Promoting Library Services at Fintel Library (Roanoke College)

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The renowned American Civil War historian and novelist Shelby Foote once said, “A university is just a group of buildings gathered around a library.” While Foote’s opinion is sure to be met with agreement and high-fives throughout the world of academic librarians, its validation can only come through the use of libraries by campus communities. Without use, college libraries are of no benefit to anyone.

Roanoke College’s Fintel Library considers promotion of the library to be an ongoing objective, not only because of the manner in which libraries’ resources and offerings evolve, but also because of the parallel evolution in faculty and students’ information needs. And that’s to say nothing of the four-year cycle during which student bodies are almost entirely recycled.

The objective of promoting the library, especially to students who might be intimidated or unfamiliar with the library’s offerings, needs to be ongoing. But how do you promote a service to someone who doesn’t come by to see what you have to offer?

Easy. Do what the corporate world does! Create a brand, advertise, and place your promotion tools in areas where your target audience is likely to be found. Then be ready to absorb the traffic and the increase in service requests that your success might create.

After considering the importance of a brand, Fintel Library created a logo and an accompanying slogan to be used on all promotional materials. These materials have included posters, bookmarks, newsletters, giveaways, a white board, etc. What follows is a brief summary of how each of these things is used to promote the campus library.

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Giveaways
Everyone appreciates free stuff—especially if it is relevant to campus life. We’ve given away items such as breath mints, coffee mugs, and tri-colored highlighters to visitors who check out three or more items at our lending services desk. Ideally, the giveaway should be something that is used over and over in the presence of others who might be interested in getting their own free giveaways.

Newsletters
During the fall and spring semesters, the library puts out regular newsletters, promoting its services and attempting to project a laid-back, yet informative style of communication that will interest students. These newsletters are displayed on all floors of campus residence halls, sent to each and every faculty member in academic departments, and distributed at the lending services desk to anyone who checks out items or requests a newsletter. Features include new acquisitions, articles about the various electronic databases to which the library subscribes, library hours, employment opportunities, and general information about the library’s offerings.

Posters
The library displays posters in various places on campus. The material they’re printed on, whether or not they’re framed, the dimensions at which they’re printed, and the locations in which they are displayed all depend on the specific nature of the posters.

By way of example, there are two posters displayed in this article. The “More time to play” poster...
has been framed and displayed inside the library as well as in choice places in other campus locations so as to impart general information, bringing attention to all the services and benefits to be found at Fintel. The “Get out from behind the 8-ball” poster gets more widespread distribution, at smaller dimensions, and is displayed all over campus—from news boards to bathroom stall doors. It highlights a specific service (research assistance) and is displayed during the last half of academic semesters, when that service is in greater need.

Other tools of promotion include bookmarks, a white board displayed prominently at our lending services desk, occasional faculty newsletters, and a dedicated column on our webpage highlighting current happenings. Additionally, topics of interest are promoted using traditional book displays. One year, a book signing event was hosted by the library.

Book Displays

Back in the mid 1990s, Roanoke College faculty and staff brainstormed various ways to encourage informal academic conversations around the campus, both indoors and outside. We wanted to promote a learned atmosphere that extended beyond the classroom.

Fintel Library already had a “New Book” display just in front of the central staircase, as well as an online “New Book List” divided by academic area. To help encourage academic conversations, an additional book display to advertise campus lectures was begun on an informal basis; it is set up on a small round table closer to the front door and circulation counter. One of the reference librarians voluntarily checks the campus daily online Events Calendar during lulls in reference questions. She then chooses an upcoming event and prints out the announcement with time and place information; searches the catalog for ten to twelve relevant items (books, documents, or media); pulls the items from the shelves; selects the three to seven most visually appealing items; and places them and the Announcement printout on the table. The whole process takes about twenty minutes, usually split up into segments of five to ten minutes per step (depending on the level of traffic at the reference desk). Occasionally we also provide printouts of a more extensive bibliography on the display table, usually for larger lectures held in our gymnasium or auditorium.

Sometimes the special library display is prompted by a campus request. Our professors usually sponsor the lectures by visiting speakers, so a recent faculty request was for a display to help advertise a campus lecture by the visiting author of Hello Kitty: The Remarkable Story of Sanrio and the Billion Dollar Feline Phenomenon. Other talks by visiting speakers have included “Ethical Business in the Twenty-First Century,” “The Real 60s,” and “Substance of the Faith.” The RC Theatre also regularly asks for a display related to the current student production on campus. The theatre provides a large poster for the play and the library displays it with either a biography or collection of plays by the playwright, reviews of past productions of the play, or a DVD of professional performances of the play.

