

## **Reaching out, building bonds: NUS Libraries for knowledge, for inspiration, for life.**

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### **Abstract:**

In today's environment, regardless of type, libraries are now pit against a myriad of competitors and challengers to their core services of information acquisition and provision. Gone are the days when libraries were by default the first place to which people would turn to meet their information needs. In the university environment, user needs, behaviors and expectations have been shaped by such externalities too, and to stay afloat many academic libraries are under great pressures to constantly justify their existence.

Recognising the competition to its core services, the NUS Libraries (NUSL) strives to position itself as an institution which compliments today's information environment through branding to further enhance and develop services based on a customer-centric approach. This paper looks at the NUSL's efforts in moving forward to assert its place as an institutional service organisation, not solely in the traditional area of providing access to information, but also in developing itself as a place for knowledge, for inspiration, and for life to its user community.

### **Introduction**

The National University of Singapore (NUS) is recognized as the most established and prestigious research university in Singapore. It is a comprehensive university offering a broad-based curriculum underscored by multi-disciplinary courses and cross-faculty enrichment. The University has 13 faculties and schools, including a music conservatory, with an enrolment of more than 23,000 undergraduates, 9,000 graduate students, and 6,600 academic, research and general staff. Currently, it also has five overseas colleges at major entrepreneurial hubs in Silicon Valley, Bio Valley, Shanghai, Stockholm and Bangalore.

The NUS Libraries comprises 7 libraries, namely, the Central Library, the Chinese Library, the CJ Koh Law Library, the Hon Sui Sen Memorial Library, the Medical Library, the Music Library and the Science Library. Its primary clients are the NUS students, teaching, research and administrative staff members, as well as a sizeable group of external members. Its collection encompasses subjects in architecture, building and real estate, business, dentistry, engineering and technology, the humanities and social sciences, law, medicine, music, nursing and science. As of June 2006, there are over 1.2 million print titles, 33,000 electronic titles, 29,000 media programmes and 29,000 microform resources in the collection.

Like many academic libraries around the world, NUSL is challenged by the changing perceptions and behaviours of its academic community as a result of changing information environment brought about by advancements in internet and communication technology. Today the NUSL has lost its exclusive position as the University community's first stop for information and no longer enjoys the once taken for granted privileged position of being seen as the "heart" of the university. In the context of this new information environment, NUSL now strives to be more visible by embracing the concept of strategic marketing and placing much emphasis on outreach activities in its annual strategic plans. This paper will

share the journey that the NUSL embarked upon to position itself as a place “for knowledge, for inspiration, for life”.

### **Recognising challenges in our changing environment**

Libraries today are constantly required to justify the impact of their services to their stakeholders. To remain relevant to its users, it is crucial that NUSL reasserts its position in the university community through strategic marketing.

“Marketing involves finding out what the users want, then setting out to meet those needs, and implies that, although librarians have in one way or another engaged in assessing the user needs, there is need to embrace the total market function involving market research and analysis, service planning and promotion” (Kavulya, 2004, pg. 118).

In line with strategic marketing model, NUSL identified the following key changes in today’s information landscape that challenges its position as THE information provider of specialised content to its community of users:

#### Increasing open access content

Users’ reliance on libraries as intermediaries for information is greatly impacted as content used in the realm of academia is now gaining more prominence on the web. What were previously individual and community driven initiatives to digitise and provide free access to content, such as the Network of Digitized Dissertations and Thesis and the Gutenberg Project, have now been expanded through massive digitisation projects led by commercial giants such as Google, Microsoft and Yahoo. There is no doubt that open access content will increase dramatically in the near future.

In addition, new business models introduced by publishers and book vendors provide users direct, more convenient and cheaper access to titles. “Pay per view” has become such a viable and prominent option that in recent years most if not all journal databases have adopted this value added feature. One latest example of such is Elsevier’s *ScienceDirect* database which recently included a new feature allowing anyone to log in as a “guest user” and to purchase relevant full text articles when searching for information.

#### The new media environment

In today’s landscape of rapid innovation and adoption of new media devices such as wikis, blogs, podcasts, youtube and myspace, alternative content can now be easily created and disseminated instantly to networks of users. While in the past, content of these initiatives could be brushed off as unreliable, unauthoritative and often inaccurate, more recent studies had indicated this may not be so. In a study by the scientific journal *Nature* where 50 experts from a range of scientific disciplines were asked to review the accuracy of articles from both *Wikipedia* and *Britannica*, the journal reported that the error level in *Wikipedia* was not significantly greater than that in *Britannica* (Information World Review, Jan 2006).

