

The other day I was in our museum café, waiting for my double shot decaf skim latte with extra foam, when I overheard a conversation. There was a man recounting his experience at a recent meeting of museum curators. The presenter said:

“We need people to come to our museums, and not just come once, but come repeatedly and we need them to spend money here. And all the curators were just rolling their eyes and you could tell they thought this was the end of the world—time to sell out. But, he said, more and more curators are being asked to be part of fundraising efforts....So there is a disconnect between the commercial side of museums and the curators, and you can see it plainly in hard form when you visit these curators offices and even the hallways are old and they just smell old.” Which is a strong juxtaposition against the clean, well-maintained visitor’s side of things.

I think this relates wholly to Visual Resources. We are in a service-oriented, non-profit position, yet we need to sell ourselves in some way. To do this, we need to assess our situations and be strategic marketers. In this episode of Extreme Makeover: VRC Edition, I’m going to show how just a few simple, inexpensive ideas turned the University of Chicago VRC into a highly visible place. Three areas we addressed were our physical environment, print, and the web.

In real estate, the mantra is “location, location, location.” In Visual Resources the same concept applies. University of Chicago’s Visual Resources Collection is located on the second floor of a building whose stairwells are well hidden, down the middle of a hallway that closely resembles an institution for people not in control of their faculties (pun intended). We are well disguised with plain white doors. According to Coldwell Banker, the VRC might be analogous to a “gem” in an “area of revitalization.” To overcome our lack of geographic desirability, we had to devise a plan. How could we A) let people know we existed, and B) communicate how useful we could be to them.

First, take a look around you. I think many of you can admit that your own institutions are rather old and shabby. Well, I’m the first to admit that when I took a good look

around, UofC Visual Resources was old. Part of this comes from straddling the divide between slides and digital. We have old equipment sitting around that some students and some newer faculty have never, ever seen in their lives. And then we have these great Mac cinema displays and fancy flatbed scanners and thousand dollar cameras. Well, we need to promote this glossy side, because it's sexy. And lets face it, sex sells. We aren't "selling out" and this isn't the end of the world. But it doesn't hurt to pump a little corporate vision into visual resources. At the same time, it doesn't hurt to poke a little fun at the historical equipment we still maintain. We pulled out the "best of the worst" from our storage cabinet and made a museum display of old lantern and glass slide projectors, complete with historical data. A little history of where we've come from and something for people to look at to gain an understanding of exactly how many decades we deal with.

Cost = Zero Dollars.

Coffee nook.

It may be restated several times by this panel, but that's because it rings true: people respond to ploys involving food. And in the case of graduate students, coffee is the nectar of the Gods. According to legend, the Art History department once had a secretary who made coffee daily, in the main level lounge. Albeit hasn't happened since 1962, this was a good thing and faculty remember it and talk about it to this day. This gave me an idea. If we had coffee in the VRC, people would wander in, following their noses and discover an invaluable resource. To cover the costs of our coffee/cookie cart, we negotiated with the department for them to supply cookies, while the VRC funded the coffee and tea, while charging a minimal amount per cup (.25 cents). I now have a box of cash in my office, the fruits of our labor, and several devoted customers. This java lovers water cooler has provided a platform for conversations about how classes are going, what would be "great to have in the department" and how the VRC can scan and catalog your research images. Kevin Costner would be proud: we built it and they came.

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| Cost: | Coffee maker | \$120.00 |
| | Coffee beans (annually--we get the good stuff) | \$150.00 |
| | Total cost: | \$270.00 |

Making the VRC multi-purpose

This brings ties into me to my next ploy. Making the VRC multi-purpose. The biggest loss of foot traffic in VRCs today is due to the fact that images are accessible online. There's no need for faculty or students to spend hours in the collection pulling slides, so we've lost our "major hub status" and became a graveyard for slides. With a little creative space planning, we condensed our slide cabinets (or rather several strong movers did) and created open space for study corrals. It was like bees to honey, those graduate students seeking quiet space to grade papers, read, check email, etc. More foot traffic = more exposure. This was reiterated on the listserv a few weeks ago when someone was asking for tips for designing a new space. Many of the responses supported this study space for students as a great addition. To introduce students to the new space and at the same time do a little selling of our services, we held a "welcome back" party near the beginning of fall quarter. We advertised it on the graduate student listserv and had a prize giveaway of a gift certificate from the campus Museum gift shop. We also served orange cheese popcorn, which was a huge hit. While the students were munching on popcorn and other snacks, we encouraged them to take in the new surrounding, sign up for PowerPoint training, and ask questions about our current digital collections. **Total cost: \$600.00 (including furniture and cheese popcorn)**

