Connecting Library with APEX Community

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Abstract

Hamzah Sendut Library as an APEX university library has taken a more proactive approach to rebrand promotional and outreach programmes. A more creative, unique and innovative style have been used to ensure that the library's mission in reaching out to the users is accomplished. Customer Squad was formed to increase the effectiveness of library's engagement with customers. The ultimate goal is to reach out to customers, increase the usage of library facilities, improve the relevance of the existence of the library in the campus community and provide additional value to the library users. Important aspects emphasised in the programme include teaching and learning supports, with the focus on research and consultation. Efforts conducted through myPHS programs, exhibitions, and virtual marketing have established positive impacts and realisation of library's relevance by the campus community.

Keywords: library, user engagement, library promotion, academic library, outreach

Introduction

"Got a question, get a live answer" is the motto used by Hamzah Sendut Library (PHS), Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) to reach out through a variety of customer engagement programmes during early phases. PHS which is located in the Main Campus and serves about 28,000 customers, should always be alert and active to ensure that the services and facilities offered to its customers are used by them for learning excellence. Librarians at PHS should always look for alternative and creative new programmes in promoting library services and facilities to their customers in the form of either physical or virtual forms to ensure that the mission and vision of the University to produce quality graduates are achieved.

On 15 January 2007, the Customer Relations Division was established in PHS. This division is responsible for promotional activities of the Library and also Reprography and Document Delivery tasks. Due to the constraints in terms of staffing and responsible task, function for promotional and marketing activities of the library was delayed. To overcome these problems, in one of the meeting with the Library management in 2010, Customer Relations Division has proposed to the management to set up a committee that could facilitate in executing PHS

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promotional activities and customers' engagement programmes. The meeting agreed with the proposal and as a result the Customers Day Committee, which is also known as the Customers Squad was set up. In that same year, for the first time Library Customers Day was held successfully with an overwhelming response from a customers who were excited with the new approach taken by the Library.

Early attempts to get out of the common practices in the promotion and marketing activities of the Library gave a new boost to the committee to explore other areas in marketing services. Since then, many activities have been carried out to establish a strong relationship with library customers, whether at the campus and off-campus such as community engagement programmes, students' day, exhibitions, social media and also touring the campus. In 2011, the Library branded promotional activities with the label MyPHS. MyPHS is significant in creating a sense of belonging with the Library customers. 'My' translated in Malay, means mine, while in the northern dialects, especially in Penang, 'mai' means come or lets. With the combination of this word My and PHS, MyPHS means Library welcome the customers and at the same time, creates a feeling of togetherness with the Library.

At the end of 2012, the library had undergone re-wiring and upgrading of its building. This project was carried out until the end of 2013. In view that this situation will affect library services and putting constraints to the customers in the use of the facilities provided, Customer Squad has introduced a new programme with the label Like myPHS for its marketing activities. This motto was chosen in line with the efforts to encourage customers' interest in the services offered by the library. In this regard, the PHS has taken steps to be more mobile, to go out to meet the customers around the campus to help them enjoy the services that are available if they come to the library such as borrowing and returning library materials, reference consultation and updating the membership record.

Literature Review

Current academic libraries should play a greater role in promoting library services to users. Thus the outreach programme should be done to reach out to the citizens of the university. The term 'outreach' means approach and expand "beyond the border" of a physical library and promote the use of a completely new library. 'Outreach' is categorised into two segments which are services and promotions. As for services, it includes research assistance on information and the resources available in the library. Promotion on facilities involves marketing and public relations to promote the services, resources and library facilities (Carter & Seaman, 2011) (Dennis, 2012). The roles of academic libraries are further described as follows:

> *"Libraries are perfectly positioned to be brokers on campus; we connect people not only with resources and scholarly materials, but also to each other. Libraries bring people together for academic, cultural, creative, and social causes; no one else on campus so completely fulfils that role. And so it is vital that we try to be visible on campus, not just as salesmen pitching our products, but as participants" (Mathews, 2009).*

To ensure that the "outreach" programme is carried out successfully, academic libraries and librarians should take the initiative to facilitate this programme. The establishment of a committee to carry out the agenda is appropriate and supposedly should involve all library staff. This is explained by Carter and Seaman (2011) that library staff involvement in this programme will help ensure its success. Librarians should collaborate and coordinate with other departments so that they can execute the plan successfully.

Saylor, Schnitzer, Allee, and Blumenthal (2011) explained that in order to implement the network in a community, librarians should be promoting outreach services by using varieties of social media. Facebook account should be created to publicise the latest information and library

services. The authors also explained that Facebook can recognise users demographic, disseminate and promote library activities continuously. Other than that users could also receive daily updates through frequent postings.

Among other promotional activities that can be used by academic library to attract customers is the exhibition. An exhibition is a medium of attraction to elicit interest and could indirectly create a network of cooperation with users. An exhibition is dependent on the type of theme that can consist of a variety of content such as posters, books, manuscripts or bibliography that lists the thematic readings recommended by librarians. Sidorko and Yang (2011) found that the diversity of the exhibitions at the University of Hong Kong Library had successfully attracted outside communities to visit the library.

