



Innovative Practice

Quick and Dirty Library Promotions That Really Work

Eric Jennings and Kathryn Tvaruzka
University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire

Abstract

The University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire’s McIntyre Library promotes the library and its services in various ways. Over the past few years, the library has used inexpensive, quick to develop marketing tools to establish positive relationships with its students, faculty, and staff. This paper describes two promotional programs by detailing how each was carried out, the costs involved, and how the intended audience received it. By incorporating nontraditional promotional ideas into its marketing campaigns, the library has earned its reputation as a fun, inviting place on campus.

The University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire’s McIntyre Library has experienced much staff turnover in the last five years, mostly from retirements. In that span, the library has had to hire a new library director, three reference librarians, an archivist, a systems librarian, and a handful of paraprofessional staff. Because of this turnover and a change in attitudes about library service, the atmosphere of the library has transformed a great deal, and it has become a fun and interesting place to work and study.

The newly hired staff brought their own experiences and ideas to the library, resulting in a rethinking of how the library promoted and marketed itself. Much of this culture change can be attributed to the new library director, John Pollitz. He encouraged library staff to act on their ideas and indicated that it was okay to fail. This was the catalyst for innovation.

The library’s budget, however, was limited and not much funding was available for promotions or activities. Therefore, staff members had to be creative and efficient in their use of funds. This article will describe two quick, easy, and inexpensive promotions implemented by librarians Eric Jennings and Kathryn Tvaruzka.

Using Facebook for Library-Sponsored Contests

The media perpetuates stereotypes of librarians as either quiet and passive or hard and controlling. We sought to change some of these perceptions for McIntyre Library by trying something new in the library: a contest. This contest, however, was not to have anything to do with the library itself. It was not going to be attached to a survey or an assessment tool as many library contests or giveaways are. It was simply going to be a contest that would increase discussion of the library and hopefully change students’ perceptions of the library and librarians.

Thus, in late January and early February of 2009, we asked students to submit their best “How I Met My Valentine” story to the library to coincide with the Valentine’s Day holiday. A Facebook group was created that described the rules:

1. Limit your post to no more than 300 words.
2. Winners must still be together and one person must be a current student of the University.
3. At least one person from each winning couple must come to the library to claim their prize.
4. Winners must agree to have their photo and story used by the library for promotional purposes.
5. Winners' photos and their stories will be posted on the library plasma screens and library news blog.

Each story was posted on the Facebook group’s discussion board (<http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=115915310421>).

A \$50 gift certificate to a local, romantic restaurant served as first prize and was paid for by the library. Additional gift certificates (\$25 and \$10) for the second and third prize winners were obtained from a few other local restaurants.

We posted fliers around campus and in the library (see Figure 1), posted a news item on the library blog, created slides for the library's large plasma screens, and prepared a press release that the University news bureau sent to various on-campus outlets, including prime placement on the University's home page. Within just a few days, sixty couples entered the contest and more than seventy people became members of the Facebook group.



Figure 1: Valentine's Day Contest Flier

We did not know what to expect from this contest. The high number of participants was a surprise, as was the serious nature of the stories. Entrants did not write inappropriate stories, but wrote heartfelt stories about how they met their significant others or how they proposed to their spouses-to-be.

Because of the contest's success, we sought to determine how participants learned of the contest. A message was sent to all of the Facebook group participants listing the different ways the contest had been promoted. Seventeen people responded (see Table 1).

How participants learned of the contest	Number*
Posters in the library	8
University home page	8
Campus bulletin boards	4
Plasma screens in library	4
Library home page	2
Friend	2
*More than one than option could be selected.	

Table 1: How Participants Learned of the Contest

We were pleased that students saw the posters in the library but were surprised that the University's home page was tied with posters for the top selection. When sending information to the news bureau, we did not know that it would be placed on the University's home page. After thinking about why it received as many votes as posters in the library, we concluded that all the computers on campus were set to open up to the University's home page when a web browser was opened.

Minimal time was needed to create the contest, and comments from students, faculty, and staff were extremely positive. In just one afternoon, the Facebook group was created and publicity was developed. Soliciting for prizes took about an hour. Reading and judging all of the contest entries took approximately half a day for two librarians.

