

Risky Business: Building Communication Bridges Using Unconventional Means

A Progress Report on the West Campus Library Street Team

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Abstract

In 2006, the faculty of Texas A&M University's West Campus Business Library (WCBL) developed a proactive and unconventional outreach program idea. The idea became a paper, "The street team: An unconventional peer program for undergraduates" by Michael M. Smith and Leslie J. Reynolds, published in *Library Management* in March 2008. At the beginning of 2007, WCBL hired a library fellow who was tasked with executing this idea. This paper delivers an update on the status of the ongoing WCBL Street Team project.

Introduction

In 2006, the faculty of Texas A&M University's West Campus Business Library (WCBL) began plans to initiate a proactive and unconventional outreach program. The program began as a peer-mentoring concept, but soon morphed into the idea of a Street Team to promote the library and its resources to students at the Mays Business School.

A street team is a marketing group comprised of members of a target market. The team employs guerilla-marketing techniques using “unconventional marketing methods to gain conventional results.”¹ In the music business, street teams post promotional leaflets and hand out “swag” (free stuff) promoting bands. They plan or present themselves at community events to promote the band and its music. Street Team members perceive that the sense of being an insider, the excitement of promotional activities, the free swag, and meeting new people with common interests offset the lack of payment for their services.

As originally developed, our objectives for the Street Team program were to leverage the staff of the library, create a safe harbor for students who fear approaching staff for assistance, increase avenues for help and dissemination of information, and build stronger communication channels with the students and faculty at the Mays Business School. We hoped that participants would gain valuable volunteer experience in a self-managed team, reach their peers outside the library walls, and learn that the library has more to offer than books, while they garner rewards and recognition for their efforts, making this a worthwhile endeavor for them.

This paper reviews the unconventional Street Team concept, its implementation, and progress to date at WCBL at Texas A&M University. We will detail our assumptions, the challenges we faced in establishing the program, and the realities we encountered in the implementation. Finally, we will share our plans for the future of the program as it enters its second year.

The Environment

Founded in 1876, Texas A&M University, the seventh largest university in the nation, has an enrollment of over 45,000 students. Texas A&M University Libraries is a member of Association of Research Libraries (ARL) and is the University's principal research and information center, providing 3.9 million volumes, 5.6 million microforms, 52,000 print and electronic serial titles, more than 400,000 electronic books, and over 600 databases. The University Libraries ranks 18th among ARL libraries in materials expenditures, with an acquisition budget of \$15.5m. There is a total budgeted staff of 268, including 85 librarians with faculty status. Librarians work in a sophisticated online environment utilizing Voyager, SFX, Metalib, Verde and a full range of automated information retrieval services.

The West Campus Business Library – also known among the students as Club West – has five faculty and eight staff and operates in a modern 38,000 square foot facility, serving students and faculty of the Mays Business School. The Mays Business School consistently ranks among the top programs in the United States at both undergraduate and graduate levels. The MBA Program is currently ranked 14th among public schools by U.S. News & World Report. In Spring 2008, Mays Business School had an undergraduate student population of over 3,910 students, a Masters student population of 744, and 63 PhD students.²

The library seats 1,000 students and houses the R.C. Barclay Reference and Retailing Resources Center on its first floor. The Barclay Center contains 40 computers, a reference collection of approximately 1,300 volumes, an extensive array of electronic resources, and is a U.S. Patent and Trademark Depository library. The building also features 15 computer equipped group study rooms.

The Challenge

American university students need an understanding of the research landscape as they transition to the information economy. Professors and future employers expect students to be information literate. From conversations that we have had with Mays faculty, however, we know that many students fall short of this expectation, as evidenced by the lack of quality information in their formal papers and presentations.

Often, students do not find their way to the library until they are desperate for answers, and even then, they do not understand how to start their research or how to ask for assistance. Many students seem intimidated by the library's reference environment and therefore do not receive adequate help to complete their work. This is especially true for undergraduate students.