Customer Engagement Programmes

Four major promotional activities undertaken by Customer Squad are MyPHS: Come to the Library/MyPHS - Customers' Day; Exhibitions; Like myPHS; and virtual marketing.

MyPHS: Come to the Library/MyPHS - Customers' Day

Customer engagement programmes, MyPHS: Come to the Library/MyPHS - Customers' Day have been organised by PHS since 2010 to appreciate library customers and welcome new students of the university. The programme was conducted at the PHS foyer. Activities included discovery of library information, fines discount, Like PHS Facebook and promotion of information literacy workshop. Apart from these activities, "MyPHS" was introduced as a library branding strategy.

Figure 1: MyPHS: Come to the Library/MyPHS - Customers' Day

In 2012, there were programmes held such as quizzes and info explorace which highlighted questions on history, services, collection and management of the Library. The purpose of this activity was to provide opportunities for students to recognise the Library as one of the attractions in the campus.

The Library also took the opportunity to launch new services such as the 24-hour reading room and Tablet PC for loan. These new services were in line with the demands of customers who wish for a more conducive space to study after the library is closed. Tablet PC for loan services were introduced and it has now become the latest of the gadgets available in the library to be used by customers to facilitate learning activities.

Figure 2: Launching of Tablet PC for loan services by Professor Dato' Dr. Omar Osman, Vice Chancellor of USM

MyPHS had become a marketing mechanism that build or strengthen ties between the library and customers, especially the new students. Besides introducing the Library as one of the key players in supporting learning and research, the programme had turn out to be a medium to raise awareness about the facilities and services provided by the Library. The connection with customers that resulted from such programme helps the Library to have better communication with the APEX community, increase understanding regarding their needs and then develop library services and facilities that aligned with their best interests. The effectiveness of the programme could be seen in the increase usage of library services, increase attendance in literacy classes conducted by the Library, and decrease of basic reference questions at i–Counter.

Exhibitions

The Library, in a way is a place synonymous with exhibitions to publicise new information and materials to Library customers. In 2012, PHS had taken a step further by organising exhibitions with new dimensions which displayed variety of reading materials, artefacts, manuscripts, realia, maps and media items. There were 5 exhibitions organised with different themes. Each theme presented its uniqueness and capabilities in providing visual and emotional impact directly to the visitors. The exhibitions were collaboratively organised with many organisations such as USM Centre for Policy Research and International Studies (CenPRIS), Tuanku Fauziah Museum and Gallery, School of Humanities, Penerbit USM, Centre for Instructional Technology and Multimedia, Dewan Bahasa and Pustaka and Penang Institute.

There were many programmes held during the exhibitions such as Poem Recitation Contest, the launching of new books of Malaysian Laureate Professor Emeritus Dr. Muhammad Haji Salleh and Dato' Haji Shahnon Ahmad, poem recital by Professor Emeritus Dr. Muhammad Haji Salleh which has been translated into many languages such as Thai, Japanese, Spanish and Chinese. The poems were recited by USM students and lecturers. The other programmes were poem forum by Professor Emeritus Dr. Muhammad Haji Salleh, film showcase which was adapted from the novel of Dato' Haji Shahnon Ahmad entitiled 'A Handful of Rice', the launching of fan page in Facebook of Dato' Haji Shahnon Ahmad and forum on novel 'Ranjau Sepanjang Jalan' by Dato' Haji Shahnon Ahmad which was adapted into a movie in 1970.

Wanita di Sebalik Bait Puisi
(7th March - 4th April 2012)

Pengembara Ilmu: Muhamad Haji Salleh
(18th April - 2nd May 2012)

myPHS: 1969-2012
(10th - 28th September 2012)

Shahnon Ahmad dalam Media
(8th - 13th October 2012)

Pulau Pinang di Alam Melayu
(19th - 30th November 2012)

Figure 3: Five exhibitions organised by the PHS in 2012

These programmes engaged various levels of community and society such as primary school students, USM students, lecturers and the general public. Furthermore, the programme was enlivened by popular artist and celebrity Sarimah Ahmad, an actress in the film 'Ranjau Sepanjang Jalan' who was invited to be honored as one of the panelist of the forum discussing the film 'Ranjau Sepanjang Jalan'.

Figure 4: Sarimah Ibrahim joined one of programmes and getting the local media's coverage

All these programmes proved that the Library has the potential to enrich the APEX community development of knowledge, social and cultural values rather than just offering services to support the academic activities. All in all, the exhibition provided opportunities and the platform for the Library to create a network of cooperation or collaboration within internal and external institutions or organisations. PHS was successful in its marketing strategies and demonstrating the effectiveness of communication in dealing with USM community and public.

Like myPHS

In 2013, the customer engagement programme had been further strengthened by the Customer Squad by the introduction of a programme called *Like myPHS*: *Connecting Library with APEX Community*. This is not just a day programme with customers as commonly held before. It was an outreach programme, the first ever held outside the library building. The original idea for the programme arose mainly because of the wiring and upgrading of Library 1 building that lasted until the end of 2013. During this period, *Like myPHS* served as a platform to reach out to the customers around campus. This initiative was taken to ensure that the Library continued to provide the best services to its customers.

