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People-First Promotion: Rallying Library Workers during COVID-19 and Beyond

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Abstract: COVID-19 forced workers around the world to face the realities of closed buildings, precarious employment situations, and challenges to their well-being. This article will showcase how library workers' resilience during COVID-19 depended on people, not buildings, and a people-first public relations strategy was employed to reveal that distinction. The authors, a team of librarians and communicators, share three pandemic-era communication stories developed to put people at the forefront of initiatives and messaging: a revamped marketing strategy for a research appointment service puts faces to the work and student support; the cancellation announcement of a beloved annual event reveals how the event takes months of planning by employees—some of whom were affected by university furloughs and layoffs; and blog posts and reports of the numbers and stories of the COVID-19 response place the focus on the workers who make it possible, despite the unpredictable circumstances. Future communication and marketing can be rethought and retooled to make services, collections, and programs worker-driven, instead of a product of the (empty) library.

Keywords: Marketing, outreach, strategic communication, management, COVID-19

Introduction

Centering people in marketing plays a role in ongoing advocacy and awareness-building. How can library communicators consider reframing what library workers do, versus what an inanimate building offers? During the COVID-19 pandemic, University of Dayton Libraries' faculty and staff made a concerted effort to promote the ways their colleagues applied creativity and expertise to the challenges presented, internally referring to this strategy as "people-first promotion." In short, people-first promotion intentionally brings attention to the human component of library work.

This article will share three pandemic-era communication stories developed to put people at the forefront of initiatives and messaging. First, a revamped marketing strategy for a research appointment service focused on putting faces and names to the librarians offering student support. Previous marketing materials had listed a menu of sample reference questions but lacked a connection to the team of experts who would be providing the services. Secondly, the cancellation announcement of a beloved annual event centered on how the event takes months of planning by employees—some of whom were affected by university furloughs and layoffs. Finally, in publishing stories on the library blog and reporting numbers to the provost, the focus was on how the workers made it possible, despite the unpredictable circumstances. Each story includes details about pre-pandemic promotional strategies, and then examples of how people-first promotion was introduced in 2020. The authors, a group of librarians and communicators, hope to showcase how library workers' resilience during COVID-19 depended on people, not buildings, and how people-first promotion revealed that distinction.

Literature Review

Advocacy is the basis of people-first promotion and communication. Sharing programs, data, and expertise—and the people who make the programs possible—with stakeholders builds a foundation of understanding. When uncertain circumstances arise, this foundation is crucial. In 2020, the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) offered an article series concerning advocating for library workers during the pandemic. Advocacy promotes a group of people or specific causes and can be done effectively by

identifying and understanding the intended audience with regard to message writing and delivery (Simpson, 2020). The institution's mission and educational goals are good starting points to consider when planning messaging and delivery, particularly to a member of the upper administration. Alignment with strategic priorities, meeting rising demands, and calling attention to library employee expertise (Savage, 2020) are examples of arguments and data usage that focus on the people. The pandemic demanded fast and furious advocacy and reporting. With furloughs and layoffs in play, library administration can enact these advocacy strategies, effectively "prioritizing people over resources and highlighting the long-term business costs associated with losing employees" (Henrich, 2020, para. 2). The visibility of employee expertise can impact student learning positively, building credibility and familiarity at the same time. Depending on the audience, this can be framed in marketing campaigns or infographic-heavy reports.

Writing during the COVID-19 pandemic, LaPierre stated that although libraries serve the community, "librarians are people too, and also part of the community" (2020, para. 3). Marketing, advocacy, and communication to promote library employees and their work can seem futile in the higher education landscape, where enrollment and budgeting can put pressure on an institution's mission and priorities, especially during a global pandemic. However, in some cases, this pandemic offered opportunities to rethink library processes and projects. Creativity led to necessary adjustments to services and collections that could stay in place for years to come. These innovations are worth sharing, and the people at work behind them should be recognized.

Reframing the Libraries' Work

University of Dayton Libraries faculty and staff work in the setting of a private, Marianist university with a highly residential campus of 11,000 students in southwest Ohio. Following the Marianist teachings and educational philosophies, the university strives to be a welcoming and inclusive campus, focused on educating the whole person in a compassionate, service-oriented, and justice-seeking community. The authors, two librarians and two staff members, serve on the University Libraries marketing team, a cross-divisional group that organizes strategic promotion on behalf of the unit. Following the transition to remote learning, anonymous announcements of furloughs and

laid-off workers, and an overall need for advocacy of colleagues, the authors focused on three projects and initiatives in response to COVID-19. The projects invited members of the marketing team to reconsider and reframe language to put library colleagues at the center of the story and recognize them for their work, which was referred to as people-first promotion.

