Attracting Undergrads: A study of effective advertising for a virtual-visual generation

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Abstract: Through a series of studies, an applied anthropology class, their professor, and a librarian joined forces to learn about student use and awareness of the library, focusing on the gaps between expressed student needs, their use of library materials and services, and what the library has to offer. In spite of efforts to educate them, many students remain unaware of what is available.
Building on the idea that the library needs to respond to the behavior of users, a study undertaken in 2011 focused on what university students considered the best means and locations to advertise and disseminate library information. We posit that our behavior as a library can influence student behavior *if* we market and advertise using methods to which students respond.

1. Introduction

Brigham Young University is a private, co-educational, residential university with an enrollment of 30,000 students—28,000 undergraduate and 2000 graduate. The Harold B. Lee Library (HBLL) is the sole library for both undergraduate and graduate students and is a member of the Association of Research Libraries.

In previous studies conducted by the Applied Anthropology course on behalf of the HBLL, we have looked at student behavior in the library, their requirements and their approach to research projects. In our studies, we found, as Texas A&M did, that " library users often requested 'new' services that actually already existed" McGeachin & Ramirez (2005). Students continually suggested that it would be wonderful if the HBLL had a specific resource available or a particular link on the webpage. In nearly all in stances, the reality was that these 'suggestions' were already in place at the library, but the students were unaware of them.

Participants suggested that the library should do a better job of advertising their services. Typical comments included *"Students would use the library if they knew what was there"* and *"I never knew you had that!"* Therefore, in 2011 we turned our attention to discovering ways in which the library could better disseminate information about resources to library users. The challenge was to try to find out why patrons were unaware of services that could benefit them in their coursework and if there were other advertising options which the library could use to which patrons would respond more positively. We were particularly concerned about two main themes – what methods of informing users about resources would be most effective and why were some of the existing methods not working?

In order to collect this information the Anthropology students were assigned to one of six groups(each with a particular research method they had learned in class). They were given several class periods to complete the collection of data and were then required to analyze it and submit a full written report. The Principal Investigators, Allyson Washburn and Sheila Bibb, then took the collected data, reanalyzed and triangulated it to confirm the student's findings. What follows is our discovery of ineffective and effective advertising techniques and the library responses.

2. Ineffective advertising

In order to assess the visual perspective of patrons, student informants were given a disposable camera and a list of photographs to take. The project instructed them to photograph advertisements (adverts) across campus and document attractive, effective and well-placed adverts as well as those that were unattractive, ineffective and poorly placed. When the cameras were returned, a short interview was conducted with the participants. The data collected about ineffective methods of advertising, (both photographic and interview responses), made it clear that visual elements were important to catching student's attention. Adverts that featured too much text, dense blocks of text or small fonts were virtually ignored. Furthermore, adverts that exhibited poor use of color and contained no images were deemed ineffective.

3. Ineffective Print adverts

Most campus buildings have large bulletin boards where departments, programs and approved students can post various adverts. When students responded to questions about this method of advertising, they said that *"the glut of ads make them unattractive and messy"* leading to feelings that they *"…don't have time to read all these."* In the student center*,* respondents indicated that *"there are too many [adverts]…and you just get lost in all of them. "*The same is true of booths set up in the student center to promote various campus activities or clubs.

Small, quarter-sheet adverts, e.g., table toppers or table tents, typically displayed on study tables in the library were noticed by students, but not effective. Even though students see them, they indicated that it*" does not mean you actually take in their message or act upon the information."*

Flyers, although used heavily used across campus, were rated as the most ineffective means of advertising. Students commented *"I only read them if I have absolutely nothing else to do"* or *"I shove them in my pocket and throw them away later."*

Figure 1 Ineffective Print Adverts

4. Ineffective Electronic adverts

Even though students respond more favorably to electronic means of advertising, if the advert is positioned in an ineffective location, it does not garner much attention. In previous studies, students have recommended that we place adverts on the library homepage so they see them when they login. However, in the 2011 study, adverts on the homepage were rated one of the least effective forms of advertising. Additionally, we know from our LibQUAL+ survey that students are not always frequent users of the library web page; 95% of them prefera Google search when seeking information. Students also found library homepage advertisement ineffective because 1) it is not a commercial site so they don't expect to see ads there and 2) when they are on the library homepage, students are focused on the task at hand, (usually finding information for whatever project they are working on), and ignore the ads there. Students who did notice advertisements on the library webpage did so only because of personal interest or relevance.

