Broken Library Communications and how to fix them

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It’s time for librarians to leave the OLD and BROKEN WAYS of communicating behind…

(N.B. We’re not saying ditch phones though)
1. All those ENDLESS WORDY UNREAD EMAILS.

Did you know - the average email OPEN RATE at Universities is ONLY 20%? If you’re only sending emails, you’re only reaching some of your users.
2. Those EMBARRASSING SIGNS with TERRIBLE FONTS and UNFORGIVABLE CLIPART.

(What’s that you say? ‘No-one does these anymore?’ Not true. We’ve seen them.)
3. All that LIBRARY JARGON (OPAC, classmarks, holds, Boolean, Shibboleth, periodicals, full-text, indexing) that make users go ‘HUH?!?’

If you have to explain what the word means you shouldn’t be using it. End of.
4. Pushing PRODUCT NAMES & ACRONYMS that mean nothing to our users, instead of SELLING THE BENEFITS of using our products and services.
5. All that NEGATIVE MESSAGING which focuses on what users CAN’T DO, rather than on what they CAN DO. Your users need to feel welcomed rather than that they’ve been caught trespassing!
6. Library staff who are UNFRIENDLY and UNWILLING to help users, or are unaware of either the CUSTOMER SERVICE or KEY SERVICE MESSAGES expected of them.
7. OVERWHELMING your users by trying to tell them ABSOLUTELY EVERYTHING there is to know about your service.
8. The belief that the VALUE and COMPLEXITY of our services is understood by our users (and senior management) despite a LACK OF EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION, or indeed any true communication strategy.

FACT: IT IS NOT UNDERSTOOD.
So if they are the OLD, BROKEN WAYS what are THE NEW?

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In this age of numerous and overlapping information channels, we need to communicate the value of our services ANYWHERE and EVERYWHERE. There are far more opportunities and ways of CONNECTING with our users than ever before.
Making a conscious decision to be present on all channels – blogs, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, SlideShare – in order to MAXIMISE your REACH and demonstrate your INFORMATION EXPERTISE.

They won’t start from the library website, we need to get in their LINE OF SIGHT and, where possible, SEARCHABLE from Google.
Recognising that DIFFERENT COMMUNICATION CHANNELS have DIFFERENT AUDIENCES and that together these channel audiences add up to 100% OF YOUR USERS.
Because social media channels and their audiences are different, your COMMUNICATION STYLE must be TAILORED to each platform.

TWITTER: short, attention-grabbing, conversational, current
FACEBOOK: more real estate so more visual, room for text, fun visuals
BLOG: more discursive, opportunity to present an idea, informal

But ALL of them need to offer ENGAGING CONTENT.
In the Kevin Costner movie FIELD OF DREAMS there’s the famous line: ‘IF YOU BUILD IT THEY WILL COME.’

But this is AT ODDS with the REALITY of communication platforms today. Just because a channel EXISTS does NOT mean it will be USED. Don’t expect users to flock to your website/VLE/Intranet. Also, wear better jeans.
You have to go where YOUR USERS ARE, NOT where YOU WANT YOUR USERS TO BE.
It is now vital that information, data, and support, in other words, your ENTIRE SERVICE, is made available, and seamlessly, WHEREVER YOUR STUDENTS ARE.
And for us to express, in this age of the individual, that we librarians are interested in our users as people – in their INDIVIDUAL UNIQUE NEEDS. And PERSONALISING and TAILORING our services as much as we can to meet these needs.
It is vital to secure the BUY-IN, ENGAGEMENT, and COMMITMENT of your staff to your communication strategy by involving them in its DEVELOPMENT and DELIVERY.