Due to the success of the "How I Met My Valentine" contest, we decided to do a similar promotion during the Fall 2009 semester. During the Valentine's Day contest, someone had asked via the McIntyre Library News blog, "what if you don't have a valentine?" Therefore, with the Halloween holiday approaching, we decided to do an anti-Valentine's Day contest to allow students who were not able to participate in the Valentine's Day contest to enter to win a gift certificate. With the same basic rules in place as the Valentine's Day contest, we created a Facebook group for a new contest titled Getting a Stake Through Your Heart (<http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=146350749607>).

Students were asked to submit their best “ghastly or ghoulish story about a date that was scary as hell, a break-up that went terribly wrong, or a love interest that cackled with laughter when you asked him/her out.” First prize was a \$50 gift certificate to a local restaurant which was paid for by the library. Donations were obtained for second and third place prizes and included an iTunes gift card (\$10) and gift certificate to a local coffee shop (\$10).

Publicity for this contest was similar to the Valentine’s Day contest. We posted fliers around campus and in the library (see Figure 2), posted a news item on the library blog linked from the library’s home page, created a slide for the library’s plasma screens, and prepared a press release that the campus news bureau sent to various on-campus outlets.



Figure 2: Anti-Valentine’s Day Contest Flier

Preparation for this contest took less time than it did for the Valentine’s Day contest. It took an hour to develop the Facebook group and to create publicity. Soliciting prizes for runners-up also took about an hour. Reading and judging the contest entries took 15 minutes.

The biggest difference between the Halloween-inspired Facebook contest and the Valentine's Day contest was that the Halloween contest did not generate nearly as many student responses. Only four students responded to the contest with stories.

When doing contests in the future, librarians will keep in mind that people do not like to tell sad or upsetting things. It is easier to be positive and share a story that has a lot of meaning. Sharing a story about getting your heart broken is problematic because it requires a person to make public an unhappy or embarrassing situation.

Although the second iteration of the contest via Facebook did not work as well, the library still views it as an important marketing tool because it has helped change the perception of the library and librarians. There is a maxim in the entertainment industry that any publicity is good; it is better to be talked about (positively or negatively) than to have the library be unknown or underused.

Library Fortune Cookies

During the opening week of each semester, the University showcases different departments and groups for freshmen at a two-hour event on the campus mall. The library has always participated in this event, usually with mixed results. In years past, the library simply handed out pens with the library logo and magnets containing library contact information. In 2008, the library sought a unique way to differentiate itself from other groups and clubs. At a planning meeting held about one week before the event, Tvaruzka suggested that the library purchase personalized fortune cookies, which was immediately approved by the library director. Because time was of the essence, Tvaruzka polled the reference staff for possible fortune ideas. Tvaruzka and others wanted the fortunes to be informal and funny to show students that while the library is an important place for research on campus, it also is a fun, exciting place to be. The library purchased the cookies from My Lucky Fortune (<http://www.myluckyfortune.com>). The length of the text of each fortune was limited, but a variety of customizations could be requested and express delivery was an option. One thousand cookies were ordered with five different messages:

1. Right now your parents are remodeling your bedroom.
2. Today you will meet someone new. Why not make it a librarian?
3. The greatest danger could be your stupidity. Use McIntyre Library.
4. Worse things are yet to come. Befriend a librarian.
5. Only fools look to cookies for words of wisdom. Look to the library.

About half of the cookies were given out at the two-hour orientation and the extras were given to students who stopped by the reference desk. The cost for this promotion, including express processing and shipping, was \$183.

Because the fortune cookie promotion during spring orientation was a success, the library repeated it for students and faculty during finals week. The library ordered 1,000

cookies for students with six custom fortunes and 250 for faculty with three custom fortunes. The following messages were contained in the student cookies:

1. You came to the library and all you got was a lousy cookie.
2. I cannot help you, for I am just a cookie. But a librarian can.
3. You will wait until the last minute. McIntyre will be here for you.
4. You will survive the final exams with the help from McIntyre.
5. Your final exams will be canceled.
6. The stapler's over there.

The library is open 24 hours a day the week before and during finals, and free coffee is provided for the late night crowd. The cookies were offered primarily during this time. They were also provided at the library's public service desks during the day, and the library director even distributed cookies to students studying throughout the building.