Book a Librarian

A service that has applicability in virtual and physical support environments is a library's reference services. Book a Librarian is an appointment-based service introduced in 2018 using Springshare's LibCal scheduling system. The system connects to the calendars of the library's research team, collections librarians, and archivists who are available for appointments. Even though the research team includes discipline-specific library liaisons, team members are generalists and may assist with any question. Students are the intended audience for Book a Librarian, but university faculty and staff are welcome to use it.

Upon introducing this service, the research team brainstormed strategies to promote the functionality and purpose of Book a Librarian. A challenge of promoting reference help is ensuring the audience knows what exactly is meant by terms like "reference," "research," or even "librarian." The team decided explicitly listing the services offered would be helpful, allowing students to connect to at least one topic. The strategy was to answer the question, "What can this service do for me?" and set expectations that the student could have upon scheduling. The final graphic (see Figure 1) included the term "research co-pilot"—a nod to the University of Dayton's Rudy Flyer airplane pilot mascot—to define the supportive role of the librarian; students could expect a collaborative meeting as opposed to an "expert-teaches-the-novice" experience. Services and opportunities listed included exploring data, saving citations, learning about the library, discussing topics, brainstorming key concepts, developing search strategies, finding articles, and locating books. The call to action was to schedule on Isidore, the university's learning management system. Book a Librarian is also accessible from a URL: libcal.udayton.edu/appointments. This graphic was scheduled on digital signage in the library and the student union. Additionally, it was posted on social media and bulletin boards through the 2019-20 academic year.

Figure 1: List of services offered

When teaching and learning moved online in response to COVID-19, the library's marketing team wanted to highlight the expertise and continued availability of librarians for academic support. One of the Book a Librarian features that had yet to be highlighted was subject-specific support. Before adopting the appointment system, the marketing team had found success emulating a 2017 campaign by the University at Albany Libraries using colorful avatars called Bitmojis on print flyers to promote research services and connect faces and names to the subject librarians (Puzier & Norton, 2020). With individual librarians' likenesses portrayed in a popular manner, students could not only learn about the services offered, but also recognize the librarians around campus and in the library. In the online and seemingly disconnected environment of COVID-19, the Bitmojis were a decidedly good approach to try again, putting faces to the names of librarians offering student success support.

At the time, not all majors and disciplines were specifically represented because not all liaison librarians have public services as part of their job duties; however, students could book appointments through the general assistance calendar, which would place appointments on the on-call librarian schedule. Librarians decided the new remote-only environment would be a good time to improve coverage in those gaps so that all majors would be covered by librarians represented on Book a Librarian. The research team worked together to fill gaps, and members volunteered for the missing disciplines.

Members created their own Bitmojis to showcase their personalities and likenesses. This allowed the research team to showcase their own style and interests. By using librarians' likenesses to promote services, libraries can

appeal to student interests and foster a welcoming environment. A graphic featuring all of the librarians (see Figure 2) was shared with the university's social media manager, the new-student orientation staff, and enrollment management for social media and other online portals. The purpose was to demonstrate the library's commitment to student success. In order to reach students in the various disciplines, graphics of each individual librarian and their subject(s) were also created (see Figure 3). The individual graphics were shared with the social media managers of those disciplines, such as the College of Arts and Sciences, the School of Business Administration, and the School of Engineering. Several departments have their own active social media accounts, such as the art and design department and communication and theater department. Each graphic was shared with suggested text: "Have a bit of a question? At UD there's a librarian for every major; book an appointment with yours for personalized research support and guidance." Later in the summer, all liaison librarians shared the appropriate librarian graphics with their departments to further promote the service. In the fall, a combined graphic of the archivists and librarians was posted to promote appointments for special collections and archives. Due to COVID-19, all of those units had transitioned to appointment-only, and Book a Librarian was available to facilitate this service. Likewise, the research team determined that all appointments would continue to be offered via remote methods (phone or Zoom) for the fall semester.
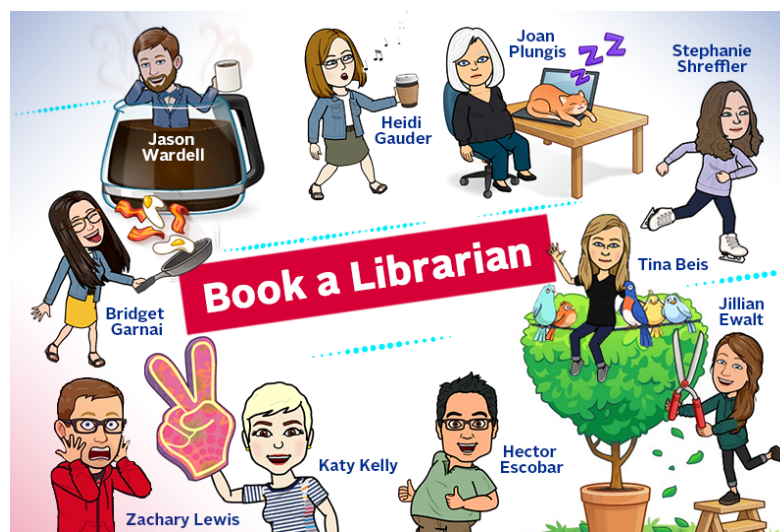