Effective communication strategies benefit from both BOTTOM-UP and TOP-DOWN perspectives.
There should no longer be a question of WHETHER libraries and librarians should be on SOCIAL MEDIA, but rather HOW they should be using it.
In a nutshell you should be on SOCIAL MEDIA for:

CONVERSATION; to PROMOTE your services and support; to ENGAGE with your users; and ADVISE them on BEST PRACTICE USE of its many channels for academic & career-based purposes.
Specifically, people coming to Twitter have the mindset to DISCOVER AND EXPLORE, so we librarians absolutely must INHABIT and KNOW ABOUT THAT SPACE to help them on that journey.
We have far more COMPETITION than ever for the ATTENTION of our users, and what is more, everyone’s ATTENTION SPAN is shorter, so we have to make a more concerted effort to craft ENGAGING CONTENT.
In addition to your website, posters and presence on various channels, you need screens displaying content that actively advertise your SERVICES.
Also use them to promote institution-wide events, or to comment on current information-related news stories. This will show that you are keyed into both the CULTURE of your workplace and the WIDER WORLD around you.
Use BEAUTIFUL or ARRESTING images to connect with your users, drawing them into your messages and content.
Craft JOURNALISTIC HEADLINES to hook users into your content (although don’t stoop quite as low as tabloid newspapers).
Employ ‘CALLS TO ACTION’ at the end of blogs, Facebook posts, and in tweets, in order to engage and converse with your audiences.
Create content which is both EASY TO CONSUME and DISPOSABLE: the information equivalent of takeaway food. They will COME BACK FOR MORE.
Don’t be afraid to inject a sense of humour in your communications. Use FUNNY IMAGES or stories to entertain your reader. 19% of YouTube is cats!

INFORMALITY make us more APPROACHABLE and does not have to equal UNPROFESSIONAL. Today we need to step into the culture of the Internet.
Remember that CONTENT IS KING. There is no value in being on a communication channel unless your users RESPOND to, ENGAGE with, and ENJOY, your content.
Continue to send emails, but do so LESS FREQUENTLY, in a more TARGETED way (to specific groups), and with ONE KEY MESSAGE. But NEVER rely on email as the ONLY means of communication.
TEACHING and TRAINING in the classroom is one of the best ways of ENGAGING, and COMMUNICATING with, your audiences. Fight for space on the TIMETABLE and seek to make library sessions compulsory.
ALWAYS seek INTERACTION in the classroom: volunteers to demonstrate databases, games and competitions, hands-on elements, Q&As, voting. Above all, seek to make sessions FUN and MEMORABLE.
Teaching sessions should be as much about BREAKING DOWN PRE-CONCEPTIONS and proving that we are NOT what they think we are (as much as about the services we offer).

We should also be aiming to move into ‘NEW MARKET SPACES’ with our teaching: SOCIAL MEDIA, CREATIVE COMMONS, OPEN ACCESS, etc.
TEACHING should be INTERACTIVE, it should make time for CONVERSATION and QUESTIONS. Make it worth their while.

It should also communicate that we can PRESENT, but also that we can LISTEN.
It is also key for all staff to GO THE EXTRA MILE thereby communicating that we are invested in, and CARE about, the service we are offering.

Expectations of libraries and librarians are SO LOW that it should not be difficult to be seen to do this. Its an EASY WIN for librarians everywhere.
Today we have to be FASTER THAN EVER. Users won’t wait as long as they used to. We need to match their HIGHER EXPECTATIONS and the TECHNOLOGY they’re accustomed to.

They use INSTANT MESSAGING, so should we.
Only point out what is valuable to the user AT THE TIME. Get to the root of the enquiry but don’t overdo the detail.

Being too helpful, is sometimes UNHELPFUL.
The TIMELINESS of your support offering is key. Don’t communicate offers at an arbitrary time convenient to you, but at a genuine POINT OF NEED.
Provide users with multiple opportunities to tell you WHAT THEY THINK and NEED: staff-student committee, focus groups, social media, session feedback.

The most SUCCESSFUL communication is TWO-WAY.
Only by SPENDING QUALITY TIME with our users and learning what they engage with can we hope to MEET THEIR REAL NEEDS.
Offer support CROWDSURFING-STYLE: be there throughout their course and work with other institutional stakeholders (IT, Careers, Course Administration, Marketing) to offer a comprehensive SUPPORT PACKAGE.

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Always seek to communicate the END RESULTS of using your services. Communicate the fact that THEIR SUCCESS IS YOUR GOAL TOO.
Do all of the above but...

Don’t lose sight of the BIGGER INSTITUTIONAL PICTURE. Be sure to communicate how your service is ALIGNED WITH THE OBJECTIVES of your organisation. You MUST be seen to be rowing in the same direction.
Fixed. You’re welcome.

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