

# E-MAIL AS A MARKETING TOOL FOR INFORMATION PRODUCTS AND SERVICES

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## Abstract

This article deals with the definitions of marketing and the strategies for marketing. Forward marketing, internal marketing and reverse marketing are explained in detail with the marketing plan. The promotional aspect and advertisement of marketing are explained. To provide quality services librarians should consider five attributes of IT products and services. Also the use of e-mail as a marketing tool is explained with the mailing list functions and discussion groups. The pros and cons of the same are given in brief.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years libraries have taken initiatives to introduce information technology (IT) products and services to add value to their services. The advent of new technologies such as: dramatic increase of digital storage media; convergence of telecommunication and broadcasting, the availability of wealth of information resources accessible through the internet and also increasing reduce in cost of computers in the marketplace, make it possible for librarians to introduce IT products and services to fulfill information needs of their customers.

Libraries should promote the use of IT as an integral part of library services in meeting the changing information needs of the community. Marketing concepts and technologies can contribute a dynamic approach to total strategy development, which will ensure effective management. Library professionals do have an affinity with marketing philosophy concepts and practice. Marketing requires the alignment of library and information centre's goals. This article deals with the use of e-mail as a tool for marketing the information products and services.

## 2. DEFINITION OF MARKETING

Marketing has been defined in many ways such as:

- ^ Find ing out what the cus tom ers want and need and chang ing when neces sary to meet their needs.
- ^ It en com passes all as pects of a li brary from identifying clients to deter mining the services one offer.
- ^ It is human activity directed at satisfying wants and needs through an exchange process. It has to do with finding out what peo ple want and need, and then re spond ing to those needs.
- ^ It is the management process, which identifies, anticipates and sup plies cus tomer re quire ments effi ciently and profit ably.
- ^ It means many things to many peo ple. While to some it is sell ing, to oth ers, it is a pro motional ac tivity.

Innumerable definitions on marketing are given in library literature; the following seem to be pragmatic:

- ^ Marketing is planning that focuses on products, place or mode of delivery, ad just ment of cost/price to the mar ket and pro mo tion to spe cif ically tar get ed seg ments of the spe cial li brar ians mar ket.

- ^ Marketing is the process of creating value through the creation of time, place and form utilities.
- ^ Marketing takes the focus off the product and puts it on the user's needs. Products are developed from the user's point of view, not the producers.

### 3. E-MAIL RULES ON THE NET

The web links us to the world, but e-mail connects us. Web sites help us round out picture of the world, but e-mail makes the world go round. The web was intended to be a communication medium for everyone everywhere. For most of us, web sites is a very passive medium. One can visit sites from all around the world, but has to get pages and bring them to his machine to view them. However, the web as a delivery medium (http) is highly interactive. Using the internet protocol and a browser interface one can do almost anything, from chat to telephony to real-time conferencing and of course e-mail.

E-mail is the most universal application on the internet and commercial online systems. It is the first online tool people use and, for many, the only tool they will ever use. People are often introduced to e-mail through their companies or organisations. E-mail truly makes the world smaller. E-mail actually has its own protocol to run over the internet, Simple Mail Transfer Protocol (SMTP), and one does not require the web to send or receive mail. One has to admit that e-mail works as an interesting and different communication tool: immediate, but not live; stream-of-consciousness, but recorded. The contradictory nature of e-mail (it can be formal or informal, personal or impersonal, immediate or delayed, and at the same time all of the above), and interpretation is largely at the discretion of the receiver, not the sender. It strikes up a conversation and talk about myriad topics and exchange advice or suggestions. One can get mail from anywhere like involving multiple interactions.

#### 3.1 Use of E-mail in Marketing Mix

Electronic messages are a terrific way for online marketers to interact with consumers. A variety of tools exist for marketers, including

e-mail, forums, bulletin boards, newsgroups, and mailing lists. These can be used to dispense information about new products and services, the organisation's (including library and information centres) background, help files, and any other material to foster a relationship.

