**PaLA** | College & Research Division (CRD)

# Pennsylvania Libraries: *Research & Practice*

Practice

# Marketing a Library Science Program

## *Personalization with Purpose*

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After a complete overhaul of the library science and instructional technology curriculum, faculty members worked with the university's marketing team to develop a campaign to attract undergraduate students to the library science program. The "Some Librarians..." campaign was designed to showcase the diverse interests and personal stories of current students and recent graduates of the program. Advertisements for the program were targeted to individuals on Facebook during two six-week campaigns using information gathered from student focus groups comprised of students and faculty. Both campaigns exceeded industry benchmarks in terms of click-through rates, indicating success both in terms of content and placement of the advertisements.

In 2016, Kutztown University's department of Library and Learning Technologies completed a total overhaul of the library science curriculum. No syllabus was left untouched, and the entire degree sequence was carefully aligned with professional standards in both library science and instructional technology. The Library and Learning Technologies suite of degree offerings included both undergraduate and graduate Library Science degrees as well as Instructional Technology graduate degree and certificate offerings. The faculty were confident that these programs offered what 21st-century professionals needed to be competitive and successful. Despite a history of excellent job placement, however, recruiting students into the programs, particularly library science students at the undergraduate level, remained a struggle. Traditional strategies did not seem to connect with the audience of 16- to 20-year-old potential undergraduate students.

Within the department, the faculty discussed the stereotypical view of the librarian and the perception that librarianship was an aging profession, irrelevant in the age of instant information (Pagowsky & Rigby, 2014). The need to attract diverse students to the library profession was also identified as a value that the faculty wanted to support (Love, 2010). The question became how could the department attract diverse young people to a profession that suffers from so many public misconceptions?
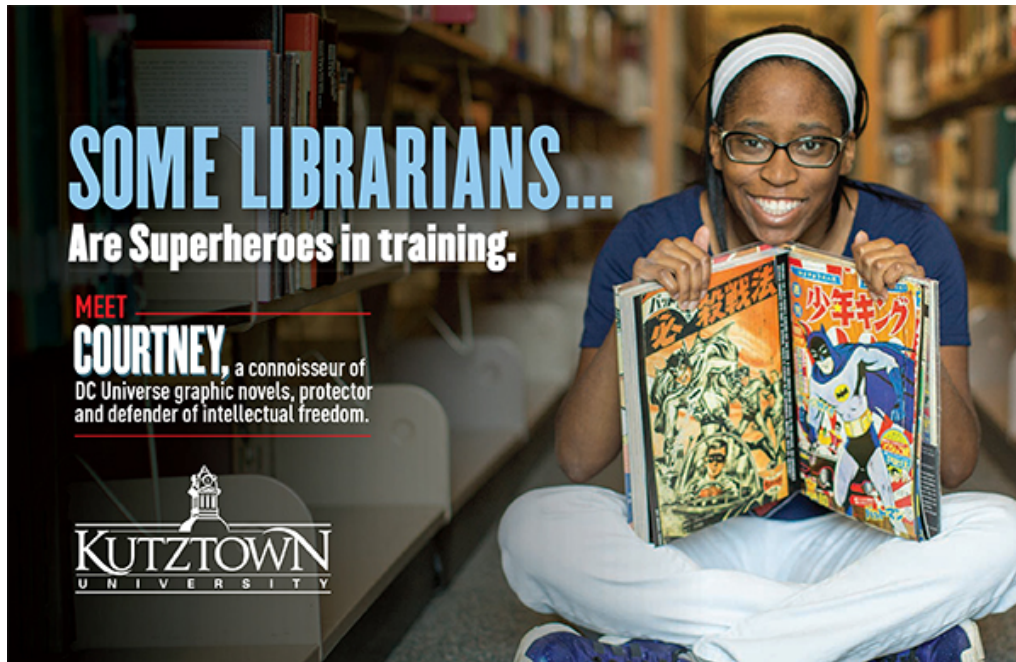
Although the undergraduate program is small, library science students at Kutztown University bring widely diverse interests and experiences into the classroom: rugby players sit next to comic book readers, and historical re-enactors beside musicians. Purple hair, body piercings, and ink are far more visible than sensible shoes. What if prospective students do not want to read about curricular revisions or faculty accomplishments? What if they want to hear about young people like themselves? By deconstructing the stereotypes, the contemporary interests and abilities of our information professionals would be revealed. This was the genesis of the "Some Librarians…" campaign.

