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# It's more than just books: working with a corporate marketing team to promote library services



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What do students really need to know when they first encounter the library and how should we tell them?

We knew that we had to review our promotional and publicity material – we had a new Director, a new vision and a new sense of purpose. Moreover, both our service (Library and Learning Services) and our buildings (Library and Learning Centres) had been renamed, rendering much of our existing information confusing with its references to Learning Support Services and Learning Resource Centres.

So we set up an internal working group to rethink and revamp our publicity. The group consisted of library staff from all grades, each of whom had responded to an initial email asking for expressions of interest. However, whereas recent guides and other material had been written and designed entirely in-house, this time it was decided to involve our university's marketing services team as well. Consequently, we have been able to harness a fully professional approach to our publicity and the result has not only been a set of lively and attractive guides but also a fascinating insight

into another way of working. And perhaps most importantly, the process has forced us to reflect upon some of the assumptions that we make as librarians about how we should convey information to our users.

#### **SHORT-TERM OR LONG-TERM ?**

At the first meeting of our group we invited the communications officer and one of the graphic designers in the marketing department to come and speak to us. In the weeks that followed they effectively became part of our group and acted as the main points of contact between us and their colleagues. However, at the meeting an interesting contrast of priorities was revealed straight away. The communications officer outlined her concept of marketing as an ongoing process, based on the principle of finding out what our users wanted and designing our promotional material accordingly. A programme of interviewing students and staff was proposed. This wholly sensible but longer-term, holistic approach conflicted somewhat with our more immediate concerns as librarians: the pressing need for us to have some leaflets ready for the start of the new academic year.

In fact, our efforts so far have indeed centred upon producing something to give to new students but there is also a strong sense of this being the start of a longer-term project. What follows therefore is the description of a fairly small process – the design of a brochure – but one we might expect to be repeated over the coming months as we turn our attention to other aspects of our publicity.

#### **THE PROBLEM OF INFORMATION OVERLOAD**

Prior to this year, new students attending introductory library classes and tours would be given a laminated folder containing a number of double-sided A4 sheets describing our services (borrowing arrangements, the catalogue and so on) as well as specific databases. The view of the group was that the sheets both looked rather out of date (they used Times New Roman font, for example) and were also overlong and wordy. This opinion seemed to be backed up by the noticeable amount of folders which were left lying around the library after classes and the large number of sheets which we had to pulp at the end of the year

Information overload is a big problem for all new students these days as competing services bombard them with handouts and freebies from all angles. Conversely, making sure they get the information they really need is of the utmost importance, especially at a 'new' university. UEL,

which has 18,000 students from 120 different countries, is one of the most diverse in the country and many students will have little idea of what to expect.

To this end, in 2003 we had produced a short video which was designed to replace the traditional library tour. The need now was to back this up with some literature the students might actually take away with them and read.

#### **DEFINING OUR MESSAGE**

The communications officer, who is also studying for an MA at London Metropolitan University, was a useful source of information here. We were able to question her about her initial impressions of our service, what she knew about us, and what she thought a new student should be told. We were also able to draw upon our own experiences of dealing with students at issue and enquiry desks.

So, what did they need to know? That we existed, certainly, and that we were a place that not only housed a lot of books but also many other wonderful resources. They needed to know that we are open twenty-four hours, that we provide extra services for disabled and dyslexic students, and that we subscribe to a range of extremely useful electronic resources. But at this stage they probably didn't have to know the minutiae of our fine rates, the email address of every member of staff or the vagaries of Boolean searching.

#### **FORMAT?**

During initial discussions various ideas were floated about the format we should use to convey our message. One early idea was to produce a diary which would include information about all student services, the idea being that students might keep and use it. In the end, time prevented such collaboration, although this may be something we will return to in the future. Finally it was decided that the folder and sheets should be replaced by a brochure briefly describing our services and that this would be backed up with a suite of A5 guides which would contain more detailed and practical information (e.g. about the databases we subscribed to, fine rates and so on). These would be handed out at the point of need, rather than as a bulky pack readily discarded.

We were all agreed that the brochure should be in colour and professionally-designed. Colour printing has come down in cost so much that there is little excuse now for not adopting it. We also wanted the text to be as concise as possible and to

avoid library jargon at all costs. It would give an overview of our services but not get too bogged down in details.

#### DESIGN

So, a colour brochure - but what exactly would it look like? This is where the clash of cultures (libraries and marketing) really revealed itself. Some of us shared a concern about examples of posters and newsletters we had seen around the campus. To our eyes, they seemed rather garish, dominated by images of students and with clashing colours and fonts. By way of contrast, a member of library staff brought along an example of a brochure they had picked up from another university at a recent seminar. A sober twelve-page effort with tasteful pictures and a blue and purple colour scheme, it conformed far more closely to our own ideas of what looked acceptable. We decided to use it as a template

However, as we actually picked apart the brochure and discussed how we might replicate it with our own library in mind, it quickly became apparent that the template we had chosen wasn't as suitable as we had thought. The pictures, for example, were 'artistic' but they made the library in question look deserted. And the text - well, in truth, it was extremely dull. If we found *our* minds wandering, what chance was there that an eighteen year old would stick with it?