The growing demand for information literacy requires more information-literate instructors, typically librarians, which is a resource that is in decline due to decreasing budgets for professional staff. Librarians are vital for showing patrons how to navigate complex electronic resources and locating reference materials, yet their everyday duties extend far beyond assisting library users. As this problem became more apparent to us, WCBL began searching for a creative, proactive way to reach more students despite decreasing funds and resources.

The Street Team Concept

As outlined in the original Smith and Reynolds article, a street team, based on a guerilla marketing approach, commonly promotes interest in and local appearances of alternative rock bands. The approach engages volunteers and uses giveaways, contests and special events to generate awareness and interest. Street team members garner the benefits of participation in the form of insider information, free "swag" (stuff), and the camaraderie of being engaged with others with common interests. They promote the band by staging or showing up at events and by posting announcements and handing out "swag."

Smith and Reynolds³ originally defined four Street Team objectives:

- Leverage the WCBL staff – Students would be recruited and trained to carry out tasks at little to no cost that an otherwise more expensive resource (i.e. librarian or staff) would do.
- Create a safe harbor – Many students seek out student workers before they ask a librarian, as they have less anxiety and

communicate in a more informal style when they talk to someone they perceive as a peer. Rather than change that behavior, we hoped to take advantage of it.

- Increase avenues for help & information dissemination – We would increase the number of people providing service and redefine the idea of a service point from a fixed location to a roaming network of service providers.
- Establish stronger communication channels – We would establish stronger communication channels between students in the Mays Business School and the WCBL by utilizing the students' own grapevine and information networks, and in general put a younger, fresher face on the Library.

The working concept included the following ideas:

1. Volunteer student participation
2. Student leadership of group
3. Service provided outside the library, wherever students congregate and at the point and time of need
4. Enhanced training opportunities to develop super-informed users who understand the library system and the value of the library
5. Service credits, letters of recognition for resume packages, swag and more.

THE PLAN

A Visiting Assistant Professor was designated Street Team Liaison (hereafter, "Liaison"), responsible for the concept's execution. The authors of the original article became the Street Team Sponsors (hereafter, "Sponsors"). Later, a senior Marketing major library student worker became the Street Team's de facto Student Leader (hereafter, "Student Leader").

We received an initial budget of \$5,000, half of which was allocated directly to the team for use in developing programs and purchasing swag to distribute to students. The other half was retained to develop and produce recruiting materials and to provide food for the team at meetings.

The plan of action included recruiting the team, organizing, training and assessing the team. We discuss each in turn here, exploring what we assumed, what we did, and the results thus far.

Recruiting

Recruiting included profiling ideal team members and developing, scheduling and promoting informational sessions. Our assumptions were that ideal Street Team members would be "social, outgoing, high-energy individuals who are enthusiastic library users

with excellent communication skills.” We looked at students who already work in the WCBL and hoped to target academic student organizations and even teaching assistants. Business honors students, and freshmen, sophomores, and juniors with an interest in business were considered our most desirable candidates.

In spring 2007, we started by meeting with the president of the Business Student Council (BSC). The BSC is a group of representatives from each of the student organizations associated with the business school. They sponsor career fairs and fun events, and provide a forum to enable coordination among all the other organizations.

Unfortunately, the idea of the Street Team did not engage the BSC president; her immediate perspective was that the Street Team was not the way to communicate the value of the library to the students. She believed the only way students would perceive value was through specific assignments that required the use of the library. She did, however, allow the Liaison to speak during the BSC meeting about the library, the concept of the Street Team and its objectives. The Liaison asked them the best way to engage with their organizations. The presentation garnered no discussion, was treated as an announcement and did not result in additional student group prospects.

During summer of 2007, we surveyed undergraduates about the perceived usefulness of the library. Because we performed this survey during the summer when enrollment is generally low, the participants were not random and we asked our student workers to solicit their friends to participate. We expected that the data gathered would help us in content development for both recruitment and training of the Street Team. By having a better sense of what the undergraduates knew about the library and how they perceived it, we could improve our ability to communicate more effectively in ways that would have impact. Though turnout was small and unscientific, we confirmed that students primarily use the library for studying, checking email and assignments on computers in the Open Access Computer Lab, and working on group projects.

