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Making the invisible visible: bringing e-resources to a wide audience

This paper considers the various opportunities that might be available to promote the e-resources held within an institution. In the current decade an ever increasing percentage of tightly stretched library budgets is spent on e-resources (databases, back-file packages, current e-journals, textbooks, image databanks and reference works). As these are part of a virtual library they are not always noticed or fully exploited by their target audience. This paper looks at some possibilities to publicize e-resources, making these important collections more visible, and considers how these resources, in particular electronic journals, can be made accessible, useful, relevant and obvious to the library customer. Topics discussed include information literacy sessions, library branding, 'spreading the word', ensuring value for money and 'making it fun'.



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Introduction

This paper will consider various different ways to promote a library's e-resource collection.

It is a simple fact of the current decade that an ever increasing percentage of tightly stretched library budgets is spent on e-resources, whether this be current e-journals, back-file packages, abstracting and indexing databases, textbooks, image databanks, or reference sources. These do not take up shelf space but are part of the virtual library; therefore, they are not always the most obvious part of the library collection.

This paper considers some possibilities for publicizing the e-resource, specifically the e-journal, and for making these sources of information accessible, useful, relevant, and obvious to the library customer.

User groups

The first step towards achieving successful promotion is to determine markets and target audiences. At a university there are several interested parties who might make use of the e-resources: academics (teachers and researchers), administrators, departmental secretaries, librarians, students (undergraduates, finalists, postgraduates – taught and research, postdoctoral students, overseas students, distance learners and part-timers), plus a range

of walk-in users who have reason to visit the library.

Using the provider's free material

At every professional conference there is usually a swathe of material to support e-resources being demonstrated at the various stands. While one could be sceptical about the practical use of a yo-yo to publicize an e-journal collection, such items are often all that is needed to catch the eye. Coupled with glossy posters and informative leaflets, a display can easily be put together to announce the library's latest digital acquisition.

Here, brand names are always important – instead of Elsevier e-journals, we have ScienceDirect; University of California journals become CALIBER. Acronyms are also easy to remember – IOP for the Institute of Physics; ACS for the American Chemical Society, LION for Literature Online. A snappy name that makes an impression is always a plus, and a huge bonus for displays.

At Leeds we have recently developed a rolling display scheme where different aspects of the library are promoted in rotation. The e-resources display became an opportunity to mix posters and leaflets (provider-based material) with in-house slides showing the catalogue and routes into key

resources. We provided pens, key-rings and book-marks to encourage customers to come up to the displays and read the information there.

Induction sessions and information clinics

A student's first weeks are generally taken up with information from every side, including an introduction to the library. It makes sense that they should be introduced to the major e-resources in their field as soon as possible, so the mention of certain products such as Web of Science or CSA can be helpful. Enthusiastic students could then follow up in their own time and discover these databases alongside the printed material on their reading lists or literature searches.

Indeed, if there is scope for putting an emphasis on e-resources during induction week, why not offer similar sessions or visits for new staff members, where e-resources are introduced and training offered. Staff induction from the library could make the usefulness of the resource more relevant right from the start, by targeting particular research areas or groups, or new members of teaching faculty, depending on need. This ensures that the library's collections are fully integrated in the discovery, interpretation, and collation of material to support research results.

Information literacy sessions

E-resources are an integrated and important part of the information literacy programme at Leeds, developed to assist student-based learning and to showcase the material available through the library.

While the main information literacy programme takes a general approach, looking at the skills needed to successfully exploit our e-resource holdings ('intelligent web searching', 'Web of Science', and so on), this is backed up by a subject specific programme focusing on particular types of resource of relevance to a particular user group.

From this year at Leeds we have introduced an assessment of e-books and e-journals, which attendees can complete for certification which counts towards their personal development portfolios. These general sessions, and their supporting online tutorials, are an opportunity to demonstrate as many e-resources as possible, while promoting a variety of different approaches, searching

techniques, and so on, which the attendee might not have considered before.