Our next approach was typical corporate America: brand ourselves. It all started with a digital photograph taken of one of the open lantern slide drawers. It was an attempt at a sort of "stock photography" one would find in glossy publications.

Poster

This image became the basis for every piece of communication the VRC created. We used it on full color 18x24 posters, which advertised our services, location, and made us look glossy and cool. We hung these posters in high traffic areas, near classroom doors and by the faculty copier, and turned our plain white doors into advertising space. We also shrank it down into bookmark-sized sheets and handed these out in the VRC, at prospective student orientations, at incoming student orientations and to pretty much

anyone with a pulse. We also put this image on the Crestron panels, which control the equipment, in each of our four classrooms. Some of you may also have the option, as we did, to add an image to the landing screen of your classroom digital projectors. With our model we were able to use a screen capture of the projected image (from our website) and apply our logo to the screens. It's as big as a billboard, cost us nothing, and reaches every student who shows up for class on time! **Total printing cost \$175.00**

Communicate! Blog & Refined website content

Even more powerful than print, a little invention called the Internet can be an excellent marketing medium. We are the 3rd and 5th hit on the UofC landing page when searching the terms "digital images" or "image scanning." The content on our web pages used to be fairly ho-hum and general. By updating it and writing very specific text, we made ourselves more visible from the main UofC page—a page most everyone on campus uses. Now I've seen some pretty sad VRC web pages that from the looks of them have not been updated since HTML was introduced. Your web page is the most important communication vehicle you have. It is the primary place where students, faculty members, and others who are looking for your services come to learn about you. Now, if your institution is like ours, we do not have daily edit control over our web pages. So to work around this and offer more timely information, we created a blog for the VRC. As you can see it has our branded image at the top. The blog is rich with continuously refreshed content, training manuals, which we update fairly frequently, current art history related news such as the new larger resolution available for download from ARTstor, interesting tidbits, and updates on the status of large projects we've undertaken. It provides an immediate channel for powerful storytelling about the distinctive services, accomplishments, and contributions of the VRC.

Bios on website

You are your VRCs greatest asset. So how do you sell yourself? What kind of information do you have about yourself on your website? Do you even have information about yourself on your web site? I was wary at first about admitting to the world that I

wore a crown for a summer and waved to people from a giant green pepper float, but I quickly got over the fear. The assistant director and I wrote our own personality filled bios for the “about us” section of our site. I actually get compliments from random people, including the web programmer who was migrating our content to a new format. He said, and I quote, “In the many hours it took me to code the Art History site, reading the original paragraph about you on the staff page was one of the only things that gave me a laugh!” I encourage you to put yourself out there. Admit to the world that you aren’t just a stuffy VR person, let them know that you make competition-worthy macaroni art, that you arm wrestle under the moniker “Slim Shady”, or that you collect doll wigs. You are a creative person—let it be known. **Total cost: Zero dollars**

The second part of marketing yourself is your attitude. Your daily encounters with those around you are mini-marketing opportunities. To keep your attitude in check, make sure you are taking care of yourself. Getting caught up in the daily grind can be a downer. Keep expanding your horizons by attending conferences, workshops, and training sessions that might be offered on your campus or in a nearby city. On a whim I signed up for a session in our library called “How to Self-Destruct at Work.” Not exactly a visual resources skill building course, but, it gave me a new perspective on my approach to work in general. It’s surprising how much learning new information or getting a new perspective can change your attitude for the better.

Involvement in organizations & committees

Marketing extends beyond the boundaries of your own department and campus. Becoming active in local and national organizations helps to promote your work, and may just come back around to the people you serve directly. For example, a person working as a solo VR curator at a small college who becomes involved in local activities may find that word of their services or knowledge gets back to the faculty members in their own department. It’s a longer method of word-of-mouth advertising.