Familiar from an early age with these easy to use new media devices, it is not surprising that today’s information seekers will first turn to these devices for information rather than the library with its structured and sometimes cumbersome and unfriendly systems to use.

## Decreasing visibility of the library in the virtual world

As we move into the virtual realm we have come to realise that the more successful we are, the more we risk becoming invisible. Delighted users, having information at their finger tips, tend to become oblivious of the university library's pivotal role in making this possible.

### **Keeping track of the competition**

Given these "threats", keeping our fingers on the pulse of the information market place will ensure that we have the latest information and knowledge to be proactive and current. To this end, the NUSL established the RADAR (Read, Analyse, Digest, Annotate, and Report) Team to constantly keep track of the latest developments and best practices in the library and information world as well as emerging technologies. Information collected is shared regularly with library management and staff.

### **Understanding our users, their behaviors and their needs**

To remain relevant and meet the demand for "just-in-time" information we need to know our stakeholders well, understand their information-seeking behaviours and the types of information and services they need.

In order to learn more about its users, NUSL adopted several approaches:

- Conduct literature reviews to learn from others.
- Observe the information-seeking behaviours of its users and talking to them. Through this approach we have come to realise that users do differ even within a specific user category. For example, it was observed that although a young lecturer and an older professor are both categorised as teaching staff, their information-seeking behaviour differs. It was noted that not many older professors visit the library and probing deeper through interviews we confirmed that older teaching staff do not necessarily need to come to the library physically as they usually employ graduate students and research assistants to find the materials they need. They also tend to focus on a few journals that they deem as core and useful for their research. Time is a major factor for the senior staff members, as they often have to take on administrative duties in addition to their research and teaching workload.
- Use of surveys to gather data on users - Surveys conducted by NUSL range from small ones, which evaluate specific services or seek feedback from targeted groups, to larger ones, which cover a wider range of issues on library services and relevance of collections aim at the entire university community.

In 2006, we conducted two surveys - the NUS staff information needs survey and the NUS student information needs survey. From these two surveys we gained valuable information regarding the preferences of staff and students. These surveys were also employed to engage the NUS community as stakeholders and to seek their opinions on the future directions they would like to see the NUSL take.

- Exploit networking opportunities such as teas, lunches, dinners, conferences and seminars as well as any campus events where we can meet our users. At these informal gatherings we collect information about faculty's research and teaching interests, strengthen bonds, solicit feedback about the library and also "sell" our services
- Scan the posters on campus notice boards that promote student and Faculty events. For example, a competition poster on marketing provides the opportunity for us to contact the relevant teaching staff to enquire if we could help prepare students for the competition. In one case, we prepared the students by giving them searching tips to enable them to not only search but to also retrieve with speed and accuracy.
- Provide many convenient modes for users to send us feedback any time. Users could send feedback to us by selecting a button on the NUS Libraries portal, through easily available feedback forms placed at library entrances and all transaction counters, in person, via the phone or email.

Views, suggestions and expressed preferences from users are valuable data that can help us shape our services and collections to better serve their needs. Feedback received is recorded, internally communicated and promptly acted upon by departments involved. The follow up actions are then communicated to the concerned users.

### **Branding NUS Libraries**

Acknowledging competition from alternative information sources, our diminishing visibility, and our belief in the high-touch services, NUSL looks towards creating a library brand to establish its value and relationship with the university community. Through branding we hope to effectively communicate and consistently demonstrate our value in a way that will be experienced, recognised and appreciated by all stakeholders. We have to continuously seek and introduce innovative ways to differentiate our products and services from alternative information sources. An established brand promises a certain level of service and deliverables which translate to user-brand expectations.

NUSL, conscious of the significance of a good brand name reflected on what we want our users to associate us with. We decided to project an image of the library that is

*more than a repository of books,  
it connects users to quality resources of all formats,  
and is part of a user's personal space where he encounters quality services, or he can go to, to explore and discover.*

The result was the tagline -- NUS Libraries **Your ONE Stop for knowledge, for inspiration, for life.** NUSL launched a campaign to promote its tagline to users. A graphically appealing poster displaying pictures of satisfied users to emphasise the human factor and to show that the library is a warm and inviting space was created. Besides the poster, tote bags printed with the tagline were also given to new students as an orientation memento. This campaign was launched at the start of the new academic year to greet new and returning students.

## Encountering quality library services

A key element to projecting our brand is our ability to provide customer satisfaction and delightful experiences. Taking a customer focus approach and with clearer understanding of our users' needs, we worked hard to integrate our services into their workflow and use targeted promotions to create awareness of our services. NUSL aims to be not just a one stop centre but the first stop to its users.

