Getting Law Students into the Law Library: The University of Michigan succeeds with a plan

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The University of Michigan succeeds with a plan

By Jennifer Selby

Faced with a typical challenge today for many academic law libraries—making law students more aware of what the library at their schools can do to help them—the University of Michigan Law Library responded by working to develop a whole new marketing plan. As law librarians in this digital age, how can we effectively and efficiently communicate the role of libraries and librarians?

The goal of the University of Michigan Law Library’s Awareness Campaign was to raise the consciousness of law students about the many ways in which librarians here can help them succeed as students now and as lawyers later. We sought to increase the number of students using the library. We wanted to get them physically into the library, and, once here, we wanted to increase students’ use of the library’s services: reference and circulation services; research consultations; our multitude of web-based resources, including our online research guides, book lists, and tutorials; group study rooms, etc. Not only did we strive to create and promote a campaign throughout 2011 that raised students’ awareness but we also understood and purposefully set out to create tools that we could continue to use over many years.

Law Library Director Margaret Leary says that, “[t]his campaign did much more than provide us with eye-catching posters and useful slogans. It changed the way we perceive our relationship with our students. We can’t wait for them to ask us, we can’t wait for them to ‘walk in’ to our library or onto our website. We must push out, when they need it, specific useful tools. We must make more face-to-face contact, be where they are. And they need to recognize us—perhaps because of our MLawLibrary pins, but better yet because they met us at orientation or saw our faces on the posters.”

Getting the Program Off the Ground

The idea to target our efforts more precisely and professionally to our law students began with Leary. It was her initiative to informally ask the law school’s special counsel for communication for advice. Leary’s approach was two-fold: how does the library staff make law students more aware of what the library could do for them? And, how can we more effectively communicate the role of libraries and librarians in this digital age?

The counsel responded enthusiastically, and, within two months, the library held two meetings with communications staff, including a graphic designer. In addition to Leary, the librarians in this newly formed marketing/public relations group included the two assistant directors and the heads of units that work directly with students and faculty: reference and faculty services, circulation services, and electronic and systems services.

Coming Up With a Plan

We developed the following plan, which evolved into the University of Michigan Law Library Awareness Campaign:

- A totally new and fresh approach to presenting the law library to the law school
- Short, quick, and eye-catching phrases, together with professional photos that personalized the law librarians and made them identifiable
- Large movie-style posters mounted to the walls of halls frequented by law students and smaller versions of the posters placed on bulletin boards throughout the law school on a rotating basis
- Pins for library staff to wear
- A newly revamped law library bookmark and faculty services brochure, incorporating librarian photos and other images used in the poster campaign
- A new logo to help us brand the library’s functions and services, including letterhead, handouts, library website, and new pins
- A targeted and proactive approach to law students, beginning with orientation for 1L’s

Over the next five months, the library marketing group worked closely with the communications staff to develop and produce finished products. This process presented a unique opportunity for the law librarians to develop close working relationships with the excellent and accomplished law school communications staff. It was a truly gratifying experience, and we were fortunate to have access to skilled and talented staff. The counsel used its expertise and creativity to produce catchy, pithy slogans for our new poster campaign. As head of reference and faculty services, I had the opportunity to work closely with the graphic designer on the law school staff. I acted as liaison between the two groups, presenting drafts of work to the librarians and conveying our feedback to the communications staff.
Putting the Plan into Effect

The poster campaign included a personalized poster for each reference librarian (five), seven posters focusing on the value of law libraries, and two "Welcome Law Students" posters. The personalized posters for each reference librarian included name, title, and degrees held by each person, along with the slogan: "We're information experts. Really. They just call us librarians."

The seven "value" posters also riffed on the "really" theme and included the following slogans:

- Make your research easier. Really. Let's talk about it.
- We're known all over the world. Really. And not just for our green carpet.
- It's a toolbox. Really. It just looks like a library.
- You'll just Google it. Really? And then what?
- You can study here too. Really. Get your latte to go.
- We're laid back. Really. And our carrels make great study spots.

The "Welcome Law Students" posters emphasized the law library as not only a quiet place to study but also a place to get help with any legal research questions, including 1L research assignments.

The movie-style posters of the librarians and values were produced and mounted on the walls in August prior to the beginning of the fall semester. The communications staff presented a proposal (which we excitedly accepted) for location of the posters in the law school, which included two hallways used constantly by law students and the entrance of the underground law library from the law school's reading room. Smaller versions of both the librarian posters and the "value" posters were also placed on a dozen bulletin boards throughout the law school. Library staff is in charge of rotating the posters on the bulletin board weekly for fuller exposure of all of the posters. For a slideshow of the posters, see: http://tinyurl.com/3uymz2h.

Other aspects of our campaign included finalizing such new special products as the MLawLibrary pins, MLawLibrary minibooks of Post-it Notes, and bookmarks. We planned a new way to orient students, which involved all reference librarians (rather than the director only) and included a library-sponsored pizza lunch at which the librarians mingled with students. We rewrote and refreshed the existing brochure for faculty, "Services for Law School Faculty." We used our new logo to rebranded letterhead, guides, and handouts.

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We also implemented new proactive measures as part of our campaign, which included promoting a new guide covering exam study guides two weeks before exams via the law school's student portal; the portal pushes emails to law students. We also provided free bottles of water and coffee in the library before and during exams. Another new proactive measure was ensuring that the 1L legal practice faculty was aware of the relevant library online tutorials before they assigned a particular research problem.

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Reaping the Rewards

The response from the law students was extremely positive. (Our patrons are predominately our own law students because we do not serve a large population of other patrons, such as practitioners and non-law students.) We saw a jump in several of the major measures of the use of the library or its service measures. For example, the number of reference questions answered (in person, phone, email, and chat) was up 36.7 percent as reported in April 2011 from April 2010. The number of group study room bookings went up 29.3 percent in this same time period, as did the number of research consultations (up 31.3 percent) and instruction sessions in law school classes, seminars, clinics, and student-edited journals (up 90.9 percent). The law library website page views went up 73 percent.

The librarians also experienced high levels of personal feedback from the law students, faculty, and staff. The posters especially created a buzz and newly charged interest in the law library and the librarians, as best summed up by a law student who responded when I asked how she heard about the law library's research consultation services: "I saw your faces on the posters!"

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