Think about your audience. Do they want to discuss an article with their peer group internationally? Now they can, through the 'comments' feature. Would they like to see articles waiting to be peer reviewed? Now they can, by looking at preprints and institutional repositories. Would they find it useful to see a chemical structure in 3-D, or as a moving image? Tell them about the advantages of multimedia. The potential is great, through the whole spectrum from the basic 'here it is' to the advanced 'here's what it does', but a customer might not realize this unless it is brought to their attention.

Library web pages and the catalogue

The library's web pages are the shop window for the service, and as such have enormous potential to draw people in, and to demonstrate to customers the riches held within the collections.

The e-resource can undoubtedly benefit by the credo of 'the importance of being seen'. There should be clear links to a database, e-book, or e-journal. They should be clearly described, easy to find, and easy to use. It is the responsibility of the library to make sure that every search of its pages counts and that the important, expensive and useful resources can be quickly located and exploited.

Library catalogues, which include all e-resources available, are a far stronger resource than separate A-Z lists, although there are arguments both for and against integrating print and electronic versions of journal titles. In an age where many e-journals are available from multiple providers, clear display of information on coverage, access, and availability is key.

User guides, help pages, and online tutorials

It has long been recognized that user guides are the 'tricks of the trade' when it comes to using an e-resource. Step-by-step guides and help pages enhance the visibility and usefulness of an e-resource, as well as making the name easier to remember.

Interactive tutorials are the next step in this process – at Leeds we have developed generic and subject-specific e-journal tutorials which can be

followed in the customer's own time and at their own pace, including in their own home as long as they have access to a computer.

Branding

When a library has developed a key service (such as an OpenURL link resolver) branding can serve to bring e-resources together. For example, our 'find at Leeds' linking tool appears within ten key databases and quickly retrieves full text from a selection of our 22,000 e-journals.

Library branding within e-journal sources also promotes the fact that they have been purchased for the benefit of customers; enhanced services, such as university portals, cross-searching protocols and subject gateways, can also serve to bring key resources together.

Ensuring value for money

As costs increase, it is essential to keep faculties informed about where their money is going, and how the purchase of e-resources will benefit them. For example, at Leeds we have regular meetings with departmental representatives to keep them informed of the latest developments in all areas, including e-resource collection development.

Other publicity methods which can quickly and easily be put to use include e-mail distribution lists, staff or team newsletters, items in university-wide staff newsletters and web pages, posters, screensavers on cluster PCs, and statistical reports. A comparison of costs can be useful too – if we didn't buy this journal, what could we buy instead?

Inclusion in related sessions

The library does not simply need to promote its e-resources; of course, extensive print collections are retained. So why not bring the two together? For example, a training session which looks at the provision of reference works can include the online versions of *Who's Who* or *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. The traditional view of the reference book as dusty volumes of the *OED* or the *DNB* taking up valuable shelf space is only half the story; make sure the convenience and adaptability of the online versions are also made known.

Making it fun

It often pays to get the customer involved – who can turn down an invitation to 'try this yourself'? Giving them a reason to use something works well. If there has been a natural disaster, bring articles on the subject together from a variety of e-resources; if a famous person has died, use reference and newspaper resources to build up a profile of their life and works. Make the most of the natural curiosity we all have – and the customer might remember that the information was useful and come back to use the resource again.

Exploit the more unusual items in your e-journal collection such as trade magazines, government reports, and niche titles with a potential for wider interest. Take a light-hearted approach – the oddest title might generate tremendous interest for its unusual slant on a research topic.

Using banners, stickers and bookmarks

An approach which works well for smaller libraries is the labelling of library sections, or journal covers, to indicate that access is available to online versions as well.