Developing a new marketing strategy for the program required reaching outside the realm of library science. The department asked Jennifer Umberger, one of the authors of this paper, for her assistance and she began creating focus groups of current students. Her team interviewed students and asked them to tell their own stories of how they found the program, why it appealed to them, and what made it special. A love of books and reading was, unsurprisingly, a recurring theme, but there was also an underlying appreciation for popular culture in a larger context, a desire to work closely with diverse populations, and a commitment to education in both formal and informal settings.

The department requested volunteers be profiled, and the students found this approach so appealing that there were many more willing participants than could be accommodated in the first campaign. Ultimately, four student profiles were initially developed (Figure 1). Each profile featured images of a current library science student engaged in activities that showcased the individual's unique interests: rugby, comic books, makerspaces, and music.



Figure 1
*The initial four student profiles featured in the Facebook campaign*
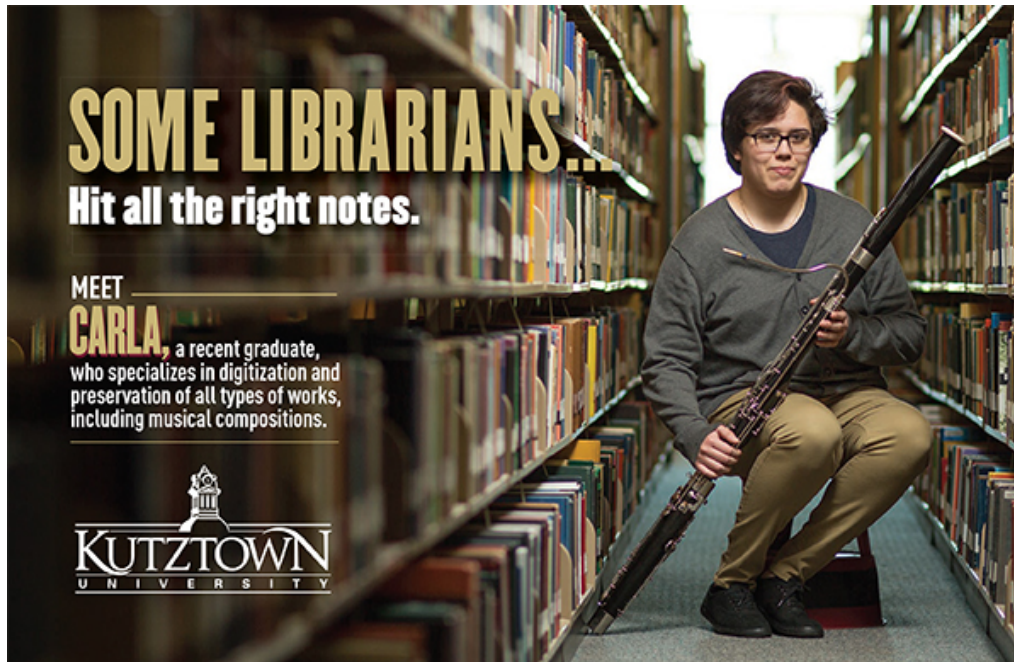
"Some Librarians…" was followed by a tagline that asked viewers to reconsider their expectations related to librarians. For example, "Some Librarians think cleats are sensible shoes." Each profile also features a short paragraph introducing the student and highlighting why they chose to study library science. With the profiles in hand, Umberger began to work her marketing magic. Research increasingly indicates that college-aged individuals are exploring higher education options through social media; it was, therefore, logical to locate the program within the venues that college-aged individuals already frequent (Martin, 2015; Thornton, 2017). In November of 2016, with little fanfare, the department launched a carefully targeted marketing effort on Facebook.