Another student “production” was featured this April when the 2008 issue of the campus literary magazine On Concept’s Edge appeared. Seven past issues, along with the brand-new issue, were displayed on the table, with book-
marks inside each one bearing the slogan “Check me out.” During a week when there are no lectures scheduled, we pick a topic of current or local interest. This academic year, during the week leading up to a lunar eclipse, we displayed our most recent astronomy book purchases alongside an article clipped from our local newspaper outlining the best time and spot to view the lunar display in Roanoke.

We just started keeping some statistics during March/April 2008 to see how many items are checked out from the special display table. When a library patron brings a book from the display to the circulation counter for checkout, the circulation attendant simply places the “Check me out” bookmark into a cardboard box. When the librarian takes down the current display, she collects any bookmarks in the box and tallies them up. We had ten displays during those months, featuring sixty-two books, two e-book printouts, seven DVDs, and one journal issue (the whole issue was devoted to the special topic). Six books and one DVD from the display were checked out. Anecdotally, several patrons stopped to look at the displays and thumb through the books; I often had to rearrange the items so that they were once again opened to the page that I wanted to feature for the display. In addition, one professor emailed to thank us and raved about the large crowd that had attended the lecture that we “advertised” with our special library display.

**Book Signing Event**

The history department on campus hosted a book-signing reception for one of the history professors, and a colleague and I attended. We enjoyed it so much that we wanted to host a similar event in the library for all faculty who had published books. This quickly expanded to include our Kandinsky Trio and Roanoke College Choir, both of whom have published CDs of their music. Planning began several months in advance of the date.

Family Weekend is held in the fall each year about five weeks into the semester. This seemed to be an ideal time to host the event, as more people would be on campus and we could piggyback on their publicity for the weekend. There are many activities scheduled beginning Friday evening and ending on Sunday. The event was scheduled for Friday afternoon from three to five p.m. on Family Weekend. We had a steady stream of people, including parents, students, and some staff.

Our event was included in the publicity for Family Weekend that was mailed to all parents/families of our students. The Resource Development Office, which coordinated Family Weekend, made a sign to place outside the front of the library. They also made nametags for the faculty. An ad announcing the event appeared in the *Roanoke Times* newspaper.
Participation from the faculty was solicited through our daily campus newsletter, the WebAnnouncer. The dean’s office and bookstore gave us book titles written by faculty. Despite our best efforts, though, some faculty still did not know about the call for participation. We accommodated several at the last minute with additional tables.

We have a fairly large open space near the entrance to the library, which we used to set up tables for the authors/faculty to sit at with stacks of their books. The tables were skirted and a tent sign on each table stated the author’s name and book/CD title. The refreshment table was also in this area.

The large reference desk/counter also near the entrance was used as the Roanoke College Bookstore cash register and storage area for additional copies of the books. The bookstore accepted cash, checks, or credit cards. A member of the bookstore staff ordered multiple copies of the books and CDs and provided nice pens for the signing. He and one assistant handled the money transactions on the day of the event.

We spent about $250 on refreshments, which included fruit and vegetable trays, cheese and crackers, nuts, bottled water, and punch. All were provided by our campus dining services, and the library staff enjoyed the leftovers the following week.

Textbooks to monographs to CDs. Religion, calculus, poetry, local history. The books and CDs represented were as varied as the faculty interests. The best sellers were the music CDs by the Kandinsky Trio and the Roanoke College choir and a monograph on the civil war. We received many positive comments from the faculty and attendees. The Kandinsky Trio music CD playing in the background helped to make it a lovely event. The event certainly highlighted the library during Family Weekend.

Academic libraries benefit from library promotion just as public libraries do. We want to encourage faculty and staff as well as students to learn more about speakers on campus, to stay current in their areas of interest, to relax with a recent film, and to connect with a real, hardback book once in awhile. While it’s not easy to quantitatively measure the effects of promoting the library to the campus community, our library staff is very confident that promotion of the library enhances the experience many people have at Roanoke College in their pursuit of information. We look forward to continuing to promote the library with innovation and enthusiasm.