

2021

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Recommended Citation

Crampsie, C., & Morris, K. (2021). Meeting Strategic Communication Goals Through a Sustainable Library Newsletter. *Marketing Libraries Journal*, 5(2), 202-221. https://journal.marketinglibraries.org/fall2021/12_MLJv5i2.pdf

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Meeting Strategic Communication Goals Through a Sustainable Library Newsletter

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Abstract: Libraries face a significant challenge in keeping users, and sometimes even their own employees, informed and up-to-date about their ever-changing services and resources. A library e-newsletter is one way of effectively communicating updates to a large number of people on a regular basis, serving as both an internal and external communication tool. To do this, it is important to establish a collaborative model that is sustainable, can be assessed, and meets readership needs. Aligning the newsletter with the library's mission and strategic plan is an effective approach for communications with an academic library community.

Keywords: library newsletter, academic library, strategic plan

Academic libraries offer many services and resources, but many users tend to be unaware of the majority of what is available to them (Marshall, 2001; Yi, 2016). If university students and faculty are unaware of all that their library offers, they will look elsewhere or possibly be inefficient in their research and learning activities (Chartered Institute of Marketing, 2009; Marshall, 2001). If users don't know what their library offers, when looking for higher quality services they are sometimes willing to pay for them, not knowing that these services are already available, or they spend a lot of time looking only to find lower quality materials (Yi, 2016). Therefore, library marketing is essential in communicating to users and potential users what the

library has to offer and the benefits of those resources and services as well as the library's worth and relevance to the academic community.

Finding a way of effectively communicating with a large number of people can be challenging, especially when competing for the attention of users against the onslaught of information they receive daily. Knowing how users prefer to receive communications is important to ensure reaching the highest number of people possible. When the Nelson Poynter Memorial Library (NPML) at the University of South Florida's St. Petersburg campus developed a strategic plan in 2016, communication was identified as a high priority. After receiving feedback from stakeholders, including faculty, staff, and students, about various communication preferences, it was decided that the NPML would use an electronic newsletter to communicate with both library staff and users. This article provides a case study of the process by which an effective and sustainable e-newsletter was established, using a team approach that aligned with the library's strategic mission and goals.

Literature Review

An e-newsletter is a simple, timely, and cost-effective way to share information. In the past when it was common to have a physical printed newsletter, there were fewer produced due to printing cost constraints, limitations in images, and restrictions on what could be succinctly written in an informative way (Lopez-Fitzsimmons & Taylor, 2005). Starting around the mid to late 1990s, e-newsletters started to emerge with the rise in popularity and accessibility of the Internet (Frisby, Kipnis, & Mikita, 2006). When newsletters began being produced exclusively for electronic distribution, it was easier to take advantage of features, such as URLs that could easily link to supplemental information. E-newsletters can be accessed online or distributed through email, so now information could be accessed by users where they are, increasing the potential readership (Frisby, Kipnis, & Mikita, 2006; Watson, 2011).

Using an email marketing service is a common way to send e-newsletters. Email marketing is considered to be the top channel of communication by 91% of marketing professionals according to the 2019 Direct Marketing Association (DMA) Marketer Email Tracker report (DMA, 2019). It also has the highest return on investment compared to other marketing strategies social media or direct mailing (DMA, 2019; Jenkins, 2008). An advantage of using an email marketing service, such as Constant

Contact, is immediate access to metrics, like open and click-through rates that provide insight into usage and impact as well as mechanisms for targeting content to specific audiences. Most email marketing services are cost effective and typically have pricing based on the number of contacts. NPML pays about \$70 a month for a Constant Contact subscription based on around 5,000 contacts. These types of services are also easy to use with adjustable templates and distribution lists; no graphic design or HTML experience is necessary.

Newsletters are used as an external communications tool for libraries as well as an internal communications tool for employees. It is important for employees to know what is going on in the library so that they can keep users informed, and it is also important to know what their colleagues are doing to stay connected (Ford, 2019). Structuring a newsletter that aligns with the library's mission and goals can also help library employees keep the broader purpose of their work in mind to stay motivated and mission oriented, as well as help them find value in what they do (Davis, Krapels, & McCarty, 2005). Having buy-in from employees makes the employee-user interactions more positive as well.

Libraries are constantly trying to prove their value to gain support and funding, and the use of a library newsletter can be helpful in those endeavors (Spalding, & Wang, 2006). Most academic library mission statements align with their university's mission. When the library newsletter is structured around the library's strategic plan, it more clearly illustrates the shared goals of the university. This can be helpful in gaining support from campus administration as well as potential university or library donors.