To be competitive today, the NUSL believes that providing a high-touch service will be the factor that will tip the balance and make the difference. It is an important ingredient to creating better user experiences and building enduring relationships. Pleasant ambience and quality collections are important but it is the personal exchanges that will directly impact and influence users' perceptions of the library.

The CARE campaign is an example of a step towards achieving the vision of making every visit to the NUSL a delightful experience for all. We aim to instill CARE (Courtesy, Attentiveness, Responsiveness and Effectiveness) attributes in all staff members so that CARE becomes second nature to them. CARE Day was launched on May 2004 to officially mark the day that we will make a difference to the person we serve. It is a journey towards differentiating NUSL as a quality service provider.

In the same spirit, in 2006, the NUSL embraced and promoted the national **Gems - 'Go the Extra Mile for Service'** movement. The campaign message was that "The employers can go the extra mile to make sure that their staff members get the training and support they need, workers must go the extra mile to exceed customer expectations, and a customer can go the extra mile to appreciate good service." During the month long movement users were encouraged to hand to counter staff pre-printed Gems "Thank You" cards to show their appreciation for good service received. For a period of two weeks library counter staff received over 1,300 cards of which 165 had additional appreciative and encouraging messages personally penned by users on the cards.

Another example of our customer-centric approach is reflected in our recent extensive library renovation. Addressing users' new ways of working and life style as well as creating an inviting and vibrant interior were the main drivers of the 2003 Central Library renovation. In designing the new layout, besides adding colour, effort was focused on creating library spaces to cater to the preferences of the different generations of users. Functional hip spaces that are new include a Perk Point, a place where the students could relax, interact, refresh and innovate; Chat points, where students can conveniently use their mobile phones in the library without inconveniencing others; discussions rooms to facilitate group work and problem based learning; and laptop charging stations where students could recharge their fading laptop battery. To meet the expectations of traditional library users, some rooms were left simple with a classic ambience.

NUSL actively invests in creating a customer-centric culture. For example, in 2006, all staff, from library attendants to professionals, had attended at least one course relating to improving customer service. Suitable professionals have also been identified and trained as customer service coaches.

## **Increasing the Library's visibility in the virtual world**

As we open up and adapt different communication channels to connect our users' to the diverse range of information they seek we have to be mindful to assert our brand at every opportunity.

NUSL is represented in the virtual world by our Library Portal – a one-stop gateway which integrates a host of user-centric features to make a user's virtual browsing experience more personalised and convenient. Through this portal, users are able to access the catalogue, news, events, and electronic forms. In addition, users can create lists of their favourite electronic resources and databases and set-up alerts of new book titles by subject areas. Hence the tagline for the portal: Academic, Convenient, Personal.

NUSL is also an active participant in the student's virtual world through IVLE – the Integrated Virtual Learning Environment, which is the University's e-learning portal through which academics and students access educational resources. Making the Library visible in IVLE provided us with increased opportunities to work with teaching staff and to appear at various sections of the online course modules:

- E-reserves – required readings which are electronically available 24/7.
- Main module content page -- links are provided to web pages or Powerpoint slides on our information sources. We have observed that students' curiosity is sometimes triggered by these links to further explore our many databases and how to search and use them more effectively.
- Lecturer's announcement page – such pages can also be SMS-ed to the students, if available. Students, after a library tutorial class, can email us about problems they encounter while searching for information. Solutions that we provide to these problems are then communicated to the whole class via the announcement page. In future, we plan to share such information in the lecturer's blog if one is set-up in the system.

At NUSL, the reference help point is represented virtually as "Ask a Librarian" which has evolved from offering just a simple e-mail service to include new modes of communication such as instant messaging. All channels of the "Ask a Librarian" service are strategically placed for easy access. A prominent button is placed on the library portal with a form which aids the submission of enquiries. A customised email address ([askalib@nus.edu.sg](mailto:askalib@nus.edu.sg)) is used for easy recognition and memory and the "Ask a Librarian" contact number is prominently placed in all library service brochures, posters and guides.

For users who want to learn how to use the Library's resources at their own pace, there are instructional guides on the library portal in LION, the Library Instruction Online page. These easily accessible instructions cover a wide range of topics about library services, electronic resources and how to go about using them.

## **Reaching out to the community**

Another branding strategy was to reach out to members of the NUS community. By reaching out we hope to humanise the Library, interact more with users, and in the process remind them of our many value-added services and to show that we care for them. Breaking out of the confines of the Library, the librarians actively plan events and sought

opportunities to move the library programs to where the users are and the action is.

