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Assessing the effectiveness of an e-resource marketing campaign in a Hong Kong academic library

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Abstract

In response to increased spending but decreased usage of e-resources, Hong Kong Baptist University Library organized a week-long campaign to promote its e-resources. The campaign's effectiveness was assessed using survey data and usage statistics. Overall, the survey data showed a positive reception towards the campaign but the usage statistics of e-resources showed a mixed pattern in its impact. The sustainability of the campaign is also discussed from it being a pilot event to an annual marketing campaign, which signified the need for a concerted library marketing strategy.

Keywords

Electronic resources Marketing, Electronic Resources Usage, Evaluation and Assessment, Marketing Plan, Academic Libraries, Promotional Activities

Introduction

Hong Kong Baptist University (HKBU) Library is one of the 8 publicly-funded university libraries in Hong Kong, serving a community of around 11,000 full-time students and 860 faculty members. With limited library space and a sizable print collection, the Library spends an increasing portion of its annual budget in purchasing and subscribing to e-resources. However, an in-depth review of e-resources usage statistics revealed a substantial drop in usage across a number of e-resources in the 2014-2015 academic year. In the past, the library's approach to promoting e-resources was limited to routine university-wide announcements, and occasional database training workshops that were open to all but were usually poorly attended. With many free competing online resources available to students, there was an urgent need to promote these library e-resources in a more concerted manner.

HKBU Library's first E-resources Discovery Week was originally planned as an ad-hoc event in response to the drop in e-resources usage. However, through the valuable experience of organizing this marketing campaign two years in a row, the librarians responsible realized that organizing a week-long event was only the beginning. A major challenge was to assess the effectiveness of the campaign, and in turn improve it and turn it into a sustained effort.

Literature Review

There is no shortage of literature on various marketing initiatives undertaken by libraries around the world, and some of them focus specifically on the marketing of e-resources. Kennedy (2010) conducted a content analysis of 23 publications on the marketing of electronic resources by libraries in the United States. She found that in general, libraries clearly understand the need to market but may still fail to develop a proper plan due to a lack of understanding of the fundamental nature of marketing and public relations and its benefits. She also observed that less than one-third of libraries in her study indicated that their marketing campaigns are part of a larger marketing plan for the library.

A proper marketing plan includes steps to evaluate the effectiveness of a marketing campaign. Dubicki (2009) described this process as something that should be ongoing, not just at the end. The evaluation could include feedback gathered from measurable objectives or direct comments from patrons. For e-resources in particular, a basic measure would be analyzing pre- and post-campaign usage statistics. Fry (2014) pointed out limitations regarding usage statistics, such as the unreliability of vendor-provided data in terms of format compliance and consistency, and the volatile nature of content discovery via discovery services. Jotwani (2014) observed that marketing alone may or may not be responsible for increase or decrease in usage as there could be other factors that affect the usage statistics. In the end, despite the many confounding factors, Fry (2014) asserts that examining usage statistics is a meaningful way to assess the effectiveness of marketing campaigns for e-resources. If properly planned and executed, marketing does and can help in improving usage statistics (Jotwani, 2014).

There are a number of similar systematic studies on library marketing in other regions. Vasileiou & Rowley (2011) interviewed 25 academic librarians from 7 academic libraries in the United Kingdom on the promotion of e-books. They found evidence of marketing actions, but “what is plainly absent is an organized and strategic approach to promotion and marketing”. Ju (2006) evaluated the use of marketing tools and promotion experience in a large library system that consists of 3 branch libraries and more than 90 institutional libraries in China, and found that despite many activities, there is a lack of a complete marketing strategy at the organizational level.

The call to incorporate marketing into the library’s overall strategy has been put forward by a number of scholars. Duke and Tucker (2007) stated that libraries must develop a marketing plan that incorporates the library’s strategic plan as well as its mission and vision statements. Both Parker, Kaufman-Scarborough, and Parker (2007) and Robinson (2012) discussed this notion of adopting a marketing orientation for libraries, arguing that marketing should not be just a set of tactical activities, but rather a long-term strategic perspective. Germano (2010) observed that marketing is often an afterthought in libraries. At best, it is approached with enthusiasm but without coherence or strategy. At worst, marketing is deemed wholly irrelevant to organizational

goals. This lack of strategy in library marketing may be due to a number of factors. They include the lack of resources and expertise (Fry, 2014; Germano, 2010; McClelland, 2014), and also the absence of a marketing culture (Parker et al., 2007; Robinson, 2012).

