly College has moved a total of two times during its time at the college. It started out on the basement floor of the main academic building before being moved to the seventh floor of the main academic building in 2012. The library ultimately moved again in the Summer of 2018 to the first floor of the main academic building. This second move occurred to prepare students for the style that the library and tutoring center would take on in the new academic building. This move hoped to bring more awareness to the library among the Donnelly College community.

Issues at the Library

Over the last several years, Donnelly College has had some recent issues regarding student usage of the library. This occurred due to lack of engagement between the previous librarian and the community. In August of 2019, a new librarian was hired to revitalize the college's library. The faculty at Donnelly College had a stale relationship with the library and did not know about the resources it had offer. The college had one paid database besides the State Library of Kansas offerings. The library did not have any tools regarding plagiarism available to ensure that plagiarism would not occur at the college. Building better relationships among the faculty, providing a premium multidisciplinary database, and funding a plagiarism tool are three issues that the new librarian focused on to make a positive impact and support the community which the library served.

Applying Sales Techniques to Achieve Different Solutions

Sales techniques are applicable to almost any situation one encounters in the library world especially for liaison librarians. The librarian held meetings with various faculty members to begin building a relationship with the library. Success or failure of using this technique will be determined by the number of information literacy sessions held after these meetings, the number of students coming to the library for research help, and the usage of course reserve materials. The faculty stated they needed access to more scholarly journals at the college. This will be measured by the number of downloads from the new premium database acquired by the college library compared to the State Library of Kansas offerings for the academic year to showcase the inherent value of the resource to the community. Engaging with the community will be assessed using the

plagiarism tool acquired by the library. The librarian 's hope with this newly acquired tool is to engage with the classes that have higher similarity scores and work with them on combating plagiarism in their writing by conducting citation review sessions. This tool was recently purchased during the COVID 19 pandemic, so no formal class sessions have been held due to distance learning being adapted in March of 2020. However, the number of submissions received using the tool will be assessed. Using the literature reviews three sales techniques, the library saw increased value in its community and became a pillar of support.

Solution 1: Building Relationships Among Faculty Members

Donnelly College has a total of forty full time and part time faculty at the college. There are five major departments at the college, divided into: Business, Information Systems, Liberal Arts and Sciences, Nursing and Student Success. The faculty at Donnelly had no relationship with the library beyond that they knew its location and the former librarian. To correct this issue, the new librarian began meeting with faculty throughout the college in person, if possible. The librarian met with seven professors who primarily taught introductory courses. This was the start of building a positive relationship between the library and the faculty. These conversations were both introductory and insightful for both parties. Questions that the librarian asked included the following:

- “Do you need any resources put on a course reserve?”
- “How can the library help your students succeed?”
- “May I schedule a time to do an information literacy session with your students?”

The librarian taught a total of 14 in person information literacy sessions throughout the academic year before the COVID 19 pandemic required the college to go fully online. This change required professors to completely reinvent their courses halfway through the spring semester causing schedule delays and issues regarding information literacy sessions. A total of 52 students came to the library to receive research help while writing a paper following these information literacy sessions. Professors asked for textbooks, the yearly common read, and subject specific encyclopedias to be put on course reserve. Course reserve materials were used a total of 63 times throughout the academic year. The total number of students visiting the library in the last academic year was a total of 374, which according to the faculty is the highest it has ever been in recent years (Donnelly College, 2020). Without forming good relationships among the faculty, the library would not be as successful as it is now.

Solution 2: Acquiring a Multidisciplinary Database to Fulfill a Need

At the start of the Fall 2019 semester, Donnelly College had only one paid database which was CINHALL for the nursing department. The State Library of Kansas offered quite a few databases for the college to use as well but students struggled with using them. The faculty at the college for a few years have been asking to get a premier multidisciplinary subject database from a vendor like JSTOR so students could access more scholarly journals. The new academic librarian discovered that this was a primary need of the community and he would attempt to alleviate that need.

The librarian decided to showcase the need to purchase JSTOR Essential to the administration of the college through faculty support and data collection. To do this the librarian began building a relationship with the faculty of the college so that he could use them as a reason why the tool is necessary. Next, the librarian had to talk with administration about purchasing

the tool. Administration would approve the purchase of the tool if it could support the college's accreditation and overall educational goals. The tool was purchased in November of 2019. The librarian began the process of collecting data to compare usage between the State Library of Kansas databases and JSTOR Essential from August 2019 to May 2020. The community requested 2,058 items from JSTOR Essential while only requesting 258 items from the State Library of Kansas databases from August 2019 to May 2020 (Donnelly College, 2020). These numbers allowed the administration to showcase how purchasing JSTOR Essential helped students get access to more scholarly resources, in their Higher Learning Commission (HLC) Interim Report. The librarian fixed a need in the community by selling the value of a paid interdisciplinary database to the administration through faculty support and data usage.

Solution 3: Avoiding Plagiarism Issues by Supporting the Community

The Donnelly College Library had a simple guide on ways to avoid plagiarism that was published in 2014. The faculty and tutoring center brought up the desire to acquire a plagiarism checking tool for the college. These tools are often expensive and past departments did not have it in their budgets to acquire one. The tool was purchased by the library since the librarian was asked to handle plagiarism education at the college. The librarian hopes to use the tool to engage the overall community through classroom instruction regarding plagiarism and citations.

To acquire the tool the librarian showcased the value of the tool to the administration of the college via faculty input, its value to their institutional accreditation, and how it can engage the community. Faculty came across plagiarism issues among students often. They wanted a tool they could use to educate students about plagiarism. The librarian used the 2018 Assurance Argument to HLC to showcase how purchasing the tool will support the colleges accreditation; since the report stated they would purchase one. Finally, the librarian discussed with the administration how the tool would allow the librarian to see what courses needed the most help regarding citations and avoiding plagiarism. The tool was purchased and installed in April of 2020. During the last two months of the spring semester, the plagiarism tool received 157 written submissions across nine courses. The professors of these courses wrote a total of 618 comments regarding the submissions allowing them to point out where students need to cite and revise their work (Donnelly College, 2020). Due to the COVID 19 pandemic requiring distance learning, the librarian was not able to consult with these professors regarding these reports but would like to do so in the future so he could remain engaged with the community on how to cite and avoid plagiarism. This tool helped the community in which the library served and allows for the librarian to remain engaged with that community via class consultations regarding plagiarism.

Conclusion

Academic libraries are integral to a college or university, but they may not be viewed that way among the overall community. Therefore, it is so important to promote the idea that the library has a service or product to *sell*. One must *sell* the importance of their library to the community to acquire more funding, be relevant to the community, and most of all help the students. Sales techniques are not for everyone. That is why it is important to find someone at the library who is good at promoting the services and products that the library has to offer to remain relevant and build a positive relationship among the campus community. Donnelly College had an underused and underrepresented library that the community was unfamiliar with. The new academic librarian had to *sell* the value of the library to make a positive impact on the community and ultimately ensure student support at the college.

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