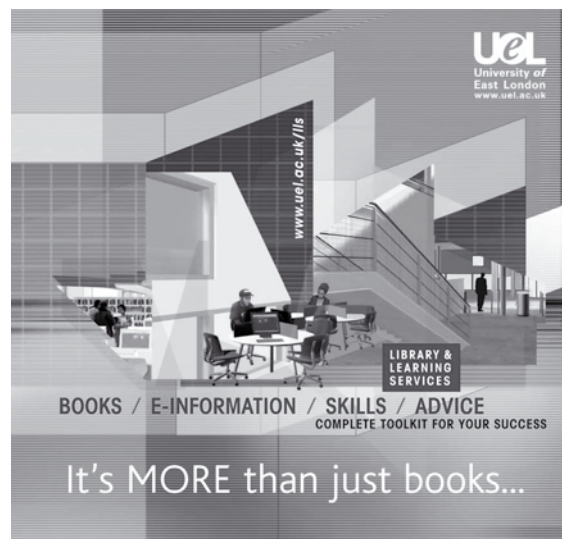
The communications officer asked us to bear in mind that the brochure would almost certainly not be read from cover to cover - more likely, students would flick through it and read parts that caught their eye. She argued that it should therefore include pictures of, and quotes from, their peers, as in her experience students are more likely to relate to these. She also suggested including library staff profiles. These would both serve to make us seem more human and give an insight into the sort of things we do.

In the end, we believe we achieved a happy compromise between the two conflicting approaches. The brochure is quite busy, with the quotes and profiles dominating the pages and it avoids dull description. But it's also well-designed, with a sane colour scheme and a core of key information.

#### BRANDING AND SLOGANS

The graphic designer designed a new brand image for the front cover: a sort of virtual, multi-dimensional image incorporating abstract shapes and computer-generated images of people in a library. This was accompanied by the slogan

'Books / e-information / skills / advice: complete toolkit for your success' and juxtaposed with a separate 'Library & Learning Services' badge (simple capitalised text in a box). It was intriguing to observe the working out of such an apparently simple design and the positive difference, for example, replacing 'and' with an ampersand made to the balance of the design.



Brochure cover

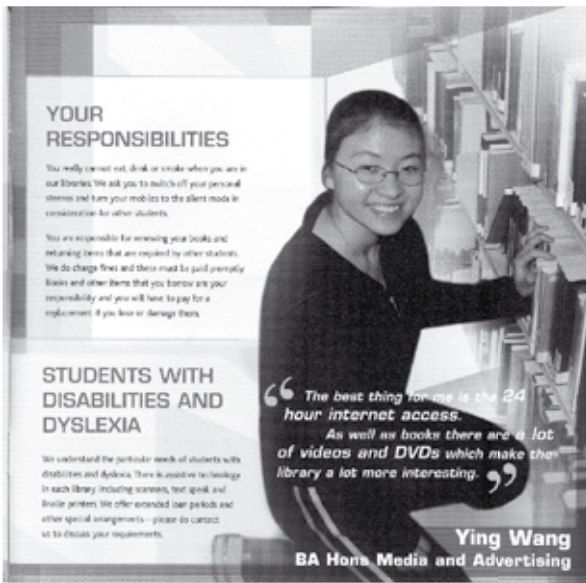
When it comes to graphics (and indeed layout) in library publicity, the designer will inevitably take the lead. Nonetheless, we were able to influence the evolution of these designs by offering opinions at each stage of their design and attempting to articulate our own ideas during the process. We are pleased with the finished look and will use this in other documents and on our web pages over the coming months.

A more controversial issue was the designer's insistence that, along with the designs, we include the motto 'its more than just books' on the cover. Some of us felt this was a little simplistic and a lot of time was spent discussing the merits of including it. The designer argued strongly that we retain it, as she felt it encapsulated the underlying message of the brochure i.e. that there is a lot more to a modern library than just a bunch of dusty old volumes. Once again we were asked to forget our own aesthetic preferences and think in terms of the students who would actually be reading the brochure.

#### EDITING AND CHECKING

After all the discussions about the concept, there was suddenly a pressing need for some words. A first draft was produced and over the next few days it was re-written and edited several times as it was circulated amongst the members of the group, the director of library services and even

the head of corporate marketing. The editing process also happened at the same time as the design was becoming clearer, and both influenced each other. We began to think about matching pictures with text and vice-versa.



#### Brochure contents

A final edit was performed by the communications officer so that the text reflected the university's house style. This was also quite an eye-opener. The university is very keen on the first person plural, replacing 'UEL' with 'us' and insisting throughout on 'our library staff', 'our computer system', and so on.

Finalising the text was not the end of the process. At each of the three proofing stages we had to painstakingly re-read it, looking for the inevitable typos (either ones we had missed or new ones by whoever had transcribed the text). This is something we almost certainly wouldn't have done so thoroughly had we been producing the brochure in-house. Once again, we were exposed to a more professional way of producing documents.

#### DID IT WORK?

The reaction of students to the brochure has been positive so far and most of the copies seem, at least, to have made it out of the building. We will be testing it more formally with a student union focus group in the near future and will also receive feedback from the library's student survey. All of this will be taken into account as we further develop our publicity and attempt to transfer what we have done to our web and e-services.

Additionally, the experience of working closely with a corporate marketing team has been of value in itself. Liaising with non-library colleagues is an increasingly important part

of an academic librarian's job, whether they are IT people, academic staff or marketing officers. Such partnerships will inevitably influence our own attitudes as we are exposed to different working cultures. Collaborating on a document has been a particularly interesting process in that it has forced us to work through some of those differences and also rethink some of our own assumptions.

The brochure we have ended up with is quite unlike the one we originally envisaged, and possesses some characteristics that we vowed to avoid. And yet, paradoxically, we are all very pleased with it. It's a bit loud at times, but also colourful, friendly and accessible, and with quieter spaces too. Rather like our library?



One of the follow up projects was a bookmark to advertise texting services