Quality control

This brings me back to the man recounting his conference experience, which I referred to at the beginning of my talk. The idea of getting people to not just come once, but come repeatedly. This is done through your product. Your final product is your best marketing tool. It can make or break you in the eyes of faculty. How good are your slides/digital images? Are they the best they can possibly be? We had some issues with this when we were at the height of our digital production. You know the drill, you're so swamped with making images that you don't have 3 seconds to check that the correct image is mapped to the correct data record in your delivery system or that the slide scans the student did last week were color corrected and now you've published pink architectural plans of Greek temples. What does that say about you? We're all "too busy" but you can't be too busy to produce quality work. Your work speaks volumes about your services. Just as in other service industries, one unsatisfied customer outweighs 100 satisfied ones. If a faculty is displeased enough with your images, they will turn to other methods to create them in their own way. To resolve this issue, we implemented a quality control step in our process. We have one student who does nothing but check the other student's work. Every single image is checked for color accuracy, naming accuracy and format. Because Upside down does happen!

Reaching out

Even before faculty are hired into our department, they have met us and know of our services. When candidates are brought in for interviews, meeting the Director of the VRC is one of the stops on their agenda. Not only does this provide them with essential information about what we have to offer, but it also gives us a chance to gauge how much work we might have facing us were this person to be hired. We are marketing ourselves right out of the gate. One of our latest hires came to our institution partly because she was so happy with how the VRC functioned in comparison with her prior institution. I think if she had walked into an unclean, unorganized space the impression would have been much different. We also, as I stated earlier, meet with potential graduate students who

are thinking about studying at our institution. So before they even officially enter our program, they know 1) where we are located, and 2) what services we offer.

So after thinking about how we market the VRC and what we've done over the past 2.5 years I wondered what a professional might say the "Top 5 Marketing Tips" would be and if they'd be at all similar to the approach we took. I've culled together tips from a marketing director I know who works for a minor league baseball team, and the Top 5 from some advice web sites and came up with the following, and lo and behold, they were closely aligned with the things I've already covered.

1. Optimize your Website: use a descriptive title for your site as well as keywords and a description that allows search engines and site visitors alike to know what they will find when they visit your web page.¹
2. Start a Blog: a blog allows you to create fresh content at regular intervals, driving traffic and search engines to your website.² I was told by our IT director that Google loves blogs because their content (based on Google's algorithm) is considered more current, therefore your blog information may very well be in the top level hits on a Google search.
3. Create a promotion or event and alert people of it (remember the cheese popcorn?): use print or email (with your brand on it) as means of promotion.³ Stuff mailboxes, hang signs, and offer food.
4. Communicate often – there are various methods of delivery possible for this step. Email to faculty is not always effective, but catching them at the coffee pot is.
5. Be creative: if it's not interesting and unique, it won't attract attention.

Another official marketing resource is the ALA. Check out the "@ your library® Toolkit" for Academic and Research Libraries, for great ideas on marketing libraries. These can be easily translated to marketing your VRC. Tools include manuals for creating multi-year marketing plans, outreach strategies other libraries have used, and

¹ Found on January 17th at www.scatterbox.com

² Found on January 17th at www.scatterbox.com

³ Found on February 8th at www.visageconnections.com

downloadable graphics. You don't need to hire a graphic designer to make a poster. Tweak one of the stock templates in any design program and make it your own.

<http://ala.org/ala/pio/campaign/academicresearch/academicresearch.htm>

Finally, some advice from a few TRUE professionals:

Going back to my earlier point about your end product:

The purest treasure mortal times can afford is a spotless reputation.⁴

William Shakespeare 1564-1616, English dramatist

And the importance of communication!

For a business not to advertise is like winking at a girl in the dark. You know what you are doing, but no one else does.⁵

Stuart H. Britt, US advertising consultant

Regardless, if you implement a “zero dollar” marketing scheme or do all of the above and more, I think you will find that your **Return on investment is Priceless.**

⁴ Found on February 22, 2008 at http://www.12manage.com/quotes_m.html

⁵ Found on February 22, 2008 at http://www.12manage.com/quotes_m.html