Figure 2: Group of librarian Bitmojis

Figure 3: Librarian Bitmoji graphics

Book a Librarian usage was analyzed at the conclusion of the summer and fall Bitmoji promotion. Between July 1 and December 10, there were 123 appointments booked in 2019, and the same number of appointments were booked during that period in 2020. Since the number of appointments booked stayed the same, perhaps this campaign helped prevent a major drop in appointments during the pandemic, smoothing the transition from in-person visits to virtual or telephone appointments. Additionally, this campaign provided the marketing team and research team an opportunity to improve upon a service and engage students and departments as intended audiences. The revamp and refocus of the service from a people-first perspective helped put librarians front and center. It connected librarians and their intent to support students in their coursework and discipline-specific research. Forging these personal connections between students and the library takes even greater precedence in a remote and transitional environment.

At the Manger

The Marian Library, part of University of Dayton Libraries, is a center for scholarship on the Blessed Virgin Mary and documents diverse expressions of popular devotion to Mary; as such, it is a strong model of the University's Marianist identity. One example of popular devotion is the collection of the over 3,600 Nativity sets from over 100 countries. Since 1997, the Marian Library has curated a substantial selection of Nativities for its annual At the Manger exhibit.

The exhibit typically runs from the end of November through mid-January. It is a popular community event in the Dayton area and beyond. It is free of charge and open for self-guided tours during the Marian Library's

weekly hours, plus additional weekend hours. Scheduled guided tours are also popular for school groups, retirement communities, church groups, and bus tours.

An exciting bonus for 2019 was the request to feature the Marian Library's Nativity collection and At the Manger exhibit on "CBS Sunday Morning." Director Sarah Cahalan was interviewed in the exhibit space by correspondent Nikki Battiste. This created additional interest in At the Manger. By the exhibit's closing, it had attracted over 2,500 visitors and 25 scheduled group tours.

Engaging undergraduates with the Libraries' special collections is a priority, but can be a challenge. During the 2019 At the Manger exhibit, Libraries faculty and staff introduced programming centered on one thing that undergraduate students are always searching for—points for priority housing. Several years ago, the University changed its method for assigning housing to a point system called AVIATE, an acronym for "a vision for integrated, applied, and transformative education." Students receive points for participating in events that support the program's learning goals of authorship, interculturalism, and community living. The At the Manger student program, which would award a point to each student, required each participant to pick up a reflection sheet, explore the exhibit, then write reflective responses. Each student's visit was expected to take 30 to 45 minutes. Reflective questions included, "Why do you think this diverse collection is important to preserve, share, and grow?" and, "In what ways did this program enhance your appreciation of the Marianist heritage of the University of Dayton?" Over 450 undergraduates visited At the Manger over the course of three open house-style sessions.

Planning for an exhibit of this scale is a huge undertaking. Discussions about the next year's exhibit can begin even before the current exhibit ends. Looking ahead to 2020, Libraries faculty, staff, and volunteers felt positive momentum stemming from 2019's success. However, as many learned early on in 2020, any plans were up for cancellation or at least revision. Due to budget and staffing constraints resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as physical distancing concerns in the gallery spaces, the hard decision was made to cancel the 2020 exhibit. Initial steps to communicate this news to the campus community and the general public began during the summer through the library

[website](#) and university communications. At the forefront of the communication was the acknowledgement of staff and time resources needed, but not available this year. This was an important people-first facet; exhibits and programs take a lot of workforce power. Reasons for canceling also included only occasional access to the collections due to remote work; the suspension of the Marian Library's volunteer program in the art collection; and university-imposed spending restrictions. Instead of hiding this information or blaming the pandemic, the communication about cancellation was transparent and shows vulnerability from an administrative standpoint. Financial decisions are hard to make and they're also sometimes taboo to talk about. The unfortunate cancellation did, however, give the opportunity to spotlight the value of the library's committed volunteers. The pandemic made it clear that without the volunteers, who report for duty almost every week during a typical year, the exhibit isn't possible.

