

Marketing

Libraries and word of mouth marketing

Consumers are bombarded with advertising messages, so are turning to people they trust: other consumers. **Rachel Smith** explains how this can work for libraries.



HOW CAN WE get people talking about libraries and information services? Do your customers act as advocates for your library and can you support and encourage them to do so? This article will explore word of mouth marketing in relation to library services and present a case study of our experience at Durham University, focusing on the Library 24/7 campaign, which won a Silver Award at the 2010 CILIP PPRG Marketing Excellence Awards. Looking at how other libraries are adopting word of mouth techniques to market library services, our exploration will close by placing this in the context of wider discussions about library advocacy.

Harnessing everyday communication

Word of mouth marketing, as defined by the American Word of Mouth Marketing Association, is 'giving people a reason to talk about your products and services and making it easier for that conversation to take place' (Womma, 2007). An umbrella term which encompasses a range of practices, from simply asking customers to 'tell their friends' to high-profile buzz marketing stunts, word of mouth marketing harnesses our everyday communication methods to promote services and products. Remarkable on the increased momentum behind word of mouth marketing in the last 10 years, Mark Hughes notes four main factors (2005, pp. 25-26). Firstly, rising 'ad clutter' means that people are bombarded with hundreds of marketing messages everyday, reducing the impact of advertising in general, while the increasing costs of using traditional print and broadcast media are becoming prohibitive. Consequently, consumers are turning away from advertising to messages they can rely on, communications from ordinary people. Lastly, these one-to-one, consumer-to-consumer communications in turn are being amplified and accelerated by new internet technologies. Word of mouth marketing is immediate, open and personal, qualities which escape traditional advertising channels.

But what has this got to do with libraries? Most libraries engage in a range of marketing activities, such as using traditional marketing media, promoting services through face-to-face encounters and using online channels like websites and social media profiles. Word of mouth marketing incorporates all of these elements, but is targeted to start and support conversations between the library and its users, and conversations between customers. By providing an experience that people want to share with their friends, educating customers about the services the library offers, and giving customers ways to share information, libraries can encourage the spread of word of mouth.

Word of mouth marketing techniques that libraries can use include:

- Doing 'something different' to start conversations
- Organising customer events and hosting discussion groups
- Using testimonials and endorsements
- Referral programmes (providing an incentive for customers who tell a friend)
- Using online forums and social networking sites (i.e. Facebook, Twitter, Flickr)
- Face-to-face advocacy.

By using these marketing techniques, customers can be encouraged to share the message about library services with other potential users through their everyday conversations, increasing customer engagement and library usage.

Round the clock

Durham University Library's 24/7 publicity campaign, which was awarded in 2010 and repeated in 2011, is a good example of how word of mouth marketing techniques can be effectively employed as part of a library marketing strategy. In early 2010, the senior management team at Durham University Library took the decision to open two library sites on a 24-hour basis for six weeks during the main University examination period. This was prompted by customer feedback calling

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Fig 1. 'Think responsibly'. Library 24/7 poster, Durham University Library.

for extended opening hours, including a Facebook group and National Student Survey responses, and marked the library's first 24/7 opening period. The library's communications and marketing group firstly needed some indication of how the service might be used, so during spring 2010 we ran a series of quick polls on our website and through Durham University's virtual learning environment. Questions such as: 'If the library was open 24/7, what time would you use it until?' hinted towards the launch of 24-hour opening, without formally announcing this to our users. These 'teasers' got people talking about whether the library was going to open its doors 24/7 and customer responses to the online polls fed into the planning of the service, which developed over the spring term.

As operating procedures started to fall into place, members of library staff began to communicate the decision to open on a 24-hour basis to key internal stakeholders, such as the academic departments and the Health and Safety Service. We were particularly keen to get the buy-in of the Durham Student's Union (DSU), which was initially concerned about the Library 24/7 trial due to issues over student welfare. Working closely with representatives from the DSU, other student welfare groups and the university counselling service, we put together training sessions to raise awareness of student well-being amongst library staff and welfare became the centre of our publicity campaign. Using provocative taglines such as 'Please think responsibly' (Fig 1) to promote healthy study habits and 'Don't muck it up!' (Fig 2) in relation to levels of litter left in the library, our campaign, as noted by the Marketing Excellence Awards judging panel, recognised 'the negative aspects on 24/7 opening as well as the positive'. By responding to the Student Union's concerns in this way, we were able to develop a strong working relationship with them and we opened up the debate about student welfare during exam time to involve other members of the student body.