Our First Setback

The Liaison made contact with the academic advisor and developer of the business school’s integrated program called Transitions, which builds life skills in business students by providing guidance and real-life experiences. The advisor was interested in working with us to integrate the Street Team concept into his sophomore course. This class's life experience included a service project, and the advisor agreed that this would be an excellent service project with real-world applications. While we were excited by the prospect of working with these students, there was concern that the Transitions team would choose to develop the identity and promotional items for the Street Team. Since the Street Team Sponsors and Liaison felt team members would find this program aspect most appealing, we agreed to veto any Transitions team proposal that included either of these projects.

The Liaison and Student Leader presented the program and our goals and asked for a proposal from the Transitions team that the Street Team could implement at the

beginning of the fall 2007 semester. We received two proposals, one that outlined plans to develop the promotional materials and the other an alternative promotion plan that did not include the Street Team concept. We declined both proposals and suggested some alternative ideas including recruitment and promotion for the Street Team and a student needs analysis. In the end, though we had spent a great deal of effort trying to assure that the parameters were clear, the Transitions team declined to help us. While we expressed our disappointment to the advisor, we continued to develop alternatives for recruiting.

Recruitment Redux

We are quite fortunate in that we have a graphic designer in the library and we worked closely with her to create recruitment materials for the Street Team. We used the concept of a “new friend request” for the Street Team recruitment theme (see Figure 1) on posters and post card handouts announcing recruitment events in the library. We offered pizza and soft drinks as an incentive to attend.

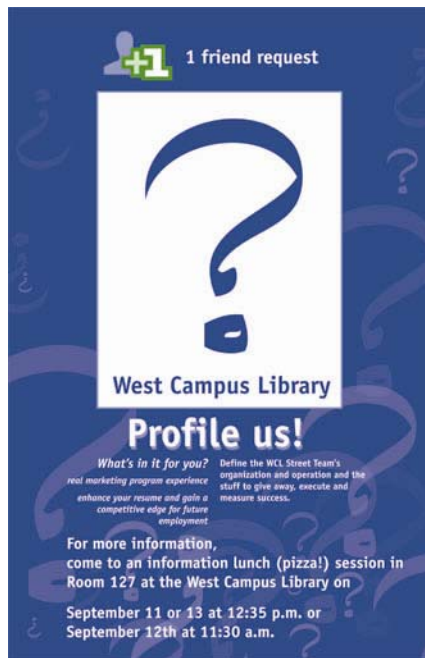


Figure 1. Street Team Recruitment Poster

Early in the fall 2007 semester, we sent email letters to Marketing, Accounting and Management Information Systems professors in the business school, asking that they consider offering extra credit for students' participation in the Street Team. We suggested that students would “gain competitive advantage that will reflect positively on Mays Business School...by learning to take advantage of resources other than Google for enhancing their business education.” The faculty did not respond to this appeal and, upon further reflection, this might have been attributed to the timing of the email or the generic salutation “Dear Faculty.” It may be better to address specific individuals at a different point in the year.

We then identified first year business courses, typically large classes of freshmen and sophomores. We asked our departmental liaisons to contact the professors of those classes, requesting time at the beginning of classes early in the semester, during which we could make Street Team recruitment announcements. We spoke in about half a dozen classes, reaching approximately 400 students. From these announcements, along with the prominently placed posters and post cards in the business school and library, we recruited five Street Team members. Two of our members also worked in the library. We recruited one sophomore, one junior and one graduate student from outside the business school. Though we had hoped for twice that many, we had a team with which to get started.

When asked what motivated our team members to join, they expressed that they were motivated by the chance to get in on the ground floor of something new and to enhance their résumés with service experience. Our members do meet part of the profile of the ideal Street Team member; they are outgoing, high-energy students who are enthusiastic about participating in this program, but they had virtually no experience using the library's resources and most were unaware of many of the library's services.