Methodology

In Kennedy's (2010) content analysis of the 23 marketing campaigns, she used components of a typical marketing plan to guide her analysis and gave special consideration to the evaluation of marketing efforts. This article adopted a similar methodology in order to assess E-resources Discovery Week at HKBU Library in a systematic and comprehensive manner. Nine components of a marketing plan—Project Description, Current Market, SWOT Analysis, Target Market, Goals, Strategy, Action Plan, Measurement, & Assessment—from the book *Marketing your library's electronic resources: a how to do it manual for librarians* (Kennedy & LaGuardia, 2013) that Kennedy co-wrote were used. They provide a structure to the analysis and a starting point to devise a marketing strategy that goes beyond just one week.

Project Description

The percentage of HKBU Library expenditure on e-resources has been on the increase, especially since the implementation of an e-preferred policy for books in 2013. However, in an annual in-depth review on e-resources usage during the 2014-2015 academic year, the review team noticed a substantial drop in e-books usage. As usage statistics are crucial data providing justification for e-resources expenditure, it was recognized that this drop could have serious consequences in the long term. The team aimed to raise awareness of the library's e-resources in the university community through a week-long promotional campaign called E-resources Discovery Week, utilizing existing library resources and also incorporating training and promotion support from vendors/content providers.

Current Market

HKBU Library offers over 300 subscription-based databases/platforms to its staff and students. Although high-quality and reliable academic content is important for teaching, learning, and research in a university, patrons may perceive search engines such as Google to be easier to use compared to databases/platforms offered by the Library. In terms of existing promotional channels of library e-resources, whenever there is a new or upgraded e-resource available, a university-wide announcement via email is made. Additionally, these e-resources are introduced to students in various librarian-led workshops through the library's information literacy program. Occasionally, workshops conducted by external trainers/vendors may be arranged but the attendance is usually low.

SWOT Analysis

<p>Strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Library e-resources are carefully selected and reviewed by a dedicated library team in consultation with faculty members from all departments, based on teaching, learning, and research needs of the university • Through library subscriptions, students and staff can access a lot of high-quality scholarly content which are otherwise not free to the general public • Promotion is clearly mentioned in HKBU Library’s Strategic Plan 2020 (HKBU Library, 2014), as one of the directions listed is “Engage with stakeholders to promote awareness of the Library’s collections and services” 	<p>Weaknesses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Although they contain high-quality content, some of these library databases are not very user-friendly • The authentication process for accessing library e-resources from off-campus could be unintuitive and may cause confusion • Although promotion/marketing is mentioned in the Library Strategic Plan, the Library does not necessarily have sufficient human resources nor expertise to engage in such activities in a concerted manner
<p>Opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • With the problem of misinformation, especially the “fake news” phenomenon, the Library can take the opportunity to stand out and emphasize that library e-resources are authoritative and reliable • The adoption of a library search discovery layer in 2012 has made searching for library resources relatively easier, but there is still much room for improvement 	<p>Threats</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The ‘Googlization’ of information makes it very easy for patrons to search for information online. Many do not see the need to use the library’s e-resources • With many competing priorities and busy schedule, patrons do not have the time to learn about library e-resources

Target Market

Although this marketing campaign aimed to reach both staff and students in the university, the specific activities planned were more targeted at students. Moreover, although both undergraduate and postgraduate students were targeted, undergraduate students were considered the primary focus as they often were least aware of library e-resources. Finally, the campaign made no special effort to target particular subject areas as patrons from all disciplines were encouraged to join.

Goals

The immediate goal was to raise awareness that the Library subscribes to e-resources covering a wide range of subjects for students and staff to use. The medium-range goal was to increase the usage of library e-resources through such awareness, thus providing an important justification for

continued expenditure on e-resources. Finally, this one-week event was intended to help change the traditional perception of the Library as being primarily a repository for physical books, and encourage students and staff to make better use of library resources and services overall.

Strategy

As the campaign targeted students, especially undergraduate students, the team tried to organize activities that were both interesting and informative. In order to motivate students to participate, souvenirs and prizes were given out throughout the week. Essentially, the strategy was to let students know about the usefulness of library e-resources with games and prizes in a fun and relaxing way.

Action Plan

Staffing & Timeline

A core planning team of two librarians and two library assistants was formed in January 2016 to design the Library's very first E-resources Discovery Week, which took place on 14-17 March, 2016. In the following year, the same planning team organized the event on 13-18 March, 2017, but with substantial improvements based on experience from the first year. The discussion below will focus mostly on the second year event —E-resources Discovery Week 2017.