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The need to communicate changes to library services over the Library 24/7 trial was a second challenge. We decided to collate all the information customers would need in one place and put together a set of webpages providing comprehensive information about the extended opening period. The web copy formed the basis for other written marketing materials, including posters, flyers and letters to departments, and all other communications referred back to full details on the library webpages. This meant that staff members from across the different library sites could spread the word about Library 24/7 on the service desks, creating library notices and liaising with departments in the knowledge that full details were freely accessible to our customers on the library website.

The internet, seen by many within the industry as 'crucial to the process' of word of mouth marketing (Taylor, 2005), became a central part of our campaign. We posted regular updates on our social media sites and news stories on the library homepage publicising Library 24/7 and responding to issues as they arose and posted regular updates on our social media sites. We also encouraged people to reciprocate this engagement by getting in touch with us through our online channels, receiving over 3,000 individual pieces of feedback about the trial in total through email, our online forum, quick polls, social media and Library 24/7 survey. By prompting and supporting conversations through all of our marketing activities, from the striking imagery and consistent branding used within all campaign materials to building relationships with the main student newspaper and radio station to publicise the trial, word of mouth marketing became the focus of the Library 24/7 campaign.

Creating a 'buzz'

The communications and marketing team at Durham University Library effectively harnessed the potential of our customers as a marketing force throughout the Library 24/7 trial period in 2010. However, an advantage in creating a 'buzz' surrounding Library 24/7 was the fact that our target customer group, undergraduate students, live and work in a close-knit community. Camila A. Alire, discussing the University of New Mexico Libraries' word of mouth marketing strategy to change the poor image of the library amongst faculty staff, notes: 'Word-of-mouth marketing works very well for academic libraries' because of the 'collegial type of environment' provided by universities (2007, p. 547). So, can this work for other libraries?

Looking at available case studies, it seems that libraries from different sectors are beginning to use word of mouth marketing techniques as part of their publicity campaigns. Hertfordshire Libraries' campaign for the Graphic Novels festival, which won a Gold Marketing Excellence Award in 2009, was particularly innovative in encouraging the artists involved in the events programme to spread the word through their personal blogs and social media accounts, giving the talks and workshops industry credibility. By becoming part of the online conversations of graphic novel fans, Hertfordshire were able to overcome corporate restrictions on the use of social media. Peggy Barber and Linda Wallace, in their 2010 book *Building a Buzz: libraries*



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and word-of-mouth marketing, similarly encourage libraries 'to be part of the conversation' by going 'to where the conversations are happening' (p. 27). Documenting a project funded by a 2007 Library Services and Technology Act grant to train Illinois librarians from public, academic, school and special libraries in word of mouth marketing techniques, Barber and Wallace present campaigns by 15 of the libraries involved, as well as successful examples from around the US. Wyoming Libraries' striking reinvention of the iconic Mudflap Girl image to market a new vehicle repair information database (2010, pp. 27-29 – Fig 3) and the development of Town and Country Public Library's mascot Watson, the 'Golden Information Retriever', which aimed to 'increase the library's presence in the community' (2010, pp. 62-63), are just two examples. Although there has been little formal research on libraries and word of mouth marketing, these case studies suggest that employing word of mouth techniques in marketing library services is a growing trend.

Beyond the walls of the library

Looking at Durham University Library's Library 24/7 campaign, we explored how word of mouth marketing

techniques were put into practice over the course of the 24-hour opening period in 2010. Having successfully employed word of mouth marketing techniques to promote the Library 24/7 service, Durham University Library is also looking at ways to increase engagement with and awareness of other key library campaigns. For our October 2011 induction campaign, for example, we're planning to get new undergraduate students talking about the library by replacing our induction tours programme with a pirate-themed treasure hunt!

Briefly exploring a range of case studies from both the UK and USA, we have seen that word of mouth marketing techniques can be used to enhance library marketing campaigns and move the message beyond the walls of the library building to the wider community of library users. The idea of advocates campaigning for the library is gaining currency, prompted by the current socio-political climate and cuts in public spending. As libraries are coming under increasing pressure to demonstrate the impact, usage and value of their services, perhaps we should begin to look towards our customers, and word of mouth marketing, as a potential marketing force. [1]

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Fig 2. (left) 'Don't muck it up!'. Library 24/7 poster, Durham University Library.

Fig 3. (below) 'We're shifting gears!'. Bookmark, Wyoming Libraries (reproduced with permission of Wyoming Libraries).