Place a banner or a sign near the well-used print titles publicizing the more accessible online version: 'There at 2 in the morning when we're not'. Use shelf markers to indicate the purchase of backfile collections. You could also brand your service with a suitable acronym to draw your customers in, although this only really works in practice for smaller institutions with the scope to promote themselves as a separate service in one location.

The use of bookmarks is already fairly standard for advertising library opening hours – why not adapt this to advertise the purchase of *Nature*, *New Scientist*, *The Economist*, or *The Times Literary Supplement*, or an essential new database or collection of learning resources?

Spread the word

It has often been said that the strongest weapon in the librarian's armoury is the ability to communicate.

An information professional should be always on the alert! Be ready to discuss key developments in informal situations such as lunch dates, and networking before events and meetings. Make sure

that Library Friends and other external supporters know about new and expensive e-resources which bring kudos to the university, especially if they can use them as walk-in members of the library.

Ensure that you promote and engage interest in library e-resources to keep that one step ahead; use your professional and academic networks to put library e-resources in the forefront of people's minds.

Staff intranets

One consideration which should be uppermost in every e-resource librarian's mind is how to use the staff areas on the web site to increase awareness of e-resources and their potential.

Intranets can be used to discuss resources in depth, perhaps even to share views and experience on their use. Is that map resource of use to sociologists? Could that medical site be included in resources of interest to historians? Will mathematicians be interested in journals on the history of education in their field? Just what titles and reports are buried inside that database purchased by the business school, and what might linguists or medics think of them?

Once these connections are made, e-resources can more easily be adapted to the needs of an interdisciplinary teaching and research culture.

E-resource brochures and leaflets

Could a publicity campaign be set up to introduce the top twenty resources from the collection to a wider audience via a glossy brochure or a series of leaflets?

Quirky and off-the-wall ways to promote e-resources could also be considered, for example, 'key facts from'; or 'journals you never knew we had', or an institution-specific campaign detailing research from your own academics, key articles, and where they appear.

There is also considerable mileage to be gained from choosing a 'resource of the month', 'e-journal of the week', and so on. Everyone is interested in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, or *Which?* magazine, if not from a teaching or research standpoint, then from a personal one.

Resource-specific exploration sessions

A good form of publicity is the bringing together of research groups (students with or without their supervisors) with the providers of e-resources. We have run several of these at Leeds in the past and they have proved very useful in getting the students aware of a new product and involved in using it; giving scope for making suggestions for improvement, and so on.

The development of focus groups can greatly enhance the interaction between e-resource provider, library, and university department. It is important to work together towards the same goal if we want to move forward in the virtual world.

Internal advertising

If your university or library policy allows you to send out e-resource publicity alongside other correspondence, to stamp envelopes with details of new acquisitions, or to advertise new e-resources in your e-mail signature, take advantage of this.

Perhaps T-shirts or caps could be worn advertising e-resources purchased by your library; or specially designed mailshots which list the journals with the highest impact factors and point out that you have them available for access from anywhere at any time.

Welcome packs for new students

Most student unions put together 'welcome packs' for new arrivals, including food, discounted tickets, and other essential items. The library could develop something similar – with pens and post-its advertising resources, information on initiatives such as wireless networking and portable screen readers, and suggestions of e-resources to explore.

This would put the library on the map quickly and effectively, and also get the message across to new undergraduates that the collections available to them are interesting, engaging and relevant to their study and research.

However, a counter-argument to this could say that students already suffer from information overload in their first few weeks. The success of a 'welcome' approach would depend on the information being interesting enough for them either to retain or return to at a later date.

Conclusion

Libraries need to keep themselves in the forefront to ensure that the increasing spread of e-resource provision develops for the benefit of the audience for which the resources have been purchased.

This article has suggested some ways in which e-resources can be promoted, made more visible, and reach their full potential. With a certain amount of imagination and flair a lot can be achieved and the large proportion of the library budget spent on e-resources can be justified by making them a natural selection point of all customer groups as

they participate in the aims and objectives of university life.

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