All university departments have discovered ways to do more with less and pivot to virtual formats; however, not everything can continue with less budget, less staff, and less of a physical presence. Even though the physical presence of At the Manger has been set aside for the 2020-21 Christmas season, the Marian Library staff and faculty developed a creative virtual Advent wreath in lieu of At the Manger. During each week of Advent, the Marian Library website presented downloadable "gifts" such as eCards; a virtual exhibit of paper Nativities; coloring pages; and a reading of Luke Chapter 2, the birth of Jesus. Each week of gifts highlighted the library's unique collections including art, stamps, postcards, and more. The tradition of promoting At the Manger to the wider community will continue, publicizing the planners' creative pivot to an online (and safe) environment.

Reporting Stories and Numbers

Using a blog feature on the university's website, library faculty, staff, and students write their own people-first point of view to share information about the library in informal, conversational and sometimes entertaining ways. All are encouraged to contribute, and over the course of several years, [the library blog](#) has become a primary information channel with dozens of contributors writing more than 550 blogs since March of 2013. Almost all contain a byline and an author postscript or biography, which builds name and role familiarity to readers. Even pre-pandemic, many blogs were personable

and fostered people-first, positive outreach. For example, in a piece about researching sensitive topics, student success librarian Zachary Lewis told readers they had nothing to fear and showed them that they had a person—not merely a building—to go to for help. In another blog about an exhibit of baseball memorabilia from a library special collection, the story focused as much on the student employee who curated it as it did on the materials. Upon publication, each blog is shared on the Libraries' social media platforms (@RoeschLibrary and @MarianLibraryUD on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram). In social media blurbs promoting blogs, contributors' names appeared whenever the circumstances and space warrant, building further familiarity.

All of these people-first communications came into play as the library communicated about its initiatives to ensure seamless services in spite of the pandemic. Website content, blogs and social media all kept the focus on the humans involved. Library faculty and staff wrote about their own projects and also wrote about others' work. For example, members of the library's access services team facilitated no-contact checkout. A blog promoted the people behind this popular service, which was unlike any other occurring in the state, along with other pandemic-induced service models. The story included positive patron feedback as well as commendation from library administration. Two months into the university's transition to remote work and learning, an access services staffer wrote a blog combining humor and history to blithely explain how interlibrary loan was working during the pandemic. In September, a blog post highlighted the expanse of librarian-led virtual summer programming and orientation initiatives.

By the end of the spring term, the efforts of the Libraries faculty and staff were impressive. The blogs were effective in telling short, people-first stories, but were shared on social media as they were published, not in a one-time publication. The University Libraries dean, Kathleen M. Webb, requested a comprehensive summary of the revamped services for remote learning and teaching with assessment data presented in information graphics and patron anecdotes. This project presented an opportunity to write in the people-first style: the subject of each section was not "the library," but the people behind the successes.

The final report illustrated the important role library faculty and staff played in the transition to remote learning by quickly expanding online access to resources and services. The content and graphics made for a well-received report from Dean Webb to the University provost and [then repurposed for a blog.](#) Although numbers were included and displayed in infographics, the anecdotes focusing on faculty and staff initiatives stood out.

The number of blog pageviews were calculated using Google Analytics and show that people-first reporting and blog writing made a difference in 2020. In 2019, there were 11,852 unique pageviews of blogs published that year, compared to over 16,817 unique pageviews of blogs posted in 2020, showing an increase of almost 5,000 views. Blogs are shared on the website, social media, and the university's e-newsletter. Libraries faculty and staff will continue to share unique perspectives and projects to help promote the library, their colleagues and themselves.

Conclusion

Library communicators play a crucial role in positioning focus; this article suggests ways to place the focus on the people who make services, collections, and programs available to their communities. It demonstrates that every library employee can play a positive role in acknowledging colleagues. Dealing with the impact of COVID-19 was a new experience for everyone. By sharing processes and projects, librarians can benefit by finding common experiences and addressing frustrations with solutions that have worked for others.

People-first promotion intends to make libraries more inviting and accessible and place a welcome spotlight on the innovation, creativity, and problem-solving abilities of library faculty and staff. The design, communication, and delivery of excellent library services takes time and diligence and expertise in conventional times—and even more time and diligence and expertise during unconventional times. The Libraries faculty and staff will continue to share their colleagues' stories and celebrate their successes through people-first blog posts, reports, and acknowledgments on social media. With in-person interactions on indefinite hold, faculty and staff continue to pursue other creative ways to pivot and communicate services and

programs, such as a walk-up virtual assistance kiosk, which allows patrons to connect visually with a staff member, while protecting those providing help.

Despite the challenges presented by COVID-19, library faculty and staff remain committed to safety, information access, and the advancement of knowledge. By rethinking and retooling library communications to focus on worker-driven services, collections, and programs, library faculty and staff can better serve their students, their university communities, and the library profession.

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