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Medical Library Marketing: An Investigation of Current Definitions and Practices - Preliminary Report of Survey Results

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MEDICAL LIBRARY MARKETING: AN INVESTIGATION OF CURRENT DEFINITIONS AND PRACTICES
PRELIMINARY REPORT OF SURVEY RESULTS

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INTRODUCTION

Marketing is essential for medical/health science libraries. However, there has been no recent, profession-wide analysis of marketing definitions and incorporation across this specific field. Library marketing research and materials are usually broad, non-specific, or focused on public libraries. Most publications from medical libraries only reflect program evaluation or specific institutional practices. This study helps fill this void by examining the current state of marketing understanding and practice in medical and health science libraries.

OBJECTIVE

This study examines individual, institutional, and profession wide marketing definitions, practices, trends, and gaps–creating a solid foundation and framework for future work. Information from medical/health science libraries as a whole, including various sizes and types, was sought to avoid hyper-specialization or lack of applicable results. The unique aspects of marketing, verse advocacy and outreach, is also examined. These areas can all be better served if the distinctive and complementary properties of each are identified, eventually filling gaps and creating efficiency for all.

METHOD

A survey was sent through discipline relevant listserves including MedLib-L and NAHSL-L. Additionally, emails were targeted to individual members of specific organizations. The survey was constructed and distributed through SurveyMonkey. It consisted of 22 multiple choice and open-ended questions, divided to focus on the areas of personal, institutional, and profession wide definitions, understandings, and perceptions of medical library marketing. Preliminary results have been tabulated by hand and using the tools within SurveyMonkey.

RESULTS

The survey had 146 respondents with a 61% completion rate. These came primarily from hospital/clinical (54%) and academic (39%) librarians (Special/other 6%) at a full range of professional experience.

INDIVIDUAL

97% thought marketing was an important thing for medical/health science libraries to be doing. 95% also said that they participated in marketing activities within their library. There was a very wide range of how individuals defined marketing in medical/health science libraries, from simply promoting services and resources (the concept of promot* used in 47% of responses) to more concrete, "Using the best communication channels to reach a specific audience for which the product or service you have that would most benefit that audience."

INSTITUTIONAL

Marketing was reported as being very (40%) or extremely (25%) important to institutions, but the overall incorporation of knowledge/understanding of marketing principles and practices into daily and strategic activities was reported as only a limited (35%) or average amount (35%) (not incorporated 4%, often 11%, all the time 4%). 76% reported that their library had no documented, formal, or specific marketing plan. 42% reported that their library had a specific person or team that had an explicit marketing role or objective as part of their job, but 53% had no specific person/team. While some mentioned the concept of promotion, most responses on how a library defines or implements marketing mentioned specific activities such as posters, targeted emails, or social media. "Flyers are posted for upcoming classes." "Library orientations for new students."
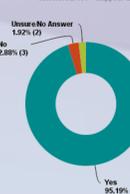
PROFESSION

Respondents rated the amount of information about marketing for medical/health science libraries across the profession as mostly poor (13%), fair (35%), or average (19%) (good 8%, excellent 1%). Quality was also rated as mostly poor (7%), fair (29%), or average (29%) (good 12%, excellent 1%). Some respondents said they would turn to professional organizations such as the Medical Library Association, but most said they would look to outside groups or resources for marketing information.
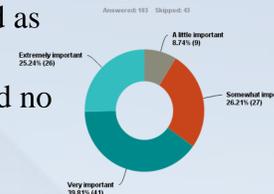
Q7 Do you think marketing in general is an important thing for medical/health science libraries to be doing?
Answered: 106 Skipped: 40
Unsure/No Answer 2.83% (3)
Yes 97.17% (103)
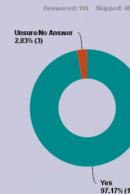
Q8 Do you participate in marketing activities within your library?
Answered: 104 Skipped: 42
Unsure/No Answer 1.92% (2)
No 2.88% (3)
Yes 95.19% (99)

Q11 How would you rate the importance of marketing to your library's daily and strategic operations?
Answered: 103 Skipped: 43
Extremely important 25.24% (26)
A little important 8.74% (9)
Somewhat important 26.21% (27)
Very important 39.81% (41)

Q15 Is there a specific person or team within your library that has an explicit marketing role/objective?
Answered: 102 Skipped: 44
Unsure/No Answer 4.90% (5)
Yes 42.16% (43)
No 52.94% (54)
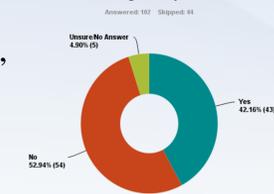
Q13 Does your library have a documented, formal, or specific marketing plan?
Answered: 103 Skipped: 43
Unsure/No Answer 9.71% (10)
Yes 14.56% (15)
No 75.73% (78)
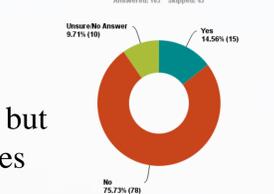
CONCLUSIONS

Preliminary results demonstrate the perceived importance of marketing in medical/health science libraries, while showing that there is a wide range of understanding, structure, and approaches to actual library marking practices and implementation. Almost all respondents reported that marketing is in some way influencing the work they do or affecting their library, but most had no or minimal understanding or guidance.

While most institutions engage in some sort of marketing activity, and it is perceived as strategically important, very little has been made explicit or standardized. A lack of, or informal, planning and documentation about marketing practices or roles within the library leads to confusion, makeshift, scattered, inconsistent, and ineffective marketing efforts. This was reflected in many of the responses to open-ended questions.

Results clearly indicate a gap in practice and the information available to assist work in this area. The need for more information, education, and resources on this topic is apparent. Time, money, and effort can be saved by systematically incorporating marketing process in to everyday work. This is especially important for hospital or solo librarians who need streamlined, time-saving processes and would benefit most by proving value and increasing institutional by-in. By having medical/health science specific resources to reference, libraries could make marketing more applicable, efficient, and effective.

NEXT STEPS

Text coding and categorization of open-ended response items is being conducted, as well as deeper analysis of all results. Additionally, a second phase of research involves thematic document analysis, testing the hypothesis that ideas, concepts, and implications of marketing exist in published articles but are not being identified or realized, resulting in a missed opportunity for greater applicability and insight in to marketing within medical libraries. Ultimately, research on this topic will contribute to the development of professional, educational resources to make marketing in medical/health science libraries easier, efficient and more effective.