The benefits of using e-mail to converse with users include:

- ^ Prospecting for leads by introducing users about the product or service.
- ^ Converting prospects to users by providing them with requested information, such as company overviews, product backgrounders, press releases, reports, surveys, and media reviews.
- ^ Building relationships and developing brand loyalty by informing users of new products or services, sales, discounts, seminars, events, etc.
- ^ Conducting market research by reading users' messages.
- ^ Creating and maintaining one-to-one relationships with users and prospects.

In an integrated marketing environment, e-mail can be used as a direct communications link with prospects. Let's look at the steps involved in an integrated marketing campaign.

### 3.2 Creating One-to-One Relationships with Users

#### 3.2.1 Giving Message

E-mail is the beginning point in this building process. At its simplest, people who have questions about your product can send you an e-mail. They might have seen the address on your letterhead, advertisement, product package, business card, or your signature file attached to a message you posted on a discussion area. Responding to each message individually helps develop one-to-one relationships with consumers.

After a while, you might notice that many people ask the same questions most of the time. Instead of writing an individual letter, one can access a library of texts written to account for most situations. As you receive a message about the product warranty, for example, you cut and paste the prewritten

answer that explains the warranty. What used to take you five minutes to write now takes five seconds.

### **3.2.2 Automation of Process**

The next step is automation of the process. You have a library of prewritten answers to the most common questions. Customers can receive those answers when they send e-mail to a specific e-mail box. This process can save time and money. If people read the prewritten response and still have questions, they can send a new request to a company representative who can answer the difficult questions. Thus staff spends their time dealing with the more difficult questions while the routine questions are handled by the auto answer facility.

Any kind of file can be sent via e-mail, whether it is text, photo, or sound. E-mail can thus provide more information than a customer support representative talking on a telephone. One can also provide answers to customers just at the moment they are most interested in developing a relationship with your library, even if that happens to be holiday.

### **3.2.3 Creation of a Database**

One can create a database of valuable information on where people can be contacted and what their key interests are. The tactic of using a separate mailbox for information replies can also be used to track the number of responses from a particular source.

### **3.2.4 Sending Specific Information**

You might send them specific information about your products that entice them to order directly from you, or lead them into one of your distributor's stores. You might build a relationship with them by sending a newsletter every month or quarter that gives them interesting new ways to use your products and services. You could encourage them to participate in surveys so that one can determine where the market is heading and what new features and benefits are sought. You could also use this material to track the marketing effort.

## **4. MARKETING STRATEGIES**

Information services that libraries offer must fulfill information needs of their present and future library services. Strategic marketing requires libraries to understand their customers changing information needs in order to provide customer-focussed services. Environmental changes that are taking place at national and international levels have and will continue to influence information needs. Due to information explosion, information is being published and transmitted through electronic media also. Libraries must take proactive measures to introduce IT products and services to cater for information needs of the society that are fast transforming towards a digital society.

Quality marketing requires an integration of three marketing strategies, namely:

- ▲ Forward marketing that focuses on customers,
- ▲ Internal/inward marketing that focuses on staff development and
- ▲ Reverse marketing whereby libraries form strategic alliances/partnership with IT suppliers.

The integration of these three marketing strategies is vital for total quality marketing of IT products and services. Libraries should develop long-term strategies to make their visions to become part of the nation-wide digital libraries a reality.

### **4.1 Forward Marketing**

Forward marketing refers to the marketing approach that librarians undertake to meet information needs of their customers. Hence, librarians provide values to their customers by providing IT products and services that fulfill their information needs. In developing a customer value strategy, libraries need to understand how the customers can be segmented. Customers can be grouped according to such criteria as professional, education levels, etc. For example, a businessman who is involved in the export and import of goods has different information needs compared to other professionals such as those in the legal professions or university students.

Forward marketing of IT products and services are essential in order to attract more users to use library facilities. IT services offered by libraries must be inviting, and user friendly. Libraries need to identify their present and potential users and their changing information needs. Identifying customer's needs and wants is not an easy task as most libraries have many customers, each with their own set of information needs.