Training

Within two weeks of the recruiting events, we held our first Street Team meeting. In an effort to overcome the issue of working with inexperienced volunteers, the Liaison and Student Leader developed two-minute mini-tutorials about how to use the library's databases using Camtasia screen capture software. We had hoped to use these tutorials to train our Street Team members before they came face-to-face with their target audience, and to show them what we could create to help them train others. Our assumption was that we would train the team for a total of approximately four hours, but based on their motivation to develop events and materials and their lack of experience, we had to reconsider our plans.

We began with a library tour. While we found that they were familiar with the computer lab and the study areas, they knew virtually nothing about the reference center or the web-based interface to business databases. We showed them the areas of the library that they were unfamiliar with, and introduced them to the library staff.

We also found that freshmen, sophomore and some junior business students had little perceived need for the library's resources. Their use of library resources was determined by the requirements of their assignments and their professors' expectations of resource usage, just as the BSC president had told us earlier. Until they began to have upper level research assignments, they simply had no need to access library resources.

After the most basic library orientation, we decided to deliver just-in-time training, and to focus instead on developing the team. Had we spent as much time training them as they needed, we would not have accomplished anything in the first semester.

Organizing

The original plan for the Street Team included the objective of building a self-managing team. This expectation was communicated to the members of the team by the Liaison early in the groups' formation. The Street Team was asked to determine the meeting schedule, the goals of the team, their management structure, their identity and promotional plan, a budget, and their assessment of how success was to be measured.

The Liaison adhered to these principles by participating in the first few meetings, and then allowed the team the opportunity to choose a leader and begin managing themselves.

The Liaison worked with the Student Leader to determine what things needed to be accomplished in meetings, and the Student Leader attempted to steer the team in those directions. However, the Street Team decided not to choose their own leader, but to manage themselves as a group, and while attendance at meetings was consistent, little was being accomplished. As a result, the Liaison became a permanent attendee at team meetings and the Student Leader became the de facto Street Team leader.

Because the Street Team was resisting the push toward self-management, many of the organizing steps planned in the original paper have yet to be addressed. The Sponsors and Liaison hope to re-address these at a later point.

One important organizational step that was accomplished was the creation of a Street Team identity, in the form of a distinctive t-shirt. With the assistance of the Libraries' graphic designer, the team developed a concept for the team's logo and the t-shirt design. The team's "Ace in the Hole" graphic (see Figure 2) combines the idea of winning cards and good grades (Aces and A's) with WCBL's resources and services. This was a truly inspired idea that shows the group's creativity.



Figure 2 Street Team t-shirt design

Accomplishments

The Street Team organized an introductory event. The team initially wanted to host an outdoor concert, but they quickly agreed that the logistics of organizing an event of that magnitude was more complex than they could take on for their first event. They settled on their second idea, which was to host a holiday movie night at WCBL.

First Event

The WCBL has a classroom that seats as many as fifty people theater style. It has a ceiling-mounted projector with an eight-foot screen. The team chose six holiday-themed movies to show over two nights during dead week, the week before finals.

The Street Team promoted the event with posters, flyers and stand-up signs throughout the WCBL. They created colorful Christmas-ornament-like signs, with messaging about the library's resources, to hang at the entrance to the classroom and hung colored lights at the doorway, drawing attention to the event. The WCBL allows food and drinks for special events in this classroom, so the team served snacks as well as coffee, cocoa and soft drinks on the night of the event. This proved to be a huge draw for our audience. The team also decorated Christmas tree ornaments to give away to those who attended.

Three goals were set for the event dealing with attendance, inquiries, and recruits. A modest goal of fifty attendees was set for both nights, with a goal of five direct inquiries about the event, and one new member recruited. Our objective was to have people wander in and out throughout the evening, grab a snack, sit for a few minutes and go back to studying.

To the Street Team's delight, the event drew almost 300 students. However, only one person asked who was sponsoring the event, and the team was unsuccessful at recruiting any new members. The event did generate encouraging comments like, "Wow! I didn't know the library did cool stuff like this" and "Are you gonna' do this again?" The Street Team and the Sponsors considered our first event a success.

