

Boosting libraries at university orientations

Designing promotional booths

by D. Brett Spencer

At the University of Alabama (UA) in Tuscaloosa, we successfully marketed our libraries' services and resources through a display booth at the campus orientation, known as Bama Bound, in the summer of 2000. For years, public librarians have designed booths for town fairs and special events; we used this same technique to reach the bustling crowds at our university's orientation. After reading about our experience, you might consider using this simple but effective marketing technique at your school.

An outreach opportunity

Bama Bound is a series of two daylong orientations for new freshmen and their parents held during the summer at UA. In an effort to acquaint freshmen with campus life before they officially arrive in the fall, the dean of students and the admissions office offer a program of lectures and tours as well as the Information Fair, a showcase of exhibits representing various university departments in the student union. During the Information Fair, the newcomers chat with exhibit organizers and collect brochures.

Two members of the libraries' instruction committee, Helga Visscher and my-

self, contacted the university's orientation office in the spring of 2000, agreed to sponsor a display table, and sent e-mail to the libraries' distribution list asking for volunteers. In an inspiring fashion, librarians and staff rallied to our call by designing displays or greeting parents and students at the Information Fair.

Sparking attention at the Information Fair

At the fair booth, our librarians did what they do best—offered help and information to people. The “library boosters” used an array of attention-getters:

- backboard decked with book covers and “Libraries Cover It All” banner,
- ceramic school mascots,
- pencils labeled with the libraries' Web address,
- “Library 101” brochures with hours, locations, policies, information on remote use, and a greeting from the dean of the libraries,
- UA Libraries posters, and
- free chocolates!

Most visitors just picked up pencils and brochures for later reading, but some took time to converse with us. Common questions were “Where are the libraries?” “Can

About the author

D. Brett Spencer is reference and instruction librarian at the University of Alabama, e-mail: dbspence@bama.ua.edu



Reference Librarian Benita Strnad stands ready to greet parents and students at a display booth during last year's campus orientation at the University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa.

I use the libraries' resources from off-campus?" "What kind of help do the libraries provide for term papers?" Many students asked about the libraries' computers, while others requested applications for library jobs. Parents even wanted our business cards so that their son or daughter would know whom to contact for help. Much to our delight, many parents were secondary teachers who took UA Libraries' posters for their classrooms or inquired about the Alabama Virtual Library.

The response to the libraries' presence at Bama Bound astonished many of us. In a survey, one reference librarian said, "I was amazed at how friendly and positive the parents and some students were. My overall impression was of parents and students who asked intelligent questions and who seemed very grateful to have information about the libraries." A library administrator exclaimed that "being part of Bama Bound is excellent PR for us" and praised giveaways like pencils and chocolates as "wonderful icebreakers!"

A marketing blitz

We made contact with more than 1,500 students and parents at the orientation. Aside from fostering a rapport with the freshmen, we highlighted the libraries' importance to the students' parents—who are taxpayers, tuition payers, alumni, and potential donors. In addition, participation in Bama Bound encouraged us to invest in a professional backboard and slick pamphlets

that will bolster other publicity campaigns.

Besides the fun of sponsoring one, I advocate display booths because they enable librarians to reach out to students in a human way during hectic orientations. Between registrations, testing, and paying fees, many students may not be able to drop by the library when they arrive on campus. At least a display in a high-traffic area, such as a student center, plaza,

food court, or registration line, can broadcast basic information about the library and help people see us as approachable. Librarians at the display offer an interactivity, warm handshake, and friendly face that is not possible through fliers, posters, Web sites, or news ads.

So, even if your school does not hold a formal Information Fair, why not set up a promotional booth during orientation? What about other opportunities for booths like family days, homecomings, concerts, and ball games? As academic librarians, we must advertise our services wherever potential patrons gather. A colorful display can boost your library's visibility and your staff's morale. ■

Tips for creating display booths

- Contact the campus admissions or orientation office.
- Stress electronic more than print sources in your display.
- Be proactive about approaching people.
- Prepare plenty of brochures and creative giveaways.
- Remind students to attend workshops or ask for help in the library.
- Recruit cheerful staff members to greet visitors.
- Exude enthusiasm about your libraries!