Librarians in providing quality services should consider five attributes of IT products and services. They are:

- (a) **Responsiveness:** willingness to help library users with prompt services according to the specific time needed by the library user. Timeliness is crucial for quality information service, as information has value to its intended user only when it is delivered at the time when information is needed for decision-making.
- (b) **Reliability:** library users have confidence and trust that information delivered to them is accurate and current for them to make quality decision-making.
- (c) **Availability:** IT products and services are always available when users want to use them. IT products must be arranged systematically so that it is easy to locate. Library users should be able to reach library services from any locations at any time through integrated online library systems.
- (d) **Caring:** that the library staff is able to provide friendly and personalised attention to each and every library user. Library users do not feel intimidated at the moment of truth when they first encounter with library personnel. For specialised and personalised information services, the library staff should be able to search, retrieve and consolidate information, not available in library collection, from other libraries or from the WWW, and repackage the information according to the specific users.
- (e) **Environmental friendly:** the library provides conducive learning environment for its users as well as its staff. The use of IT products and services must be made easy and user friendly so that it will not deter users from making full use of its services.

Ergonomic of IT equipment used and facilities should be given prime importance. Continuous maintenance of computer systems should be given priority so those users do not encounter frequent computer failure. User education programs should be systematically planned to guide users to the wealth of resources in their subject area of their interest.

## 4.2 Internal Marketing

The provision of quality information service is very much influenced by the efficient use of IT products by its users. In the long run, market orientation should lead to better services and quality IT products and services, higher productivity among its staff and strong customer loyalty. This involves internal or inward marketing. Human resources are the most valuable assets of any organisation. It is the people in the organisation, who individually or collectively, contribute to the achievement of the organisation's objectives to achieve competitive edge. As an organisation, a library exists to deliver value to its customers, and this is best achieved by adapting a long-term perspective to the development of its people for the achievement of quality services. With experiences and proper training in IT, staff will become the most knowledgeable asset of the library.

The provisions of quality and efficient services depend on the knowledge, skill competencies and experiences of library staff. These require libraries to take positive measures to develop its human resources in IT. The staff must be trained in the effective use of IT products, such as navigating the net, so that, they in turn will be able to guide library users in the effective use of IT products and services. Continuous training in IT is essential as IT products have shorter life cycle and new IT products always appear in the marketplace. System of rewards and recognition must be given for staff who are committed and excel in developing IT products and for those who are able to deliver quality IT products and services. Librarians who have expertise and experiences in providing IT services can be invited to give

talks to professional meetings or forums to share their experiences.

### **4.3 Reverse Marketing**

The quality of IT products and services depends also on the availability of IT products supplied by IT suppliers. To introduce innovative products and services, libraries should be in close contact with IT suppliers, such as publishers of IT products, software houses, computer vendors, database providers, telecommunication service providers. IT suppliers will be able to provide information on the state-of-the-art of IT as well as the latest IT products in the market. This is done through reverse marketing with suppliers. Treating IT suppliers as customers and partners will mutually benefit both libraries and IT suppliers.

For sustainable IT products and services, libraries should form strategic alliances and partnership with IT suppliers. Establishing partnership with IT suppliers will enable libraries to tap skills and expertise of IT suppliers. IT vendors can be invited to give professional talks on IT to library communities and can also be invited to give talk to seminar/talk and forum organised by libraries. This will assist in upgrading the levels of IT knowledge among staff on the latest development of the IT. Libraries should also participate and attend IT exhibitions, forums and talks organised by IT suppliers. Partnership with IT supplier should be encouraged.

## **5. MARKETING PLAN**

In order to promote the use of IT products and services, libraries must develop marketing plans to market its services. The marketing plan should include the following services:

### **5.1 Remote Access to Library**

With the availability of internet, libraries can use their homepages to advertise their services, such as, calendar of events, new IT services, new collection of topical subject, local heritage, sales of library publications in their home pages. People can also access library's OPAC from homes and offices.