Super Bowl Party

As the Street Team was discussing their next event, one of the library's staff members suggested that we show the Super Bowl since the WCBL was open on Sunday nights. The Super Bowl event was similar to movie night, except that a couple of elements were added. We used the new logo on the materials for the event, including wearing the new bright red "Ace in the Hole" Street Team t-shirts. The team created a football pool for extra fun, and placed a large poster on an easel in the middle of the main hallway of the WCBL where it could not be missed.

The team again set a modest goal of fifty attendees, five questions and one recruit. There was concern that the library would be almost empty by 4:30 p.m. on Super Bowl Sunday. Though that concern became a reality, the team ended up hosting another successful event. The Super Bowl Party had 45 attendees, the Street Team fielded three inquiries about the event, and a new team member was recruited.

Momentum Wanes

After the Super Bowl event, momentum within the team waned. After discussing the reasons for the slowdown, the Liaison and Sponsors realized that the current members of the Street Team have lots of energy and enthusiasm and could execute an idea if it was well conceived and had a clear scope. They could not however, develop a cohesive strategy and ideas to support it. They simply lacked the experience at this point in their lives. It was agreed that what was really needed were more members with a wider variety of experiences.

The Liaison and the Student Leader worked on a basic strategy, consulting the Sponsors for guidance. Using direct mail marketing as a guide, it was determined that in order to recruit ten more members, the Street Team needed to create a very large number of marketing impressions.

- Conversion rate of respondents = 25%, so in order to get 10 new members, 40 respondents were needed
- Response rate to perceptions = If not targeted, marketing industry lore suggested 2% of people reached, so in order to get 40 respondents, 2,000 people needed to be reached
- Number of perceptions needed to gain the attention of people = ~6, so in order to reach 2,000 people, 12,000 “marketing impressions” needed to be generated

Because the WCBL has about 4,000 students a week coming through its doors, it was thought that if a variety of highly-noticeable activities were developed, the Street Team could easily make 12,000 marketing impressions over the remainder of the semester. This idea was taken to the team, and they were challenged to come up with the activities. For the remainder of the spring semester, the team determined that the following activities would be a priority:

1. Develop a news release for the Aggie Hotline, Texas A&M’s press release mechanism.
 - The Street Team developed, in coordination with the Libraries’ Development & Promotion Coordinator, a news release that provided a basic overview of the Street Team. The news release immediately caught the attention of a writer for the local newspaper. A reporter from *The Bryan-College Station Eagle* interviewed and photographed the Liaison and Student Leader, and wrote a feature on the Street Team that appeared on the front page of March 9th’s Region Section – two days after spring break began. While we were thrilled with the coverage, the news did not reach our target audience because they were partying at the coast over spring break.⁴
 - However, the week after spring break, the student newspaper, *The Battalion*, also picked up the news release and developed a story that ran March 31.⁵ *The Battalion* is by far the most popular source of news amongst students at A&M. Its daily distribution reaches many of our 45,000 students, both in print and online format.
2. Host just-in-time, project-related workshops for a senior-level management class. The team would announce the workshop(s) during the classes.
 - The Street Team accomplished this goal when WCBL held a series of workshops the week of March 24th for the Management 466 class project.

Due to excellent preparation by the Liaison and the tremendous support of one of the professors, these workshops had great attendance with over 90 students attending the three sessions. Attendees provided overwhelming positive feedback, and seemed genuinely appreciative of the information offered them.

3. Hold an art contest to generate art for the eight new group study rooms that are being built in the WCBL.
 - The art contest was officially kicked-off on April 7th.
 - Judging of the art will occur during movie night planned for dead week (see below), and prizes will be awarded to the top three entries. In addition, the top eight entries will be framed and hung on the walls of the new group study rooms. If more than eight great entries are received, additional places in the WCBL will be found to display the art works.
4. Purchase swag to give away at hosted events.
 - The Street Team chose library-approved coffee mugs and highlighters as the best items to give away, and arrangements are underway to obtain a cache of “swag” to use at promotional events.
5. Plan another movie night for dead week, with fun movies of all kinds and eras.
 - The plans for the dead-week movie night are well underway. Movies have been chosen and promotion is being developed.

