



Marketing approaches for learning development engagement: the importance of promotion to enhance students' learning

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Presentation abstract

Key to engaging students with learning development (LD) is helping them to understand who we are and what we do, an issue that the profession continues to contend with (Stapleford, 2019; Mossman, 2023; White and Webster, 2023). Although there is existing research on marketing academic and public libraries (Dowd, Evangeliste and Silberman, 2010; Potter, 2012; Rowley, 2013; Kendrick, 2021), there is limited research on the marketing practices of LD services within universities and their institutional context, with no known studies focusing on the techniques that learning developers implement to promote their service to students and academic staff.

The importance of establishing an identity was explored in this paper, discussing the development of an LD marketing plan which included strategies for promoting the department. This plan used key marketing practices and current research (Potter, 2012; Kendrick, 2021) to establish the department's 'brand', facilitating an identity which ensured clear, effective communication of its service.

This paper also demonstrated the importance of effective marketing and communication with students by exploring the promotion of an interdisciplinary dissertation event. This implemented timely and targeted marketing strategies to promote engagement and service awareness. The event hosted 264 participants with attendance from disciplines across all faculties, demonstrating the importance of considered promotional activity to encourage accessibility and inclusion.

Participants heard about the ongoing marketing plan work and strategy developments employed by the LD team to actively engage with students across the University of Surrey, as well as having the opportunity to share their own successful promotional practices.

Keywords: marketing; promotion; communication; learning development; student engagement

Community response

The community engaged in an intriguing discussion about managing promotional activities for marketing learning development (LD) provisions to different stakeholders, whether they are students or members of staff. They raised questions about the effectiveness of traditional marketing methods and highlighted the challenges of obtaining approval, while also expressing concern about the workload involved in marketing efforts:

RC: How do you time your posts on Instagram in relation to the workshops, i.e., schedule them to one month before, one week before, etc? [...] I am curious how social media is managed to market LD provision to students. Is there one LDer coordinating and maintaining the social media content? Can all LDers in your department freely add things into it? Is the social media site only accessed by students and staff of your university or is it potentially open to all? Are there any other protocols of running the social media site?

Online contributor 1: Do you still use paper flyers/posters? Or do you think they don't have impact anymore?

Online contributor 2: Really enjoyed that – thank you! We've recently started a Bluesky account to try and reach out to academics more. We use Instagram for students but wanted somewhere to get to staff. Do you have any experience/ thoughts on this?

Online contributor 3: Thanks for a really interesting presentation! Do you find there's any red tape in terms of getting things approved? Any advice on when there's a lot of different opinions and people who want to be consulted?

Online contributor 4: Was the designated staff member responsible for the marketing aspect inundated with this type of work? From experience, and as you mentioned, it is time-consuming, and the day-to-day work gets pushed aside.

Online contributor 5: Thank you so much about this session. Could you please elaborate on the structure of the dissertation ready event?

Next steps and additional questions

The presentation highlighted several key considerations and ongoing developments for effective marketing and communication.

Considerations:

- Involve someone with an interest in marketing and communication, as well as a team member with a design background or interest.
- Recognise that marketing is time-consuming and constantly evolving. Starting small can be effective.
- Take into account the diverse opinions and expectations within your department and institution regarding designs and materials. Clarify who has the final decision-making authority.
- Allow time to assess what strategies are effective and what requires further development. Expertise in marketing is not necessary to initiate positive changes.

Continuing developments:

- Continue refining the marketing plan and strategy of the department.
- Enhance evaluation questions to include inquiries about how participants learnt about events.
- Engage with students through focus groups and involve student mentors to gather insights. Conduct further research on marketing to students and young adults.
- Develop marketing and style guidelines to ensure consistent messaging.

Author's reflection

It is evident from this session, and the discussions that took place, that there is significant interest in marketing and promotional activities to engage students, staff and academics with the integral work we do. It is particularly important to those who are given marketing and promotional responsibilities or who are interested in this area and are quite often doing this on top of their learning development (LD) role. The questions received during and after the session validate the effectiveness of our approach, highlighting the importance of communication to facilitate an identity and maximise engagement.

Questions were focused on how marketing should be arranged and delivered, particularly regarding social media provision and timelines for activity. It is important to note that there is no definitive way of organising this, and that the scheduling and publicity of material will often depend on the communication channels available and working out when and where the audience are most likely to see it. There are a range of resources that can help with this which I've listed in my session reference list. Particularly useful ones I can recommend are *The library marketing toolkit* (Potter, 2012), *Engaging your community through active strategic marketing: a practical guide for librarians and information professionals* (Kendrick, 2021) and *Marketing library and information services II: a global outlook* (Gupta, Koontz and Massisimo, 2013).

To answer some of the questions raised in the session and community responses, from our experience at the University of Surrey marketing a wide range of LD events, a two-week lead-in is a good starting point for smaller, one-off events, with a four-week lead-in time being better for larger events. Recent experience has taught us that, for postgraduate events, a six-week lead time may be even better, to suit students who work or have caring responsibilities. The most successful forms of activity for student engagement are VLE news posts, communication from academics and faculty staff, and social media publicity. Other useful activity includes print, campus screens and communication from other internal departments, such as marketing and student-focused departments.

A communication schedule and assigned job roles are important to ensure timely, consistent activity. In our department, activity is split between three roles; I am responsible for overseeing the marketing as well as VLE posts and general student and internal staff communication, another colleague is responsible for social media posts, and the final colleague is responsible for campus screens and print design. Team members who would like to promote ideas or events usually come to me first, and I will then organise and delegate activity. This can be time-consuming, especially at busy times of the semester, but makes sure that the messaging, branding and design is consistent, accurate and timely.

We primarily use Instagram for promotion on social media, which a designated member of LD staff posts through the University of Surrey Library account (@surreylib) and schedules on Hootsuite. The library has also recently set up a Bluesky account, targeting academics and PGRs; however, we are yet to post here with an LD focus. I would recommend

researching the existing social media platforms your institution uses and determining who has responsibility for creating and publishing posts.

As highlighted in my paper, LD marketing and promotion is under-researched and under-developed, perhaps due to our nuanced and continually developing field in HE. Further research is required to determine how successful promotion and marketing of LD services encourages student, academic and staff engagement, and explore what can be done to further establish our identity across HE and beyond. If you would like to learn more about what we do to promote LD at the University of Surrey, or are interested in working together to research this area further, please contact me at s.gridley@surrey.ac.uk.

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Samantha Gridley has worked in the Academic Skills and Development team at the University of Surrey for over seven years, supporting students with their learning development. Her role includes embedded teaching in the Faculty of Arts, Business and Social Sciences to a diverse range of undergraduate and postgraduate taught students, as well as one-to-one academic skills advice and support. She particularly enjoys the collaborative nature of her work and loves working with students, academics and colleagues to develop impactful experiences. She is currently exploring research on encouraging student engagement with learning development, by developing effective marketing practices.

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