When creating a successful library newsletter, the first thing to consider is its purpose and audience. When the purpose of the newsletter centers around the library's strategic plan, it can guide the content (Ford, 2019; NoveList, 2019; Yi, 2016). The audience of an academic library newsletter may be students, faculty, staff, campus administration, and potential donors, or subsets of these groups. Knowing the target audience helps to determine the image, tone, and content for the newsletter. These factors can, in turn, dictate the most appropriate contributors to write the newsletter, whether that is one person or several contributors.

The next task in establishing a newsletter is to determine who is responsible for content, design, and distribution. Staff time and burnout have been reported as a point of frustration in creating newsletters over the years,

but breaking up the work and having multiple contributors and assigned columns or themes to write about has been found to result in a more sustainable process (Frisby, Kipnis, & Mikita, 2006; Lopez-Fitzsimmons & Taylor, 2005). Also, aligning the newsletter to the strategic plan creates a constant source for content. Having content contributors come from different areas in the library helps diversify perspectives and content. Creating a sustainable and relevant newsletter increases the chance of its success and continuation.

Strategic Planning

After a decade and a half of university growth and transformation, the Nelson Poynter Memorial Library (NPML) at the University of South Florida St. Petersburg campus needed a new strategic vision. The library had grown, new staff and services had been added, and long-standing departments had steadily become more siloed over time. NPML is staffed by seven faculty librarians, four instructional designers, and 16 full-time professional staff. The strategic plan provided an updated vision, mission, and five new strategic goals, which included a goal focused on communication (University of South Florida St. Petersburg, 2017).

Five strategic planning committees were formed around those goals, providing cross-departmental teams that connected complementary expertise, facilitated integration, and fostered interesting and innovative projects. The strategic goals were:

- **Goal 1:** Customize library instruction, collections, research tools and services in order to foster an exceptional user experience
- **Goal 2:** Preserve and increase discoverability of unique, rare, and locally produced content in order to showcase our university's output and community's cultural heritage
- **Goal 3:** Create welcoming, convenient, and intuitive environments in order to facilitate multidisciplinary exploration, discovery, conversation, and collegiality
- **Goal 4:** Deepen our commitment to fostering diversity and inclusion in order to provide access and opportunity for all of our users and employees

- **Goal 5:** Advance internal and external library communications and engagement in order to improve awareness of NPML resources and services to support the exchange of ideas and information

Goal 5: The NPML [BULL]etin

The Goal 5 committee was tasked with improving communication, but, as past efforts had quickly flared and burnt out, the renewed focus was to market the library's activities, resources, and successes with a sustainable, collaborative solution. The committee was made up of five key library staff with marketing or communications roles who offered expertise including, instructional designers, the marketing librarian, library assistants, and administrative staff. Expectations were that each member of the committee could dedicate one hour per week to the project.

The committee utilized project management practices, including defining scope, roles, and lifecycle to work towards the goal of creating a solution that could be sustainably managed by a team of library staff with competing work priorities. The small team utilized the Google Suite of electronic collaboration tools to establish a project plan and foster a culture of teamwork. The key stages of the project included: needs assessment and analysis; proposal of intended solutions; implementation; and analysis of strategic outcomes used to measure success and make improvements.

Needs Assessment

The committee sought to determine the potential readership, content, and modality needs of library stakeholders consisting of the students, staff, and faculty comprising the university community. An initial needs assessment survey was distributed to stakeholders through Google Forms in the spring of 2018. The request was distributed via email to university listservs, posted onto the library social media accounts and website, and distributed in person through setup of laptops in high traffic walkways. Questions on the survey were designed to ascertain the respondent's role at the institution, how they currently receive information, preferences on modality type and content, and the extent to which they would like to be content contributors (if appropriate for their role).

Analysis

Survey respondents (N=150) included 58% students, 20% faculty, and 28% staff. There is slight overlap in percentages because some participants marked having more than one role (e.g. being a student and a staff member). Fifty-six percent of respondents took the survey in person, 42% through email, and 2% through social media. The overwhelming preferred format of delivery, with over 90% of the responses, was via email. Ranked from high to low, the most requested content was: Events, Workshops/Trainings, Library Services, Hours, Exhibits, Research Support and Technology Support.

