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Signage UX

Updating library signs for a new generation

Like most college libraries, the Alfred C. O'Connell Library at Genesee Community College (GCC) struggles to find effective ways to tell students about upcoming events and new library services, and to promote library policies. Short of standing at the library entrance and personally notifying each entrant about each new initiative, it can be a big challenge to impart information about the library to our patrons.

The library has a robust public relations system, which includes physical signage, a big screen TV slideshow that displays PowerPoint slides, a library website with a section for news, Facebook (both the library-specific site and the college site), a roving librarian, library representatives on student clubs and student government, a Student Library Council, access to add events to the college calendar, and a library news box in the campus's Blackboard Course Management System.

Even with all of these public relations outlets, it's inevitable that when we ask our Student Library Council members how to best communicate with their peers, they suggest things like, "You should create a Facebook page!" (We've had a Facebook page since 2010.)

Or when we gather feedback a few months after heavily promoting a new service, more than half of the people we survey will have never heard of the service. In fact, gathering feedback about a service seems like a much better way to promote a service than putting up a sign, since it's a way to tell a person individually about something that we're doing, even though it's an indirect method.

Physical signage seems like the most immediate way to try to reach the patrons who are actually using the library. We can catch them when they're here in the library and tell them about some of the cool things that we're doing, or ask them to behave themselves. But, we've found that our signage does not get us the results that we want. When asked, students are usually unaware about the services that we're trying to promote, or the library rules that we want them to know about. More often than not, we use our signs as a back-up for rule enforcement if we need to speak to someone about their loud phone conversation or their cheeseburger next to the computer. Why aren't our signs working? Are they too busy? Are they too hard to read? Do we need to change them up more often? Are there too many of them? Do they become just part of the background noise of the library?

This year, like many other libraries around the country, the Alfred C. O'Connell Library is focusing on UX, or on how our patrons ex-

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perience all aspects of the library. As part of this project, in order to try to answer some of the signage questions listed above, Librarian Cindy Hagelberger and Library Staff members Amy Westfall and Stephanie Smith conducted a signage review with four college students over the winter break. The group chose that time of year to conduct the review because it was quiet on campus, it would be easy to tour the library without disturbing anyone, and the students could speak freely without worrying about being observed by their peers. In order to get a broad perspective, the student group included both a local GCC student and students from three other local college campuses.

Here are some of the things that we learned from this signage review:

Sign quantity

Less is more. The students told us that one big sign is better than a bunch of small signs scattered around the library. That being said, the students requested more signs for things like our touch-screen scanner or for directions to get to our library instruction classroom. However, once you know how to find both the scanner and the classroom, that sign now becomes superfluous. What students seem to really need are on-demand signs that show up at the point of need exactly when they need them, but until we can figure out a way to make signs appear only when you need them, we're stuck with too many signs or too few.

Sign location

We currently have a large sign located in the entrance to the library, welcoming visitors and covering a few of the most im-

Food policy sign. Courtesy of Genesee Community College.

portant things that we think our patrons should know. The student signage review group dismissed this sign by saying that it had too much information, it took too long to read, and they would never stop in the entrance and block traffic in order to read a sign. The majority of the students who come to the library do so in order to use one of our 75 computer workstations, so we've often placed signage on the workstation tables. However, the students dismissed those locations as well, saying that they would probably ignore the signs on those tables, perhaps because their focus at these tables would be their work, and not general signage. The general agreement was that signage would work best if it was placed somewhere between the entrance and the places where students go to sit and work.

Not surprisingly, the students suggested that putting signage at the point of need works best for them. For example, they mentioned that the layout of our circulating stacks is not intuitive for them. We do have a poster that explains the main Library of Congress Classification categories, but it's currently located about halfway down our first aisle of stacks, and the students suggested that that would work better at the beginning of the collection. We provide a dedicated catalog search kiosk, which is located close to our reference section, and the students suggested moving that kiosk closer to the circulating books, since those are the books students are most likely to look for in the library.

Sign style

The student signage review group sugges-

tions echoed those that we've seen in library signage how-tos, such as Edward Luca and Bhuva Narayan's "Signage by Design: A Design-Thinking Approach to Library User Experience."[1] The students said that our signs should be easy to read at a quick glance. They suggested bigger font, less text, and more images. They liked our creative signs, such as our food policy sign that displays examples of the kinds of wrapper-covered items that we'd like our patrons to keep in the cafeteria They also liked our meme-like signs, such as our "Keep Calm and Ask a Librarian" sign, which taps into images that they're familiar with seeing on social media.

Think like a 19-year-old

The most interesting thing that we learned from the student signage review was that the students we spoke to worried a lot more about how they looked reading our signs than they thought about what was on the signs. They were very concerned about their peers seeing them reading a sign, because that's not a cool thing to do. They were horrified by our study

Study room rules sign. Photo courtesy of Genesee Community College.

room usage signs because these signs are posted *on glass,* on the window of a study room, and people sitting inside of that room could look up and catch them reading a sign. These insights were fascinating to us because it would have never occurred to us to worry about how other people would judge us for looking at informational material.

In this same vein, the student reviewers really liked our big screen TV slideshow as a source for information because it's big enough that they could linger across the room and casually glance at the slides, rather than standing right in front of it where they could be caught reading. The students also noted that

one of the best uses of signage on campus was the monthly Business Office publication *Stall Wall,* which is posted inside of stalls in the bathroom. You're a captive audience for that information, and, best of all, no one can see you reading.

Next steps

The data that we gathered from our signage review is being used to make significant signage changes in the library:

- We're reducing the number of hours signs, and we're limiting them to the front door and our two service points, so that students will know that those are the places to look for hours information.
- We're changing our entrance/welcome sign to display fewer rules and more simple graphics and announcements.
- We're limiting the number of postings for our study room guidelines, and combining the content into one larger, easier to read sign.
- We'll be grouping our library classroom directional and class listing information together and making it larger and more prominent, so that incoming students will be able to see at a glance where and when their classes are being held.

We highly recommend performing this kind of signage review with students or student-aged patrons at your institution. The observations can be illuminating.

Note

1. Edward Luca and Bhuva Narayan, "Signage by Design: A Design-Thinking Approach to Library User Experience," *Weave Journal of Library User Experience* 1, no. 5 (2016), http://quod.lib.umich.edu/w/weave/12535642.0001.501?view=text;rgn=main. ✄