Figure 5: Like myPHS booth

In 2013, library mobile services were delivered four times at designated hot spots of the campus such as administration centres, public areas, cafeterias and study centres. The services provided are loans and return of library materials, whereby new materials including books, media items and magazines were brought to be loan out to the customers. In addition, customers also could receive discounts up to 70 % if they settle the outstanding fines on that day, make consultations and reference inquiries, fill in the customers' satisfaction survey, participate in the book donation campaign and 'like' PHS Facebook.

Figure 6: Like myPHS that was held at the Chancellery, Cafetaria and School of Management

Like myPHS programme has crossed the boundaries of communication practices, marketing and services normally offered by an academic library. It managed to become one of the Library rebranding strategies which applied visual, values and emotional approach. This initiative had benefitted the APEX community through the concept of a mobile library that adopts the idea 'if you don't come to the library, the library will go to you'. It helped in giving services directly to the customers and showed that the library cares about the customer's needs and strives for friendly, efficient, effective and dynamic services.

Virtual Marketing

The rapid growth of technology has been harnessed by PHS to gain more interactions with the customers. In the past interaction occurs physically, but now the interaction is expanded into a virtual form. Among the advantages of virtual interaction is that it is quick and easy which allows

questions to be answered without the presence of customers in person. Facebook, blog, Twitter, and Tumblr are now widely used by all and therefore have attracted the attention of the Library to use them as effective marketing tools.

Recognising the rising importance of the virtual marketing strategies and wide use of social media, PHS joined the crowd by creating facebook accounts, blogs, tumblr, and e-newsletters. PHS has its own facebook account starting 16 March 2010, which can be accessed through this official name: Perpustakaan Hamzah Sendut, Universiti Sains Malaysia. Handling an official library facebook is not as easy as handling personal accounts. Each post or statement in the facebook must be answerable to management because it represents the organisational standpoint. Most of the time facebook administrators need to be aware the unofficial nature of facebook and the official nature of every organisational statement or posts. Thus, the administrator must know the distinction between how to post an official statement leisurely to ensure good acceptance from customers. Until 16 July 2013, PHS received a total of 4,447 facebook like with average 108 likes per month. Obviously facebook brings a lot of benefit to the library and customers. Indirectly, this virtual medium serves as an alternative interaction to e-mail and the traditional complaint box.

Blog is another virtual medium used by PHS to deliver important information. It can be accessed via the following link: http://hamzahsendutlibrary.wordpress.com/. Blog namely 'PHS Blog' was registered on 30 November 2009 and has since been fully utilised to record all the activities that take place in the library throughout the year. Normally, this blog will be updated once a month depending on the frequency of activities that took place. Until 17 July 2013, the blog had received 15,356 hits that reflect its importance and popularity.

The Library is not far behind in creating its own Tumblr account on 28 August 2012 which can be accessed through http://hamzahsendutlibrary.tumblr.com/. Tumblr is a site in the form of mini blog which allows administrators to upload photos, videos and short texts. PHS has uploaded old photos, photos of activities and corporate videos onto this site.

PHS also promotes the services, facilities and collections through a virtual bulletin called 'PHS & U: Connecting library with APEX community'. This e-bulletin is published mainly to inform customers of news and useful information about the Library. To date, a total of 6 issues were produced from January 2011 to December 2012. In each issue, the editor will choose a specific department of the Library to be highlighted through 'zoom in' slot. In addition, a column namely 'Happening @ PHS' is also dedicated to display photos of activities that were held at the Library. So far, the Library is getting good feedback from the campus community regarding the information given in PHS & U.

In short, the diversity of virtual marketing techniques used by PHS has help a lot in promoting the Library as well as to reduce the gap with the APEX community. The Library's facebook has become an effective channel for disseminating information to customers promptly. Besides, it enables the customers to communicate, lodge complaints, give suggestions and enquire directly to the Library. As for the Library blog, the narrative of every post is made more detailed in the form of reports aimed to inform the public about the programmes that were held in the Library. It provides useful information for customers with the link to PHS facts and figures, questionnaires, guide books and bulletins. In short, this blog has become an alternative references to the Library's official website especially for those who want to get extra information about PHS.

PHS TumblR is suitable for customers who want to get close to the library through photography, video and illustration. Customers will be able to get updates on new acquisitions that are uploaded in this account. Lastly, the e-bulletin acts as an intermediary between library and campus community in giving them a clear picture of the services or facilities offered. It is very helpful in promoting every library departments, particularly how things are done behind the scenes, tips and guides on how to fully utilise library services and facilities.

Hence, PHS will continue to empower itself with the latest technology and developments in order to walk hand in hand with our customers who come from diverse background and wish to be kept updated through the latest social media.

Conclusion

PHS with its Customer Squad has successfully rebranded promotional programmes and outreach with specific focus on the needs and demographics criteria of users. Promotional efforts and marketing strategies will be enhanced to provide excellent services to the customers in support of the University's aspirations. Promotional and marketing activities can be used as a benchmark to continue the legacy of customer engagement through new marketing techniques that will be explored by librarians in the future.

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