

Checking Out the Competition

Marketing Lessons from Google

Deborah Lee

It seems everywhere you turn, you find Google. As a library instruction librarian, the number one request from the faculty I work with is: “Can you get my students to use something other than Google for their papers?!” I’ve noticed on some of my favorite television police procedurals that the detectives now “google” for information. And, of course, the business news is all agog about Google and the phenomenal increase in their stock.

While some librarians love to use Google, and others love to hate the service, there are some useful marketing lessons to be drawn from Google. It’s no fluke that this service has rapidly outpaced its competition and captured the minds (and keyboards) of a generation. While developing a service that fills a need is obviously the most important aspect of any service, this column discusses what we can learn from Google about marketing our library resources and services.

Branding Works

Branding is a marketing concept that identifies a good or service through the use of a name, phrase, design, or symbol. In a market-driven, brand-conscious society, it can be a powerful concept. Google is an excellent example of short, clearly defined brand that is uniformly applied across multiple product lines. As a brand, it’s been so successful that its brand has been turned into a verb; who hasn’t heard their users speak of the need *to google* a search?

According to Rowley, brand names should be:

- easy to spell, say, and recall;
- convey major benefits;
- be distinctive in nature;
- be compatible for all service or product offerings; and work with all types of media.¹

As a brand, Google meets all of these criteria. It’s simple, easy to remember, and visually distinctive. New product lines (such as Google Scholar or Google Books) continue the branding image.

How have you branded your services? Can users easily identify your services and resources? Are related services tied together with an easily identifiable brand? Have you tested your brand with your users, asking them how they perceive your brand?

Keep It Simple Stupid (KISS)

The keep it simple stupid (KISS) principle is a long-standing tradition in marketing. Remember those commercials that left you wondering what product was being sold? Such commercials may represent innovative creative efforts, but they fail as marketing tools. The more simple and direct a message is, the greater the potential impact on the receiver.

Google does an excellent job of this with its simple, clean interface. While some of us may argue that it’s too simple, there is no doubting that some of Google’s attraction comes from the easy-to-understand interface. Advanced searching options offer the user a more refined search, but the initial interface can be used by anyone.

Compare this to the situation many users find themselves in as they try to use our library databases. My library has more than 180 databases, with a multitude of interfaces and special features. Toss in a proxy server and a link resolver, and you end up with a maze of information sources that can discourage the most seasoned researcher. We often add to the confusion by designing Web pages that make this situation even worse.

Don’t get me wrong—I love delving into the nuances of different databases, trying out search alerts, personalizing profiles, and special searching options. And I know of a few researchers for whom these will be attractive. Certainly, concepts of information literacy become crucial in this type of information environment. But the vast majority of our



Deborah Lee (dlee@library.msstate.edu) is Associate Professor and Coordinator of Library Instructional Services, Mississippi State University Libraries.

users don't want to learn how to set up their own profile in Academic Search Premier; they need information that answers a query. This is the battle we're losing to Google.

What has your library done to simplify user access to resources or services? Does your Web page make it easy for users to locate what they need? (Of course, the best way to know this is to ask them!) How many different interfaces would a user encounter doing a typical query?

Integrate, Integrate!

One solution to the lack of simplicity is to more thoroughly integrate your services and resources. Google does this quite well, allowing users to seamlessly pass from Google to Google Scholar to Google Books. Other services are not quite as integrated; use of Google Earth, for example, requires the installation of specialized software. But in general, Google users can easily move from one service to another.

How do we handle this integration? Link resolvers and federated search systems allow us to integrate our resources, but have we achieved the same level of service integration as Google? When users enter our Web space, do we present them with a list of departments? Have we tried to integrate these services into the typical user's frame of reference? When users visit the library (physically or virtually), they have an information need. Maybe they are looking for information to help them make a purchase, write a paper, or develop a career. This may involve such disparate departments as reference, collection development, and circulation. But those departmental designations have meaning only to us; the user simply has an information query and seeks an answer.

Form Key Alliances

Finally, consider forming key alliances. An excellent example of this concept is Google Books, Google's three-part digital books initiative. The first part consists of digitizing historical works that have passed into the public domain. The second is a strategic partnership with publishers to provide digital access to small portions of works still under copyright protection. The third, and most controversial, part of the initiative involves working with a group of research libraries to digitize major portions of their collection, again providing small portions of the work online.

There has been a great deal of controversy (both within publishing and librarianship) about the library partners part of the Google Books project. That controversy is currently being well hashed out in other areas of the library literature. But this project does provide an excellent example of strategic partnering. Google's strength is its interface; by partnering with content providers (publishers, libraries), Google can expand the impact of its project far beyond the capabilities of any one member of the project.

Your library also has strategic partners with which it can explore. One may indeed be Google. Many link resolvers can now be integrated into the Google interface, allowing your users to search Google or Google Scholar and invoke your holdings. Other potential partners may be social or cultural groups in your area, who have content but not the expertise to catalog or provide consistent access to the content. By building upon your library's strength (good public relations, skilled catalogers, and central meeting facilities) you may find other groups that can enhance your library's ability to meet the information needs of your community.

Love it or hate it, Google succeeds for a reason. Examining Google from a marketing perspective may provide insights that you can incorporate into your library's marketing plan.

Reference

1. Jennifer Rowley, "Managing Branding and Corporate Image for Library and Information Services," *Library Review* 46, no. 1 (1997): 244-50.

Google Resources

Here are a few Web sites that can assist you in learning more about Google and its associated services.

Google Blog, <http://googleblog.blogspot.com>. This is the official Google blog site.

Google Labs, <http://labs.google.com>. Maintained by Google, this Web site connects users to all Google projects, including those publicly available but still in beta testing.

Google Watch, www.google-watch.org. Not affiliated with Google, this Web site offers an alternative view of Google