

Making the most of your interactive promotions

By **Nancy Collins** and **Marian Davies**

The next time you and your colleagues are brainstorming promotional ideas for your library's latest campaign, upcoming event, or newest service, take stock of how interactive your ideas are. Do the strategies your group develops for reaching your users situate them as passive recipients of your promotional messages? Or do they consider them as co-creators actively involved in the operation and success of these activities?

Chances are your library is already making use of interactive promotions to a certain extent. Your mind is probably shifting now to the usual standbys for engaging users – including contests, special events, and surveys – and, yes, these things all count.

But, there's a hitch. As you may have already discovered, you can spend a lot of time planning and running these activities one month, only to have these same promotions over, done, and forgotten about the next. Sound familiar?

To make the most of your outreach efforts, you need to think beyond the life of isolated, one-off events and activities. Instead, plan promotions where your users' involvement and contributions can be re-purposed in the future as a means of engaging library users on a more ongoing basis.

Let's take contests for example. Regardless of the topic, contests tend to generate a significant amount of user-generated content. Generally speaking, they are a positive

and fun way to engage audiences, yet their capacity for generating this usercreated content can be best utilized when purposefully tied to your library and the resources, services, and focuses you'd like to highlight.

To illustrate, last year the University of Waterloo ran a video contest asking students to create a short video describing why they love the library (lib.uwaterloo.ca/contests/lovelibrary). The library received 18 video entries from students that were later displayed on the library's website with the announcement of the contest winners. The potential for using these videos did not stop at the closing of the contest. They have since been screened at a donor event, incorporated into online promotions directed at new students, and selectively used by liaison librarians during in-class instruction, with future uses still in the works.

So, when planning promotions – whether they be online polls for your website, activities to celebrate Library Month, or the design of your latest bookmark – try to think not only of ways to involve your current users, but of how their involvement can be used and celebrated within the context of your library's regular presence and spectrum of services.

Before embarking on a new promotion, you may want to ask yourself some of these questions:

Is this promotion interactive? If not, is there a way to make it interactive? Sometimes even promotions that are

typically created for consumption purposes only, like displays, can be altered to include opportunities for garnering feedback and productive reflection.

Does the purpose of this promotion connect meaningfully into the library and provide opportunities to repurpose user-generated content? If not, why are you doing it? Can the promotion be altered to allow for this?

What types of user-generated content will this promotion likely yield? User contributions can range from a click on an online poll (statistics) to written commentary to creative works (such as photographs or the creation of videos).

What are the potential uses for this content? Think about the different venues, both in your physical and in your virtual spaces, where you might be able to make use of user-generated content. If your promotion is primarily online, can user contributions be incorporated thoughtfully into your website alongside your formal presence? Alternatively, are there opportunities to make use of online social networking tools to maximize exposure to this content? Depending on your promotion, you may also be able to repurpose user contributions for inclusion in instructional materials or to support your library's development initiatives.

Are you having fun? Interactive promotions are all about celebrating your audiences, your library, and the

connection between the two ... so have fun with them! Promotions do not need to cost a lot of money. They primarily require a willingness and commitment to engage your audiences by highlighting the points of connection between you.

Remember that interactive promotions are driven by inclusion, engagement, and relationship building. By incorporating such promotions in your library, you both acknowledge and celebrate the central role that your library plays as both a crossroads and mainstay within your community.

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