

10 Tips for Marketing Virtual Reference Services (VRS)

1 Treat your online services like a branch library.

Support them with appropriate budget and staffing for both developing and marketing “the product.”

2 Have a communications plan.

This plan should complement and extend your library’s overall marketing plan. The look, tone and voice should be consistent with the image of your library. Assign a coordinator to manage and carry out the plan.

3 Don’t forget your most important audience.

The most important audience when launching any new service is staff. All frontline staff need to be up to speed, know the URL and be able to answer questions. They should understand both the message and why it’s important for the library.

4 Remember you’re only new once.

The launch of a VRS is newsworthy because it is new and unique to libraries. Be sure to take advantage of it. Get out those news releases. Call those radio and TV stations!

5 Focus on what’s unique.

Online reference and other virtual services provide an opportunity to focus on what people say they like best about libraries—the expert, personalized service that librarians provide.

6 Have a clear and consistent message.

One that you use over and over again in all publicity materials, e.g. “Get answers in your pajamas. Send your questions to...” Make sure your “salesforce” (the whole staff, Board, Friends, etc.) understands the message and is prepared to answer questions. Remember, simpler is better.

7 Harness the power of word-of-mouth marketing.

Prepare and encourage all frontline staff to put in a plug for VRS at every opportunity. “Have you tried our new *Ask a Librarian* service? Let me give you one of these bookmarks with the URL.” Ask 10 satisfied customers to tell 10 friends. Also encourage Friends and trustees to spread the word.

8 Track positive feedback.

Provide an interactive form for VRS customers to give feedback. Collect testimonials to use in your next wave of publicity. (Use names only with permission.) Remind your “salesforce” to forward any positive comments they hear to the publicity coordinator.

9 Work the Web.

Seek links with other Web sites of schools, government and other organizations to bookmark or link from their homepage Offer an e-mail newsletter to keep customers informed of developments.

10 Evaluate.

Evaluation is critical to any marketing effort. Provide an interactive form for VRS customers to give feedback. Collect testimonials to use in your next wave of publicity. Track your publicity. Watch to see what works and what doesn’t. Aim to do it better next time.

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From a presentation by

Peggy Barber & Linda Wallace of Library Communication Strategies
“On Marketing Virtual Reference Services” sponsored by LSSI at
2002 ALA Annual Conference – June 15, 2002

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