Based on the analysis of the information gathered in the needs assessment survey, the Goal 5 Committee developed a proposal for a library newsletter that would meet the communication preferences of the intended readership in regard to modality, content, and frequency. The proposal was submitted to the Dean of the Library for preliminary review for consistency with strategic plan and goals. The proposal was then presented to the members of the Library Leadership Team, consisting of Library Faculty and Management, for feedback, approval, and commitment.

Implementation

The resulting library newsletter was created with the goal to communicate library information, news, services, and events to the campus and community in a timely, consistent, measurable, and effective manner. The newsletter serves as both an internal and external communication tool with integrated multi-media marketing distributed through email lists and social media channels. Initially, the team decided to publish about eight issues a year, four issues in the fall and four issues in the spring semesters but none during the summer semester since there are few people on campus during that time.

Newsletter Structure & Content

Named after the university mascot, Rocky the Bull, the *NPML [BULL]etin* is organized into sections that highlight resources and information related to the library's strategic goals, initiatives, and anticipated seasonal teaching and learning needs.

These sections include:

- **A Note from the Dean:** Written by the Library Dean.

- **Spotlight(s).** Highlights a person or service that had a significant impact. Anyone in the library can submit an entry.
- **Did You Know?** Highlight a service or resource. Responsibility of Goal 1 Committee.
- **Scholars Corner.** Highlight a collection or scholarship of faculty and students affiliated or within the library. Responsibility of Goal 2 Committee.
- **Spaces.** Highlight a physical or digital library space. Responsibility of Goal 3 Committee.
- **Tapestry.** Highlight diversity initiatives and stories. Responsibility of Goal 4 Committee.
- **Special Collections Trivia.** Fun facts and photos from the archives. Responsibility of the Special Collections Librarian.
- **Events.** List all the upcoming events prior to next publication. Responsibility of the Marketing and Outreach Librarian.
- **Exhibits.** List all the upcoming exhibits prior to next publication. Responsibility of the Marketing and Outreach Librarian.

It was important to structure and manage the publication process using a sustainable model that distributed the work across the library. This helped to make what could have been a laborious process, a streamlined, sustainable one. *NPML [BULL]etin* entries are submitted through a Google form or emailed directly to a member of the committee, and submissions can be made at any time. Entries are encouraged to be short (250 words or less) to enhance readability. The idea was to have a space for each strategic goal committee to highlight an activity or resource that fit within their scope for each issue.

A submission timeline was created for the process, beginning with the submission of content and ending with the publication of the newsletter, as shown in Figure 1. Committees were not always quick to write content, so informal reminders and calls for content were still necessary. As such, the marketing committee had to reach out to the strategic goal committees, who did not submit an entry. Inversely, as anyone could submit content, additional

unanticipated content, outside of the strategic planning committees, would sometimes be submitted. When this happened, the team worked to find an appropriate section for every submission regardless of the topic. Finally, the committee determined that flexibility was important, thus not every category appeared in every issue.

Figure 1. *NPML [BULL]etin Production Timeline*



The content aligns with strategic goals as well as current campus and library events, and provides timely and relevant information for each issue. For example, at the beginning of a semester, an article about the library textbooks reserve program was included because it was relevant at a time when students might still be trying to find and purchase textbooks or were waiting for textbooks to come in but still needed to read chapters for class.

Sustainable Publication & Distribution Processes

Past attempts at library newsletters had not been sustainable for numerous reasons, including staff burnout, difficulty gathering content, distribution, and lack of assessment. The Goal 5 committee wanted to make sure that this newsletter would be a practical solution built to maximize on current library workflows, utilize existing tools, and fit into the capacity of the individuals involved in the publication process.

The library holds a subscription to Constant Contact as a means of managing registrations and communications for library instruction. The tool enabled the team to create a template for the newsletter that would make it easy to replicate the format for each edition; it also allowed the library to use the existing university email distribution lists programmed into the tool. In

addition, Constant Contact has assessment metrics; in the case of the newsletter, the main metrics used included open rate and click rate shown in Table 1.

Table 1. *Constant Contact Metrics Used for Assessment*

Term	Definition	Higher Education Industry Average Rate	NPML [Bull]etin Average Rate
Open Rate	Percent of emails opened compared to sent	19.56%	53%
Click Rate	Number of times a link was clicked in an email against the unique number of opens	6.93%	6%

Before the establishment of this e-newsletter, the process of editing and publishing the newsletter had typically been seen as the most daunting part. Previously, this responsibility often fell to one individual. The committee approach allowed for a more distributed process, thus making it more collaborative and easier to maintain. Depending on availability, committee members rotated the lead role to compile the submissions and entered them into the newsletter template. The draft was then reviewed by the full committee. All committee members had access to the draft in Constant Contact and completed any edits. After at least two people have reviewed the copy, it was then sent to the Dean of the Library for final review at least 24 hours prior to publication. Because the newsletter is published on the Dean’s behalf, it is important that she conduct the final review of the content and format to maintain consistency with the library vision and standards.