Assessment

In the first year of the implementation of the Street Team program, we learned that:

- Freshmen and sophomore business students have not yet learned enough about programs and marketing to be capable of self-managing a program like this.
- First- and second-year undergraduate business students have not yet faced a need for the resources offered in the business library, and have difficulty relating to their value. Third- and fourth-year students recognize the need, and wish they had learned about these resources earlier in their college careers, based on consistent feedback in classes and the workshops.
- Student volunteers cannot be expected to devote much time to the program outside of meetings. Meetings generated great ideas, but were not long enough to put those ideas into practice. As a result, the Liaison and Student Leader did much of the background work to realize the great ideas brought up by the team.
- Five people are not enough to develop and maintain the momentum for a program like this.

Conclusion

If we measure the program to date against our original goals, there is still a long way to go. Like any marketing initiative, it takes a long time to develop awareness for a new concept, particularly in a generation that has become inured to traditional marketing.

- We have yet to see the leveraging of library staff.
- We have not yet significantly increased the avenues of information flow.
- We have, however, begun to open communication channels.
- We have not yet created that safe harbor for students.

REALIZATIONS AND RESOLUTIONS

The Student Leader graduated in May. We lost our biggest asset – a trained, credible peer of business students, a Marketing major who contributed to every aspect of the program’s execution. To fill this position, the library’s marketing liaison, who is also one of the Sponsors, will approach faculty colleagues in the Marketing Department to seek approval for a Senior marketing major to serve as student liaison to the team as an independent study.

We need to focus on recruiting more juniors for the Street Team so that there is a built-in appreciation for the resources available to them in the library. At the same time, based on the feedback from students, we need to start working with the professors of sophomore-level classes to require basic resource literacy.

Based on informal conversations with business professors, we find that they believe students had library training before coming to college, and certainly before their senior year. Information and resource literacy is taught at A&M in the freshman English class but many business majors place out of freshman English. Because Mays is a highly ranked business school, acceptance is competitive, and business students are generally in the top of their classes in high school.

We realize that we need to understand the BSC priorities so we can more effectively align our priorities with theirs. We might re-engage with the Transitions program, possibly at a junior class level, to offer another opportunity for a project to help us improve the Street Team concept. Additionally, we may need to be more selective in deciding which organizations we address and target more appropriate business student organizations.

The Sponsors need to be more closely involved and provide real-time consultation for the Liaison to facilitate faster and more effective program changes.

We need to realign our expectations of what the Street Team can accomplish. Even though the most frequently recorded comment on training evaluations is that attendees wish they had known about the library’s resources sooner in their college

careers, the reality is that there is little perceived need among business students. We need to make sure that the Street Team makes the connection for students so that at the time of need, they are called on to help.

We will continue with and improve our awareness generation, to develop an association between the Street Team and the library resources. Over time, awareness will grow, the Street Team will become more productive, and our goals can and will be met.

The genuine enthusiasm of the Street Team, their spot-on ideas, and their continued support gives us this confidence.

Endnotes

¹ Shari Caudron, "Guerilla tactics," *Industry Week*, 250(10): 52-57.

² Texas A&M University Office of Institutional Studies and Planning, "Enrollment Profile – Spring 2008, Official Certified 12th Day Class Data," Texas A&M University Web site, http://www.tamu.edu/opir/reports/ep/epsp2008_certified.pdf, accessed April 20, 2008.

³ Michael M. Smith and Leslie J. Reynolds, "The street team: An unconventional peer program for undergraduates," *Library Management*, 29(3): 145-158.

⁴ Holly Huffman, "Students market business library," *The Eagle*, March 9, 2008, <http://www.theeagle.com/local/Students-market-business-library>, accessed March 2008.

⁵ Melissa Appel, "Library forms team to increase research resource knowledge," *The Battalion*, March 31, 2008, <http://media.www.thebatt.com/media/storage/paper657/news/2008/03/31/News/Library.Forms.Team.To.Increase.Research.Resource.Knowledge-3291876.shtml>, accessed April 17, 2008.