In March 2006, the Library rolled out the first of such an activity by which users were engaged outside its physical confines i.e. right in the heart of the Faculties. This was the NUS Libraries Portal Road Show which was a timely event launched to promote the revamp of the Portal. The Road Show traveled across the campus for a week. Booths were strategically placed at the busiest intersections and librarians utilised new wireless technology as an enabler to bring services and resources in the library out to the Faculties. This event was localised and strategically planned to reap the most benefits and was extremely well received by students as well as faculty members.

Reflecting NUSL's commitment to reach out to its community, its organization structure was re-aligned to ensure greater support for outreach initiatives. Librarians in each library were organised into resource teams and each team was assigned a group of subjects. Librarians in each team, taking a holistic approach, oversaw the collection development, provided information services and offered user education in the subject areas they were assigned. For example, the Chinese Library would contact a new faculty member from the Chinese Studies Department within the first week of his arrival to brief him about the Library's collection and services. Librarians also held occasional focus group meetings with the faculty members to find out more about their teaching and research needs. In addition, they organised book exhibitions, seminars and talks jointly with the students to promote Chinese culture on topics such as festivals, painting, music, folk-culture and temples.

Apart from collaborating with faculty and student bodies, we also collaborated with other University's administrative departments to support seminars they organised, to promote personal wellness, to assist in their student career development programmes, and also to train administrative staff to search for information.

### **Positioning ourselves with our brand: building relationships and bonds**

NUSL values our relationship with our users. We believe in building on and establishing long standing relationships with them and not just provide a one-off encounter. We therefore aim to serve the students not just when they are in the university but to reach out to them before they enter and to continue to serve them even after they leave the institution. We strive to develop bonds with our users for life, from "cradle to the grave".

For example, The Science Library collaborated with the Faculty of Science to reach out to the first year junior college students who were short-listed for the Research Methods Module. These students were required to attend a compulsory session on "How to use Science Library – Tools for literature searching". NUSL also participated in the NUS and individual Faculty's Open House programmes designed to "sell" NUS, its courses and lifestyle to potential students. We took the opportunity to showcase our hi-tech library facilities, services and collections using displays and tours.

Our crucial first contact with new students is during the orientation period. NUSL was successful in gaining support from all Faculties to include the Library as an item in their compulsory briefing sessions to new students. This allowed the NUSL to reach out to all new students to market our orientation programmes which resulted in an overwhelming response. Orientation programmes include briefing-cum-tour, briefings or just tours and

hands-on sessions.

Recently, NUSL jointly organised fun and games orientation programmes with student clubs. The Hon Sui Sen Memorial Library was decked in colorful festive balloons and posters. Games like “Limbo Rock” and balloon popping were played. Students were also required to find the answers to a list of quiz questions in the Library. Meanwhile students from the Arts, Science and Computer Science clubs learnt to break the most essential code at the start of their University study - their reading list. Competition among the groups spurred them on to complete the tasks and also to create innovative cheers such as “Silent Library Cheers”.

As the excitement of orientation subsides and the students settle into their daily routine, NUSL continues to reach out and support them via the many information help avenues available. We offer user education programs such as:

- Tutorials - include lectures, hands-on sessions and classroom demonstrations.

For tutorials we have either:

- Assignment-specific tutorials - tutorials customised to address the information needs of a particular assignment or project of the module. An interesting development in the Hon Sui Sen Memorial Library is the unique relationship forged by the business library with the teaching staff of 1<sup>st</sup> year Foundation Marketing course. This resulted in students having to answer 5 exam questions based on the library tutorial they attended.
- Subject specific - broader in scope and covers databases relevant to the particular module. For example in the Law Library tutorials are highly technical and cover the research process to resolve legal issues.
- Student Advisory Service – this is a one-on-one session between librarian and student to work on a specific thesis, research paper, assignment or project.

After the students graduate we continue to forge life long relationship with the alumni through various schemes. Alumni are offered library membership at very special rates and they are welcome to walk-in and use the Library print collection any time. The latest development is a special Alumni Library portal via the AlumNET. We have also started to negotiate for alumni e-access with publishers.

## **Conclusion**

NUS Libraries has embarked on a new proactive journey to reach out, bond with our users and seize every opportunity to promote our brand. We can no longer afford to just work behind the scenes and be contented with knowing that our efforts have been well received by those whom we have touched. We have to keep reminding all our stakeholders of how we can help them achieve their goals and add value to their life. More importantly we have to continue to seek and discover ways to convince the university administration that the library is still the “heart” of a university.

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