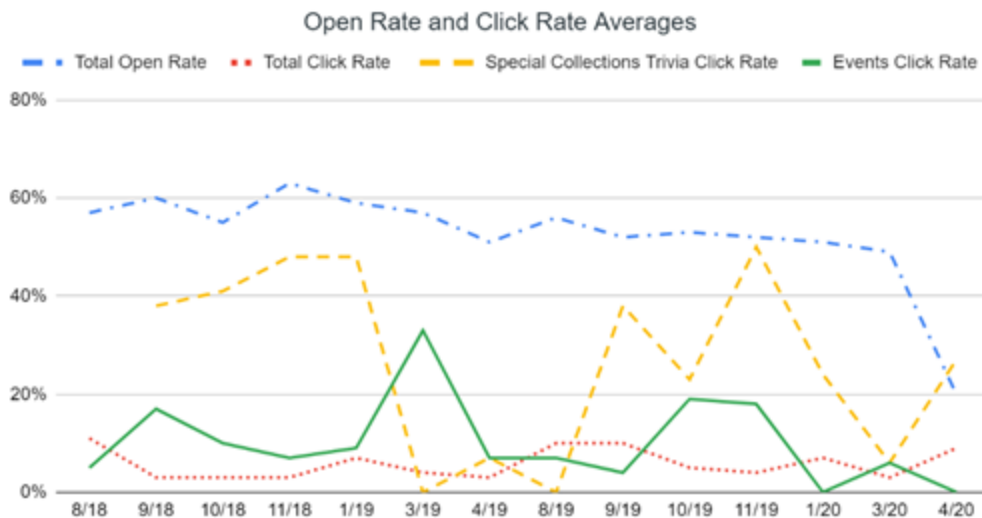
Assessment

The library newsletter has now been operational for two years, thus validating the committee’s approach to establish a sustainable way to share information with the library community at large. As a result, the library has seen a number of strategic outcomes that advance the awareness and

engagement of library resources and services and support the exchange of ideas and information.

Figure 2 shows the open and click rate averages for each issue of the *NPML [BULL]etin*. The click rate information for the Special Collections trivia and events links are highlighted because these were consistent sections of the newsletter and generally most often viewed sections among readers.

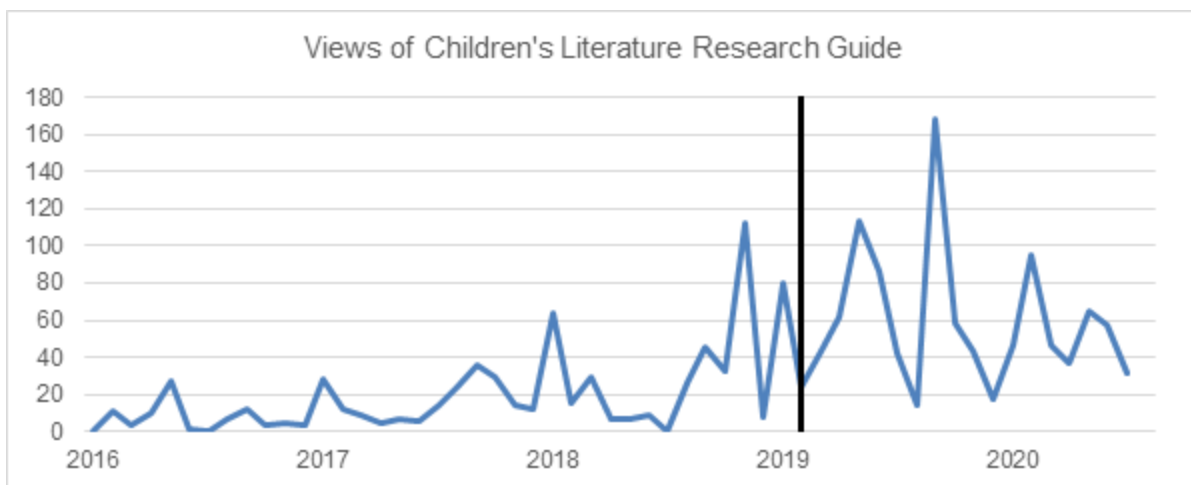
Figure 2. *Open Rate and Click Rate Averages*



- **An average of 53% of readers opened the *NPML [BULL]etin* email.**
 - According to Constant Contact the average open rate for higher education emails is 20% (Constant Contact, 2020).
- **The Special Collections trivia question quickly emerged as the most popular content item as based on click rates.**
 - Average of 33% click rate. In comparison to 6% general click rate.
- **Links to the events calendar were the 2nd highest clicked**
 - Average of 10% click rate.