Program

The key components for E-resources Discovery Week 2017 are summarized in **Table 1**:

Table 1: Key components of the E-resources Discovery Week 2017

Component	Description
Mini-passport	A compact folded card which included details of all activities and instructions on how to enter the Grand Prize Draw by collecting three stamps.
Database Training Station	Five Database Training Stations staffed by vendor representatives were arranged each day from 12:30 pm to 6:00 pm. Participants could collect one stamp by visiting a Database Training Station and interacting with the representative.
Lunch & Learn Workshops	Ten topical workshops were conducted by vendor representatives. Two sessions were arranged from 12:30 pm to 2:30 pm each day with light lunch provided. Participants could collect two stamps by attending a Lunch & Learn session.
E-resources Poster Exhibition	The team designed 26 posters featuring the library's key databases and e-book collections. They were placed in high-traffic areas in the Library

	lobby during the week.
Feedback Survey	A 5-minute short survey was designed to collect participants' feedback. Participants needed to fill out this survey in order to enter the Grand Prize Draw.
Grand Prize Draw	Participants could enter the Grand Prize Draw once they collected three stamps on their mini-passport, filled in the feedback survey and dropped the Mini-Passport into the Grand Lucky Draw box.

Promotions on Campus

To publicize the week-long event, promotions via various channels on campus started about one week in advance. They included:

- University-wide announcements distributed through email
- Direct emails to listservs for students of specific programs - in cases where permissions were given
- In-person announcements in the classroom with permission from course instructors
- Promotional videos on the library digital signage and interactive kiosks around campus
- Posts on the Library Facebook page, which is the main social media platform used by the Library
- Promotional posters on notice boards around campus

Budget

The team secured financial support from the portion of library budget that was usually reserved for library event prizes. A total of HK\$6,213 was spent on printing of promotional materials (e.g. banners, backdrop, posters) and refreshments. The prizes in the Grand Prize Draw were all sponsored by the vendors.

Measurement and Assessment

When planning for E-resources Discovery Week 2017, the team put in extra effort in identifying ways to measure the effectiveness of the campaign. As a result, in order to collect direct feedback and comments regarding the various aspects (e.g. timing, logistics) of the campaign, the team designed a 5-minute survey using Qualtrics for the participants to complete. Other measures such as workshop attendance and prize draw participation were also identified and carefully compiled. Finally, e-resources usage statistics were retrieved for comparison and analysis.

A more detailed analysis of the measurement and assessment is followed in the next section.

Discussion

When assessing the effectiveness of a marketing campaign, it is important to keep in mind the original goal. As stated by Kennedy (2010), having a clearly stated goal for a marketing plan is important and thoughtful evaluation can ultimately inform a library if the campaign has helped to reach the goal. The team’s goal was to increase the usage of library e-resources through raising awareness, thus providing an important justification for continued expenditure on library e-resources. The evaluation provided the team with the necessary information needed to assess the impact of the marketing campaign in a systematic way and plan for the future.

Turnout/Participation Rate

There was a cumulative total of 195 participants recorded for the Lunch & Learn Workshops, averaging 20 participants per workshop. However, after further analysis, the number of unique participants for the Lunch & Learn Workshops was confirmed to be 104, suggesting that many participants attended more than one workshop. There were a cumulative total of 197 visits to the Database Training Stations. The total attendance at the Lunch & Learn Workshops and visits to the Database Training Stations should have collectively produced 587 stamps on the Mini-passports. However, there was a total of 114 valid Grand Prize Draw entries (Mini-passports) after duplicate check, equaling 342 stamps, suggesting that some students and staff may have attended the activities but did not collect any stamps or enter the Grand Prize Draw.

The number above came from the campaign in the second year, which had a higher turnout than the first year. However, when comparing the number against the University’s total enrolment, the campaign only reached a small fraction of the university community—a few hundred total participants compared to a total enrolment of around 11,000 full-time students on campus.

Feedback Survey Results

A total of 129 responses to the feedback survey were received, of which 114 responses were valid after excluding duplicated submissions and submissions made by unidentifiable or ineligible participants. Among the 114 survey respondents, 76 were undergraduate students, 34 were postgraduate students, two were Associate Degree students, and four were faculty or staff members. As shown in **Table 3**, participant distribution by Faculty/School generally aligns with the university enrolment figures, suggesting that the event promotion had been evenly received by the patrons across various departments.

Table 3: Participant distribution by Faculty/School/Academy

Response	Participant Count (%)	2016-2017 Enrolment Percentage
Faculty of Arts	20 (17.5%)	15.3%

School of Business	24(21.1%)	21.6%
School of Chinese Medicine	6(5.3%)	4.7%
School of Communication	15(13.2%)	15.7%
Faculty of Science	17(14.9%)	16.3%
Faculty of Social Sciences	27(23.7%)	23.0%
Academy of Visual Arts	1(0.9%)	3.4%
Other(e.g. Offices)	4 (3.5%)	--
Total	114(100%)	100%

Note. Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.