Libraries can introduce online reference inquiry form (ORIF) in their home page. Library users will be able to key in reference inquiries through the ORIF or to search libraries' databases from any locations at any time. Hence, libraries are able to provide 24-hour services. Online reference inquiries will ensure better and faster means of delivery of information products and services.

### **5.2 One-Stop Information Centre**

Libraries can be developed as a one-stop community information centre for IT services. By allowing library users to access variety of online databases available through the internet, users do not have to go to different places to get information. They can navigate the WWW by themselves or with the assistance of library staff. By integrating IT products and services with other print product will make learning more interesting and enjoyable.

### **5.3 Packaging of Information**

For personalised services, library staff should be able to response to request for literature search on specific information. Such literature search will include: compilation of bibliographies on selected topics of interest to specific user needs; compilation of addresses for contact; compilation of data, statistic and fact related business; compilation of profile on business products, country profile for potential market; developing metadata on relevant websites, creating hyperlink of relevant websites to cater for special user needs, etc. The library staff should be able to search for such information from different sources either from available reference sources or from the internet, and repackage that specific information in according to specific individual request, thus providing value-added services. Packaging of information tailored toward specific information needs is a mean of providing personalised services to users. Such services can be charged accordingly.

### **5.4 Hyperlinking Relevant Sites**

Library will maintain a database on user profile that includes information about their specific subject interests. Librarian will make regular scanning on relevant databases and

websites as well as from latest journal publications that matches the interest of registered users. Information from various sources that match users' interests are consolidated and repackaged in a systematic way in accordance to specific user' needs. By doing so, members are always exposed to latest information relating to their subject interests.

### **5.5 User Education Programmes**

Systematic user education programmes on the use of IT can be introduced. It can be targeted to different market segments of library users as different groups have different information needs. By introducing such services, a library is able to retain its existing library users and to recruit new library users. The programme will include basic information handling skills, use of varieties of library resources including IT products, literature search by navigating the internet, search strategies for different information resources, use of reference sources, compilation of bibliographies and information packaging, etc. Guides to information search from the internet should be developed and made available to library users.

### **5.6 Forums and Seminars on IT**

The library can organise regular forums and seminars on various IT related topics. Such forums and seminars will be opened to library users as well as staff from other libraries. This will benefit and gain new knowledge on the latest development on IT. Publishers can also launch their newly published books on IT or IT products at the library. This form of reverse marketing will benefit both the staff of the library as well as the IT suppliers.

### **5.7 Consultancy Services**

A library can also provide consultancy and advisory services in setting up or upgrading library services for IT companies and other private sectors. This is a form of reverse marketing to library suppliers as well as forward marketing to potential corporate customers.

## **6. PROMOTION OF SERVICES**

For effective marketing libraries must promote its services through various forms of advertisements so that library users are aware of new services being offered. A systematic and organised marketing plan will raise the library image as innovative library rather than as storehouse of printed materials. The library will gain higher status and recognition from stakeholders for funding. Promotion of its IT products and services can be made through the following means:

### **6.1 Brochures and Posters**

The library should come up with attractive and innovative brochures, leaflets and posters, which advertise its IT services and resources that should be distributed to all new members.

### **6.2 Library and Information Month**

Organising Library Month is a way of promoting and advertising its products, activities and services. During the month, the library can focus a theme, which will highlight certain aspects of IT. IT suppliers can also be invited to participate in this festive month. During this period, various activities can be organised at the library such as IT exhibition, special library tours (open house), launching of some IT products, etc.

### **6.3 Advertisement**

The library should advertise its services in the newspaper, magazine, TV and radio. Staff should be encouraged to write articles related to new library services to be published in professional journals, popular magazines and newspapers. Librarians can appear on Radio and TV highlighting the new library roles on IT services for the community.

### **6.4 Participation in Exhibitions**

Exhibition is one of the ways to publicising services of the library. The library should organise regular exhibition, which focus on different aspects of IT with different target audience in mind. The library should open its door for IT vendors to exhibit its products and services at its Exhibition Hall. At the same

time, the library staff should participate in the Book Exhibition Trade Fair and IT Exhibition.