The library and other buildings on campus routinely utilize large plasma screens for adverts. One such screen hangs in the library's atrium and displays promotional videos. These are definitely visual and it was assumed that because students are huge consumers of YouTube videos that this would be an effective method of reaching students. However, in this case, the location of the screen was crucial. Because the screen is located in a high traffic area of the library, students just catch a glance as they rush by and only notice if an advert is new. A few students thought the ads on plasma screens were effective, but more thought them ineffective. The comments from the study explain this enigma. One student said, "*I think they're catchy, and you can see them from a distance but I don't want to take the time to stop and actually watch what's going on on*

the TV monitor." Another mentioned, *"I always thought it was funny that the TV advertised the library because you're in the library."*

   Of the students who did watch the plasma screens, thirty-seven percent did so passively, rather than intentionally. Fourteen percent indicated that they glanced at it as they were passing by. Thirteen percent said they watched it while they were sitting and waiting, e.g., *I was waiting for a friend and had nothing better to watch. "*Another ten percent indicated that they watched simply because *"it was on."*
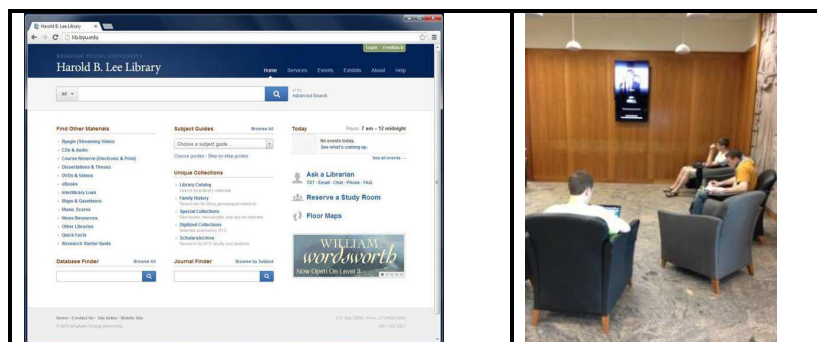

Figure 1 Ineffective Electronic Adverts

5. Effective Advertising

Before moving on to the findings, it is interesting to note that when asked how the library could do a better job of making their resources known to students, the number one answer was "in class, from the professor". One student said "*I think that if the teachers just mentioned that the library offers all these different resources… that relate to that class ...the word would spread more. "*Other responses suggested that the library could advertise course specific resources, targeting specific classes and majors, using the professor to make the students aware of the service or resource, and that the adverts needed to be "student-specific".

6. Effective Print adverts

   With the exception of adverts on large plasma screens in major buildings across campus, the effective adverts students photographed and told us about were print based. Several varieties of adverts in various locations were noticed and caught the students' attention. Posters and banners were most often photographed and tend to be the most common advertising mechanism across campus. These non-digital forms of advertising can be effective when they are large, colorful, simple, and strategically positioned. Banners photographed were usually constructed on bright paper with equally bright wording in contrasting colors. Text on the banners was large, concise and easy to read. A student remarked that one banner, displayed in the student center, "*was visible from anywhere in the center."* Students also commented that the large posters in the library atrium were effective because they were "*the first thing you see when*

you come in the library." According to their comments, students literally had to walk around them and almost subconsciously took in the message.

   Another form of advertising that appeals to students is life-size cutouts of professors and/or campus celebrities. These cutouts are typically used to recruit students to a particular major or inform students about lectures or seminars by guest speakers occurring in the various departments. They stand out much more than a poster on an easel and have a personal element that attracts students. A recent basketball star who received national attention was also used in several of these types of adverts around campus, including in the library.

   Repeated, varied, and creative efforts sustained the attention of students. As Dyal and Daniel (2010) claim, "multiple venues and variations for the same message are the only ticket to success—and even then,… [are]dicey if we have not created a compelling message." The university Office of Research and Creative Activities (ORCA) has successfully and repeatedly used a cut-out of an orca whale to advertise their research grant application process to students .Near the end of the application period, they also had a person, dressed in an orca whale costume, appearing in various spots across campus as well as small posters in classroom buildings, encouraging students to submit their applications. This particular advertising mechanism was viewed positively by students in the study.

Figure 3 Effective Print Adverts

7. Effective Electronic adverts

   With the explosion of apps for mobile devices, students in this study indicated that adverts using "app-like" pictures attracted their attention. Students are used to seeing apps everywhere and respond positively to them. Quick Response (QR) codes are becoming more widely used and also resonate with students. As with the print adverts, an effective electronic advert has to have something that will make it stand out from all the rest and must be able to "*make a quick impression."*

   The web page was mentioned previously as an ineffective location for library adverts. However, some students remarked that they liked the format of

the university homepage. The BYU homepage (www.byu.edu) includes pictures of students, professors, athletes, etc. and links to stories that are personally connected to students. Regarding the library home page, students commented that *"the videos and YouTube clips are good and I like the music."*

The findings relating to emails and text messages as effective advertising mechanisms were mixed. Respondents in different groups expressed conflicting opinions regarding the effectiveness of emails or text messages. Some felt that emails were ineffective because they get lost in the inbox and others said they at least skimmed their emails and would probably read them, each reflecting their personal choice. An email with a catchy subject line is less likely to be 'lost' among the others – especially if its content is bold and eye-catching. One student suggested a message that would resonate with him would say, *"Hi, you are studying Information Systems. Did you know you can do this? –[and then] give me ONE useful thing and the person to contact to get more out of it."*

A feature of all the points discussed so far in this section is the role of technology and surprisingly very few of those interviewed indicated that sending text messages with library information would be effective. While no reasons were given, it may be fair to assume that as we saw with emails, the text messages get 'lost' in the inbox and are either ignored or not acted upon.