Five survey questions were designed to collect participants' perception of the usefulness of the activities. As shown in **Table 4**, participants reported a satisfaction rate (responded "Strongly agree" or "Somewhat agree") close to 100%, suggesting that the E-resources Discovery Week activities were useful to the participants. In particular, all of the participants reported that they would like to make better use of the library's e-resources after this event. In addition, a chi-square test of independence against significance threshold set at 0.05 was performed to determine if there is any significant relationship between types of students and their perception. The chi-square test results indicated that undergraduate students and postgraduate students did not differ significantly on their responses to the survey questions, which suggests that both types of students were satisfied with the activity design and the Lunch & Learn Workshop contents.

Table 4: Participants' responses towards the usefulness of this event

Question	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewh at disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
Overall, I enjoyed participating in the E-Resources Discovery Week activities	74 (64.9%)	40 (35.1%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	114 (100%)
The things I learned from this event are useful to my studies/research/work	79 (69.3%)	33 (29.0%)	2 (1.8%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	114 (100%)
Overall, do you find the Lunch & Learn activities you attended to be useful?	36 (43.4%)	43 (51.8%)	4 (4.8%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	83 (100%)
Overall, did you find it useful talking to the database trainers at the booths	47 (48.4%)	43 (44.3%)	7 (7.2%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	97 (100%)

Do you feel that you want to make greater use of the Library's e-resources after participating in the E-resources Discovery Week?	74 (65.5%)	39 (34.5%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	113 (100%)
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Note. Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.

Here are some selected comments from the respondents:

“This event is particularly useful to me as I’m going to do a research paper next year. It tells me something I did not know before. The staff on site is helpful and is willing to answer enquiries.”

“The content is very useful. It showed me new ways to search information. On the other hand, the guest speaker is very professional. He explained the searching method in a fun and easy way. The time of the workshop is also assigned perfectly. I would like to participate it again next time.”

“I want to have more chances to know about the database and have database training, which would be very helpful to my study.”

To better inform planning in future years, the team included two survey questions that were designed to seek participants’ comments towards the preferred timing of the event. The results showed that the lunchtime slot chosen for the Lunch & Learn Workshops is still the preferred choice by participants (81.93%), as compared with later mornings (2.41%), early/late afternoons (8.43%), and early evenings (7.23%).

Regarding the timing of the whole campaign, the feedback received is slightly mixed. The top three choices include March (same as this time) (41.2%), January or February (earlier in the second semester) (30.7%), and September or October (earlier in the first semester) (20.2%). In fact, during the planning stage, hosting the event in the first semester was seriously considered to enable patrons to learn about these e-resources earlier. However, it did not materialize as the team did not have the time and resources to host a large-scale event like this during the busiest time of the academic year in September and October.

Three survey questions were related to participants’ perception towards the effectiveness of the promotional efforts. As shown in **Table 5**, close to 80% of the participants found the promotional materials to be either extremely effective or very effective. The perceived effectiveness was even higher for the Mini-Passports (around 85%) and the stamp collection process (around 91%). The chi-square test of independence also indicates no significant difference in responses to questions listed in **Table 5** between undergraduate students and postgraduate students.

Table 5: Participants' responses towards the effectiveness of the promotion

Response	Extremely effective	Very effective	Moderately effective	Slightly effective	Not effective at all	Total
Overall, how effective were the promotional materials (e.g., banners, database posters, web pages, and digital signage)	36 (31.6%)	55 (48.3%)	20 (17.5%)	3 (2.6%)	0 (0%)	114 (100%)
How effective was the mini passport in raising your awareness of the event	49 (43.0%)	49 (43.0%)	14 (12.3%)	1 (0.9%)	1 (0.9%)	114 (100%)
In particular, how effective was the "stamp collection" process in motivating your participation?	62 (54.4%)	42 (36.8%)	9 (7.9%)	1 (0.9%)	0 (0%)	114 (100%)

Note. Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.

Although the results in **Table 5** show that the promotional efforts were generally perceived as effective, compared to the near 100% satisfaction rate towards the usefulness of the event, it seems that the participants considered the promotional efforts insufficient. In fact, quite a few participants commented on the promotion of the event. Here are some selected comments:

"The promotion on those events can be more intensive. Because I just knew those events by my friends. There should be more promotion all around the campus."

"There may be more promotions or broadcast of this activity."

"Promotion is not enough, maybe try to send email before the event."

"Since not many students attended the workshops, it may be better to adopt more strategies for promotion."