## 6.5 Mailing List

Mailing list management programs (sometimes called 'listservs') automate subscriptions and unsubscriptions, and the process of mailing to each of the subscribers. Mailing list software has many uses:

### 6.5.1 Newsletters

In the typical public newsletter, anyone may subscribe freely, though only the moderator or list owner sends mailings to people on the list. In a private newsletter, the moderator controls both subscriptions and mailings. Companies use mailing lists to power e-mail newsletters which:

- ^ Provide for mervisitors with brief information about new articles, products, and features on their web site
- ^ In form with a regu lar news let ter con tain ing help ful content along with in for mation about one's busi ness. Of ten such news let ters are also archived on a web site, creating a n increasingly valuable information resource
- ^ Enhance a reputation through occasional articles of interest. A weekly or monthly publishing cycle is not crucial
- ^ Nurture potential customers during the gestation period until they are ready to pur chase or sign a con tract
- ^ Support existing customers with on-going information
- ^ Solicit paid subscriptions for newsletters with proprietary information not readily available elsewhere
- ^ Earn revenue from paid sponsors of the newsletter.

### 6.5.2 Discussion Groups

These are discussions carried on via e-mail, in which each person's e-mailed comments are echoed to every other subscriber. In moderated lists, the moderator filters out all the annoying 'unsubscribe me' requests, and only passes on the more important, on-track contributions. To keep the number of daily messages from the list under control, it is often wise to subscribe to a digest version of the discussion, which may be sent once per day.

Discussion groups can be powerful, with great potential for education and community building. Some manufacturers set up a 'user group' of people who are familiar with their products. Company representatives, as well as more experienced laymen, share information with the less experienced. Groups can build customer loyalty and provide significant customer support. In addition, the individual or company, which sponsors or moderates the discussion, can build an excellent reputation-and significant business-from discussion group members, who often number in thousands.

## 6.6 Obtaining Subscribers

One of the best ways to obtain subscribers is to ask visitors to sign up when they first enter your web site and also ask if they would like to receive updated information, notice of new articles or products, etc.

## 7. PROS AND CONS

- ^ The cost of distributing information via e-mail vs. printed fliers and post age, e-mail is less costly.
- ^ An e-mail newsletter excels in sending information in words, not graph ics.
- ^ One has to main tain the e-mail list. E-mail addresses are always becoming obsolete, and mailing list software doesn't automatically unsubscribe such addresses.

## 8. MONITORING AND REVIEW

The library should constitute a monitoring system, which is designed to measure the effectiveness of IT resource being used and the reaction of library users as well as to assess the effectiveness of the marketing strategy to promote IT products and services. As IT products have shorter life cycle, librarians need to monitor its use and the extent that the new IT services being introduced sustain the interest of library users. Innovative and creative ways of marketing IT products and services must be considered. It is also essential to monitor changes that continue to take place in the external environment and in the IT market places as these changes may lead to changes being taken in the process.

The review process involves feedback from staff involved in the change process, feedback for the library users. Collected data is analysed and conclusion is drawn about the effectiveness of the marketing strategy. The information is used to shift the strategy towards a more effective direction. Efforts and resources should be redirected and focussed in an area where demand is greater. Benchmarking with other libraries to measure and to compare its service performances with other libraries/information centres is also important. Having an information system enable librarians to make quality decision making in introducing innovative IT products and services.

## 9. CONCLUSION

Marketing is the human activity directed at satisfying wants and needs through an exchange process. It has to do with finding out what people want and need and then responding to those needs. Still it is in an immature stage of development. One of the reasons being the relatively low level of knowledge and lack of agreement on users' requirement. In the digital era, IT products and services must be made as an integral part of library services. Libraries that have introduced IT services should promote its use to the society. Libraries must have marketing strategies to connect libraries and communities through IT and services. Marketing strategies of IT products and services act as a driving force in achieving quality library services that meet information needs of the community. Proper design and execution of marketing plans can help to achieve satisfactory utilisation of LICs' resources and also to improve its image.

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