- **The library newsletter helped break down silos in the library by keeping staff informed about what was going on in other areas of the library.**
 - In an internal communications survey given in February 2020, 75% of library staff reported that they received enough information relevant to their job and to the library initiatives.
- **The library newsletter has increased visibility of library initiatives that could help with fundraising opportunities.**
 - University advancement reached out about promoting a new podcast produced by the library that features faculty research, teaching, and learning.
- **There has been an increase in use of library resources featured in the newsletter.**
 - A Children's Literature Research Guide was viewed on average about 34 times per month from January 2016 to December 2018. After being featured in the library's newsletter in January 2019, monthly average views of this resource increased to an average of 57 views per month. A visualization of this is shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3. *Views of Children's Literature Research Guide*



Discussions

Sustainable Publication Process & Workload Distribution

The aggregation of the content through an electronic form rather than through email submission has significantly improved the efficiency of the publication process. The use of a submission form reduces the potential for the error of missed or lost emails. The form allows submissions to be organized by content area and includes the capability for supplemental attachments, such as images and links. It also allows committee members to track content across categories, thereby reducing repetition of topics between adjacent issues. Some entries are still submitted through email, but this content can be entered into the form by the committee for tracking and organizational purposes.

Because the editing and publication of the newsletter relies on a collaborative approach, one of the threats to the sustainability of the newsletter is the availability and interest level of the committee members. The all-too-common shifts in priorities and motivation can impact the time that committee members have to actively participate in the process. As we continue to evaluate the implementation of the strategic plan, we need to continually evaluate the membership of the committee to account for these potential shifts. An opportunity to better mitigate the issue would be for the committee leadership to provide an estimated amount of time commitment, tasks, and goals when the committee membership changes.

Internal Communication Improvements

During the needs assessment stage of the strategic planning process, one theme that came out was the issue of silos in the library and the resulting communication challenges and barriers to collaboration. Some library staff felt like they could not provide good customer service because they did not always know how to refer users to get questions answered. There were also concerns with the top-down model communication structure, where staff were not always being told information from managers that they felt would be relevant to them. For instance, library staff who work the front desk may need to be aware of policy changes or new operating hours in other departments to correctly answer questions and direct library users.

To address these concerns, the library newsletter was created to help improve internal library communication. The newsletter provides updates on

major library initiatives, services, resources, events, new staff, staff accomplishments, and updates and progress on strategic goals. It is distributed to all library employees, including students, staff and faculty. Efforts are made to try and highlight projects from all departments on a rotating yet timely basis. For example, one issue highlighted the work of student employees in the Collection Development and Technical Services department, and another issue highlighted how one of the IT staff members installed new software onto the library computers. The newsletter is also used to highlight library faculty publications.

The newsletter has the potential to help colleagues learn more about what is being done at the library and create greater opportunity for collaboration within the library and outside the library with colleagues, such as other departments or non-library faculty. Those outside collaborations may connect the library, to a greater degree, to university wide-initiatives and increase its visibility university administration, enforcing the value of the work being done at the library (Vine 2018). This may include collaborations of liaison librarians with teaching faculty or the partnership between the library and Student Government, which created a robust textbook reserve program, helped reduce costs to students, and met state performance-based funding metrics.

Since the strategic goal committees were formed using a cross-departmental structure, it allowed different perspectives and knowledge to be shared among the committees. The committee structure alone improved the silos issues in the library. For Goal 5, this worked out well because when content was needed for the newsletter, the committee would hold brainstorming sessions; the knowledge of initiatives in the different library departments each person had was helpful in coming up with appropriate content.

Expanded Readership

The digital format of the newsletter has many advantages that were concerns in the past. As noted in the survey, recipients are much more likely to access a newsletter that is delivered via email. Additionally, although social media was rated much lower on the delivery preference question, the electronic format allows the ability to link the newsletter to the library social media accounts. This is particularly important for reaching students, because the library does not have an email distribution list for all students. Reaching

the student population is an area that needs to be improved, possibly through campus partnerships. The electronic format also allows the use of links, which points to more detailed information or to digital collections while keeping the length of the newsletter short, increasing readability.