Another finding was that the library should move its advertising out of the library. Suggestions included, *"Students like to study in places other than the library so they may never see the advertising which is in the HBLL"* and *"It kind a defeats the purpose when they have the ads playing in the library on the TV that's in the library. Obviously, if you didn't know about the library you wouldn't be there."* Since one of the reasons for promoting library resources is to get the students to use the library, placing the ads inside the library does seem to be an ineffective strategy.
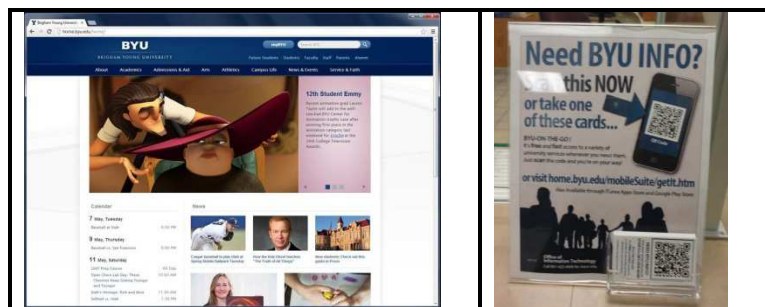

Figure 4 Effective Electronic Adverts

8. Recommendations

In today's world of constant media exposure, tweets, texts, and social media sites, careful thought must be given to the audience for adverts. To be effective, an advert needs a "visual hook" to catch the attention of the students. Print adverts need to be carefully crafted and displayed in order to catch the eye of the passersby. For electronic adverts to be effective, they cannot be placed where

students will not notice them or can easily choose to ignore them. As mentioned previously, even the best ad in an inappropriate location is not likely to be noticed. Students in the study recommended several actions they thought would increase the effectiveness of the library's advertising efforts.

1. **Pictures on website:** This is the second study in which the recommendation to add pictures to the website has been voiced. Suggestions included adding pictures of students in the library, using a format similar to the BYU homepage. Including pictures could help students connect visually to the library, whether they are pictures of other students or familiar library resources.

2. **Move advertising out of the library:** An effective location suggested by the students was the door of the Testing Center, noting that *"Everyone has to open this door."* A second recommended location was on highly traveled pathways across campus. Some posters already exist on these pathways and one student commented, "*I am automatically looking out, and I see them.*"

3. **Library advertising should be in or near major specific buildings and be targeted to library services for majors in that building.** One student remarked that *"...many of the library signs I have seen in my major building because I am always there."* This suggestion would have the added benefit of informing faculty about library services which they could then pass on to their students.

4. **Focus on using technology in ads.** Use app- like images, QR codes and encourage students to tell their friends about the library's Facebook page. One student commented *" My friend actually showed [the facebook page] to me...keep it conversational and also advertise the fan page more...then people might actually start liking it."*

5. **Print adverts should be large, vibrantly colored banners or posters with minimal text.**

6. **The library should establish a marketing committee with a large student component.** This action would provide ongoing student input about effective advertising campaigns.

7. **Work with the AdLab,** BYUs student-run, faculty mentored ad agency (www.byuadlab.com). The library could consider becoming a client which would leverage the student point-of-view and result in adverts that would appeal to students and increase their knowledge of library services and resources.

9. Library Responses:

The library responded quickly to some of these recommendations, but others are still in the discussion and planning stages. The first response was a recent campaign dubbed "Research Rescue." The front of each help desk featured a large, bright red banner with a Red Cross symbol that read "Research Rescue" in bold print. Additionally, we created several standing cut-outs of student employees holding library materials posing with a "rescue" dog and placed them near various service areas in the library.

Figure 5 Research Rescue

The second response included students in the library's multimedia unit creating videos that encouraged students to study in the library which have been very popular with the students. These are posted on the library home page (www.lib.byu.edu) as well as on YouTube (http://www.youtube.com).

Several subject librarians responded to the recommendation to move their advertising out of the library and inside the buildings where majors congregate. The business librarians have displayed digital posters on the screens in all lobbies in the Business building to advertise their Research Clinics. Some students came the clinics because they saw the posters, but more reported that they came because their professor saw the advert and brought it to their attention. The Nursing librarian has a link to her LibGuide on the College of Nursing's homepage. The Theater and Fine Arts librarian has posters advertising the Documentary Film series in three buildings across campus and in local businesses that students frequent. They are also delivered to faculty who typically hang them outside their office doors.

While the library does not have a marketing committee, the students who are hired to create adverts about library services and resources are typically pursuing a degree in advertising. They work with the Communications Manager and the library benefits from their student point-of-view and their classwork experience.

10. Conclusion:

Dubiki reminds us that "Marketing and promotion play a key role in assuring the viability of libraries in this era of rapidly-changing technological advances" (2007). The findings of this study have helped our library to begin to develop effective adverts that we hope will change the way students view and use the library. In previous studies we learned that once students discover what the library has and the services offered, they are both surprised and pleased and often become the best word-of-mouth adverts. If the library wants to get students into the building to use the services and resources, it is critical to leverage the findings of this study and translate them into effective adverts.

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