

PR for Academic Libraries: Focus on the Faculty

by Robert H. Hu

The faculty is the driving force of most law school libraries. Instituting a public relations campaign that caters to faculty needs will illustrate the fundamental importance of the library. A successful faculty-centric PR strategy not only solidifies the library's position with the law school but also generates buzz and recognition among the university-wide community.

It's All About the Faculty

In the world of academic law libraries, the law school faculty is crucial to enhancing the library's image.

The faculty is a key constituent of the library.

Two groups form the core user communities in the academic setting: the faculty and students. Other users, like practitioners and local residents, may or may not be central to the library's mission, depending on the policy of the institution. However, the faculty, as one of two core user groups, is essential in defining the library's purpose.

The faculty is a steady user group of the library.

Law students, the other core user group of the library, have only a temporary association with the library during their law school careers. By contrast, faculty members will likely stay around and thereby establish a permanent relationship with the library. In research-oriented law schools, the faculty may be the most frequent users of the library.

The faculty possesses great influence over the library's operation.

In any law school, the faculty can and will exert its influence over library decisions regarding the budget, personnel, collections and other policies. Certainly such influence will vary from one institution to another, depending on the organization's structure and dynamics.

The faculty has clout with students regarding the library.

Not only are faculty members library users themselves, they also influence the attitude of other library users. Because of their status and close contact with students, faculty members are in a superior position to sway the opinions and attitudes of their students toward the library.

Some Proven Ideas

Every library is unique. So a successful PR initiative must fit into the library's particular circumstances. It may take trial and error to get to the right formula. At Texas Tech University, the law school library recently initiated several satisfying PR strategies that catered to its faculty's needs.

Faculty orientation. Last year Texas Tech University School of Law made a concerted effort to lower the faculty-student ratio by hiring five new faculty positions. The arrival of the newcomers presented a unique marketing opportunity for the library to make an impression and initiate a friendly rapport with them from the outset. So the library developed a new faculty orientation program consisting of two parts.

For part one, the library mailed out a "welcome packet" to the new faculty members as soon as they were hired. The welcome packet contained a congratulatory letter from the library director, including a list of key library contacts and the law school Web site. The packet also included a library brochure describing the programs and services offered to the faculty; a set of state, local and campus maps for relocation planning; and a staff-compiled guide to local services and resources.

For part two, the library held an orientation meeting with the new faculty after their arrival on campus. During the meeting, the librarians, computing staff and the faculty members introduced themselves and mingled over refreshments in a casual, friendly atmosphere. The librarians then discussed some frequently asked questions, such as how to handle mail and set up computer accounts. The librarians led the faculty on a library tour, highlighting key staff areas and major points of interest. (Due to scheduling difficulties, the library repeated step two until all new faculty were oriented.) The new faculty appreciated the library's efforts to make their transitions easier. The program worked so well that the law school committee responsible for new faculty orientation contacted the library for advice when it was developing its own orientation program.

Faculty enrichment. Texas Tech University's law library recently hired a new director, who immediately made changes to enhance the organization. The library secured additional funds, added positions to the staff, acquired new materials, adopted a new school-wide e-mail system and installed multimedia technology in the classrooms.

All these exciting changes were happening fast, but much of the faculty was too busy to keep up. So the library set up an enrichment program to regularly inform the faculty of library events and train them on specific topics when needed. To draw a large audience, the library offered the initial program around noon and provided a free lunch. During the program, the librarians introduced new library staff to the faculty and reported on new items to the library. The library staff demonstrated how to use and access several informational databases accessible from the library's Web site as well as a few Web sites useful for legal scholars. Everyone enjoyed the program (and the food too); even the dean came and stayed briefly.

Given the program's successful debut, the library decided to offer it again, with a similar format but different content each time. The enrichment program is now a regular function each semester. As a result, the library gains publicity and recognition by the faculty.

Faculty publications display. Most law schools have a place to exhibit publications authored by their faculty. The display, usually managed by the library, is a good way to promote the faculty's accomplishments and generate positive feelings about the library.

Because Texas Tech University's law school library never had a publications display, the library created one. It began with one small display case. The library staff solicited and received several faculty publications. The small display case filled up so quickly that other published items could not be housed. And the faculty kept sending even more materials. Overwhelmed by the response, the library looked for a larger exhibit area to accommodate the growing number of publications they were sent.

The library was intrigued with the idea of a wall-to-wall, custom-built glass exhibit case placed in the library's foyer. The display would brighten up the library's front entrance while giving maximum exposure to the publications on display. Although that exhibit would be costly, the library was convinced that the benefits to the library would make costs worthwhile. When the new display case was finally built, the faculty and students alike were pleased and eager to supply additional publications to the exhibit. The faculty now has a place to showcase their scholarship to students, colleagues and visitors. And the library generates more publicity and goodwill from the faculty.

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Other Libraries and PR Strategies

Other types of law libraries can adapt and tailor the PR ideas mentioned above to their specific libraries. For example, as technology transforms law practice and information management, attorneys and judges, like their academic colleagues, face a critical need to learn how to use new tools and products to work effectively. To meet such needs, a firm library can offer orientation to its new associates;

a court library could set up an orientation program to train its junior judges. Additionally, just as law school faculty enjoy displaying their publications, attorneys and judges alike would benefit from publicity about their work products. The private law library, for example, could draw attention to the firm's big cases recently litigated to raise the firm's visibility to current and future clients.

PR campaigns will differ from library to library. Yet the common thread of all successful PR strategies is that they are always tailored to the uniqueness of the individual libraries and are specifically focused on the libraries' key constituents. Sticking to those tenants of public relations will result in goodwill and publicity.

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