As online learning becomes prevalent in higher education, reaching library users in a digital environment is particularly important. The trend of distance learning has been steadily increasing over the years. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), in 2003 only 15.6% of undergraduate students took at least one distance learning course but as of 2016 that has increased to 43.1% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). According to the NCES there has also been a growing trend in fully online programs, which increases the possibility that students may not live locally or even in the same state as the college or university offering the program. Faculty and students who participate in online education, whether it is a few courses or an entire program, do not have as much of a need to come to campus with the lack of a face-to-face component. Even for those that do come to campus, not all come into the library building, so being able to reach them through online methods is important. It is possible that some of the information presented in the newsletter may draw users who have never come into the library before.

The digital format of the newsletter is now even more important since the impact of COVID-19 and the move to remote learning at the university. This reinforces the importance of effective, sustainable digital communications. In March 2020, the University went virtual in response to COVID-19, and the library put out a special edition library newsletter that month highlighting virtual services and temporary alternatives. Putting out a newsletter seemed like the best option compared to sending typical email because the format was segmented, and it would be easier to draw attention to major topics. For example, the timely newsletter update about how to cite presentations to in-person conferences that were canceled was appreciated by faculty. Since then, there has been a greater shift to highlighting and providing services virtually, and the newsletter has been vital in communicating those efforts and resources.

The literature on newsletters has also discussed the benefit of being able to archive and access past issues (Frisby, Kipnis, & Mikita, 2006). The Nelson Poynter Memorial Library hosts the institutional repository for the USF St. Petersburg campus. Part of the mission of the repository is to preserve the

university business and history, including that of the library. The library newsletters, therefore, are preserved in the repository making them accessible to all. There are many reasons an archived newsletter may be accessed from the repository. A simple reason could be that the email was deleted but someone remembered seeing something in a newsletter and needed to look back and find out more information. Since the newsletter is used to track progress of library strategic goals, having the archived issues proves helpful in gathering information for annual reports or story highlights for university advancement to use for fundraising. Beyond just archiving the newsletters themselves, all library assessments are also archived including any assessments done regarding the impact of the newsletter using metrics collected from Constant Contact. These assessments could be used for accreditation purposes.

Effective Assessment

Another concern in the past had been the difficulty in receiving feedback on the newsletter. Through surveys and by using the technology through Constant Contact, it is easy to track open and click rates for the newsletter. This gives insight into content preferences and reading habits of the recipients. These assessments will provide information to make needed adjustments to content or the timing of when the newsletter is sent out (Lopez-Fitzsimmons & Taylor, 2005; NoveList, 2019).

In the spirit of continuous improvement, a survey to the library faculty and staff about internal communication was conducted, including success indicators for the newsletter. Responses indicated that 81.3% of respondents either completely agreed or agreed that the newsletter is an effective tool for internal communication. Additionally, 81.3% either completely agreed or agreed that internal communication in the library has improved since the implementation of the strategic plan.

Although we collect internal feedback from library faculty and staff about the effectiveness of the newsletter through a separate survey, feedback is also needed from the broader readership. Methodologies being considered include an effectiveness rating at the bottom of each edition and a communication survey conducted at regular intervals to ascertain changes in preferences on modality, content, and frequency of library communication.

Conclusion

Academic libraries offer many services and resources for their campus community; those things are always changing. So, a sustainable and effective method for regular communication is necessary. An electronic library newsletter is a viable option. A collaborative, reliable process of gathering content, distributing the newsletter, and adjusting as necessary, based on user needs is part of what makes the process successful. When a newsletter has a stable framework, such as alignment with a strategic plan, it can make the newsletter more likely to succeed. Not only do contributors know what type of information has to be communicated, but readers of the newsletter will come to expect and rely on it for certain types of information. Making sure that the newsletter content is relevant at the time of distribution is also a good way to communicate important information and updates, demonstrating the value of the library and its services.

To stay relevant, it is important to regularly assess the library newsletter and ensure the content is fresh and of interest. Feedback from users is also essential, calling for the need of surveys and informal feedback. Having flexibility and keeping things fresh will help to keep interest from readers and contributors alike. The library newsletter can serve as more than just a tool for communication; it is also for relationship building and creating pride in accomplishments from library staff. All of these factors can lead to increased library usage as well as potential partnerships across campus while showcasing the value of the library.

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