Because of the success with fortune cookies for students, the library thought it might also serve as a useful promotional tool with faculty. In the previous year, the library had endured several librarian retirements, the subsequent process of hiring new staff, and the move to a liaison model for information literacy instruction. The librarians hoped that handing out fortune cookies would serve as a fun, lighthearted way to meet departmental faculty, introduce them to the liaison program, and spread some joy during a stressful week of finals. Three custom fortunes were created for faculty:

1. McIntyre Library staff wishes you a great winter break!
2. It pays to remember your librarians this holiday season.
3. PEEQ-a-boo...from McIntyre Library.

The PEEQ-a-boo fortune was a reference to a campus-wide assessment program--*Program to Evaluate and Enhance Quality*.

Dressed in Santa hats and reindeer antlers with a Santa bag full of fortunes, McIntyre Library's reference and instruction department librarians braved the cold and visited most academic departments on campus during finals week to deliver some holiday cheer. New librarians took this opportunity to introduce themselves to the departments, and others used it as a way to reconnect or schedule instruction sessions. Not surprisingly, the librarians got a lot of smiles, laughs, and even a few books to return to the library.

Both fortune cookie distributions were run again during the 2009-10 academic school year. As not all of the cookies were used in 2008-09, fewer cookies were ordered this time (750 instead of 1,000), and fortunes were printed double-sided. On one side were the corny library-related fortunes that were used during the previous year and on the other side was "Welcome from McIntyre Library." However, these 750 fortune cookies did not last the entire two hours. The library ran out of cookies with half an hour to go.

Once again, students stopping at the library's booth were pleasantly surprised when the library gave them something out of the ordinary. The library received a lot of laughs and the number of students surrounding the library's booth was considerably larger than any of the booths nearby. One librarian, who was not staffing the library booth but came by to see how the promotion was going, asked Jennings what he had done to attract such a large crowd of students. He responded that he was simply being friendly and creating an atmosphere that was conducive to students talking with him. At an event like this, the staff tried to make the library seem like a lighthearted and fun place to visit and did so with great success.

Distributing cookies to faculty at the end of the semester once again proved useful. A number of faculty said that the librarians had made their day when they got their fortune. One faculty member tracked the traveling librarians down after they had passed by her office to tell them how much of a kick she got out of the fortune. It also gave the librarians the opportunity to make their presence known with faculty in departments that typically do not use the library. One faculty member, upon receiving his fortune cookie, remarked that "everything is online these days." That gave the librarians the opportunity to educate that faculty member on the usefulness of a physical and online library. In general, there were many smiles to be had by both the faculty receiving fortunes and the librarians handing them out.

Overall, the library produced a lot of good will by doing this simple, quick, and inexpensive promotion with faculty and students. At the orientation events, librarians have had students ask about library employment, what services are offered in the library, and what books are available for leisure reading. Additionally, many students have been introduced to the subject librarian in their major, and numerous students have gotten a laugh from the silly fortunes. At the end of the semester events, students have come to expect these fortune cookies as a supplement to their diet of late night coffee. Faculty are also engaged and happy with the yearly fortune cookie cheer. McIntyre Library has had numerous faculty contact them to see who made the fortune cookies because they wanted to do something similar in the future.

More importantly, the library has started to connect with departments and individual faculty that have not used the library much in the past. Increasing the library's visibility and its services through something as simple as fortune cookies is something that will continue to be done at University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire as long as it does not become overdone on campus. The total cost was \$123 for 1,000 student fortunes and \$39 for faculty fortunes, plus shipping charges.

Conclusion

The library is always looking for new, inexpensive ways to promote the library and its services. While some may feel that insignificant promotions like a Facebook contest or providing fortune cookies to students and faculty have little place in an academic library, we believe otherwise. Quick and dirty promotions are helping change campus attitudes toward the library and its staff in a positive manner. A little thinking outside the box can

go a long way. We believe that it has helped at least one library and can work for others too.

Eric Jennings is Assistant Professor, Research & Instruction Librarian and Kathryn Tvaruzka is Assistant Professor, Education Librarian at the University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire.

©2010, E. Jennings and K. Tvaruzka. *Journal of Library Innovation* is an open access journal. Authors retain the copyright to their work under the terms of the following Creative Commons license: Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 (United States) <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/us/>