Based on **Table 4** and **Table 5**, it seems participants found the activities to be highly useful but suggested the team to put in more efforts in promoting the activities.

E-resources Usage Statistics

One of the most direct measurements to assess the effectiveness of a marketing campaign for e-resources is the e-resources usage statistics (Dubicki, 2009). The team reviewed the vendor-provided usage statistics of e-resources from the past three academic years (2014-2017), focusing on those that were promoted both in E-resources Discovery Week 2016 and 2017.

Table 6 highlights a number of e-resources whose usage was monitored. Overall, the usage of a number of major multidisciplinary databases increased in the past two years as compared to the 2014/2015 academic year, specifically Web of Science by 63% and Scopus by 37%. There was also an increase in usage across a number of major e-book platforms—MyiLibrary by 124%, Ebrary by 174%, and across a number of online reference platforms—Gale Virtual Reference Library by 50% and Encyclopedia Britannica by 310%. Yet, the usage of some subject-specific databases dropped, for example, Clarity English by 50% and WiseNews by 21%. It is difficult to discern a pattern as there were many confounding factors that could affect the usage, as pointed out by Fry (2014). For example, the increase of e-book usage could be just due to the purchase of more e-books on that platform by the library over time. The decrease of subject-specific databases could be due to changes in academic programs, courses or assignments, or the subscription of alternative e-resources. In addition, content inclusion or cancellation within a database platform (e.g. ProQuest, EBSCOhost) and platform upgrades in these databases/platforms could also affect the usage. At this stage, the team only considered three years of usage data and two years' worth of data from running the campaign. It would be more meaningful to examine the usage statistics over a longer period of time with the campaign running every year. This can be considered for future research.

Table 6: Usage statistics of selected e-resources

E-resource	Measurement	2014/2015	2015/2016	2016/2017
WiseNews	Total click	690,902	649,591	438,686
Factiva	Search	9,152	20,455	11,007
CNKI	Search	200,704	180,430	180,719
Scopus	Search	8,099	11,307	10,987
Web of Science	Search	28,117	50,528	40,898
MyiLibrary	Successful Sections Request	145,662	282,088	370,312
Ebrary	Successful Sections Request	132,979	246,638	485,979
Clarity English	Session	n/a	1,187	605
Encyclopedia Britannica Online	Search	2,268	8,385	10,228

Gale Virtual Reference Library (Gale)	Successful Sections Request	2,716	4,421	3,729
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Overall, the survey results showed that participants found the program of E-resources Discovery Week to be useful. Suggested improvements regarding the logistics of the event include the timing of the campaign and the scale and intensity of promotion. Moreover, the turnout rate showed that although useful, this marketing campaign only reached a small fraction of the university community. It could potentially reach many more patrons in the university community. Finally, the e-resources usage statistics showed that while usage for multidisciplinary databases increased, usage for subject-specific databases decreased. Although the impact on usage statistics is mixed at this point, the team believes that compiling more data in the coming years will definitely help draw a more comprehensive picture.

Conclusion

After two years of running, E-resources Discovery Week has become a recurring annual marketing campaign at HKBU Library. This is the beginning of making a concerted effort to reach the team's goal of raising awareness of library e-resources in the university community and in turn increasing usage. In order to have a sustainable impact, it is essential for the library to develop an overall marketing plan. A library-wide plan can help with incorporating marketing activities (e.g. promoting e-resources) into as many aspects of the library as possible and making marketing a priority. The team cannot do it alone. This requires the buy-in and support of senior management within the library. As mentioned before, some of the main challenges for a library-wide marketing plan include the lack of resources and expertise in marketing, and the absence of a marketing culture within the organization (Fry, 2014; Germano, 2010; McClelland, 2014; Parker et al., 2007; Robinson, 2012). These two challenges do resonate with the HKBU Library to a certain extent. For example, the four library staff who planned E-resources Discovery Week did not have any formal training in marketing, though one staff did have excellent graphic design skills who was highly valued not only for this marketing campaign, but also a wide range of promotional tasks within the library. This fact alone demonstrates the importance of marketing-related skills for the library. However, training opportunities focused on marketing-related skills within the library context are relatively few. Topics such as media design and social media are marketing-related but are not often seen as core to library staff development. In addition to training, changes at the organization level are needed. The team therefore welcomed a recent proposal by library senior management to form a Marketing and Communication Committee for the library. The Committee will be tasked with overseeing and coordinating the Library's various promotional activities across all units and on all platforms. This is a promising development towards strategizing library marketing in a more consistent and concerted manner, so a marketing campaign such as the E-resources Discovery Week could be continuously improved and sustained.

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