A Facebook advertisement campaign begins with a careful selection of keywords and phrases that best describe a person's interests. This selection helps focus the audience into a group with matching interests and increases the probability that a member of that audience will pay attention to the advertisement, or better yet, click on it to learn more. With the help of the student focus groups, the faculty identified topics that would likely interest future potential cohorts. These themes ranged from professional and academic interests related to the fields of library science, instructional technology, and education, to favorite cult TV shows, Internet fandoms, and comic book series. The keyword selection process was also informed by research into the topics outlined; we sought to learn what our students read, watch, listen to, and follow on social media.

Facebook profiles include personal details that can be mined through analytics. These details include where a person resides and their age, gender, and interests. Analytics allow marketers to define the target audience and place the advertisement into the Facebook feed of users who match it. Once the advertisement is in place, Facebook analytics record many details about the audience's response to the advertisement, such as how many impressions the advertisement made. Impressions are the number of users that received the advertisement multiplied by the number of times that advertisement was served to the user. Analytics also record if user clicked on the advertisement to learn more. In the case of this campaign, clicking on the advertisement took users to the Kutztown University admissions website.

After six weeks, the faculty were thrilled to discover the campaign had generated an extraordinary click-through rate. It had reached more than 25,000 people, delivering the four messages more than nine times during the six weeks for a total of more than 200,000 impressions. Better yet, nearly 4,500 users clicked on the ad, resulting in a

2.12% click-through rate. The industry standard average click-through rate at the time of the campaign was 0.35%, placing this campaign at a nearly 600% level of performance. Of the four versions of the ad, the two that featured photographs taken in a library setting performed significantly better than those that featured the less expected settings of a sports field and makerspace, suggesting that traditional library-based visual cues may still appeal to this young audience.

For faculty, the idea of a Facebook campaign was intangible, but the results were very concrete. Interest in the program increased noticeably, and this growth was tracked through the Admissions Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system. The combined spring and fall new student enrollments were in the double-digits, a remarkable upsurge over previous years. Encouraged by this initial marketing success, the department committed to a second round of social media advertisement featuring two new student profiles (Figure 2).



Figure 2
*The two additional student profiles featured in the second Facebook campaign*

Taking cues from the results of the first campaign, these two new profiles featured unexpected elements, such as a student in equestrian apparel and a student in a full historical reenactment uniform, juxtaposed against a library setting. Faculty also decided that future campaigns should be split between Facebook and Instagram to build on our previous success while acknowledging the changing social media habits and preferred media platforms of the target demographic (Martin, 2015).

The new campaign launched in early fall 2017 with the goal of attracting students in their junior year of high school who might be beginning their college search and senior-year students who may still be undecided about their college preference. The results of the second campaign demonstrated the first campaign was not a fluke. Like the first campaign, the click-through rate exceeded both the industry and Facebook's average, generating 359,330 impressions. It also demonstrated that a carousel placement of the images outperformed all other variations, indicating more visuals should be a mainstay of campaigns going forward.

Social media advertising is relatively inexpensive compared to traditional media. The out-of-pocket expenses included faculty and staff time, the cost of the student photo shoots, and the fees associated with running the click-through ad campaign. To put the nominal nature of these expenditures in context, an increase of one student enrollment in our program more than fully paid for the cost of this entire campaign.

The success of this marketing campaign provides invaluable information to faculty looking to boost the public image of strong but less visible programs and to librarians trying to raise the profile of the profession. Through this process, the department discovered that the instinct to focus on the students and tell their stories, rather than highlighting nitty-gritty curricula details was a recipe for success. The faculty also learned the value of working closely with the school's marketing professionals: an openness to thinking outside the box coupled with marketing expertise resulted in a professional campaign that captured what was unique about the program. Finally, the value of meeting young people on their turf cannot be overstated. Social media can be intimidating to faculty and staff who do not engage with it daily, but keeping on top of where students spend their online lives can pay real dividends in terms of marketing success.

## References

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