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Communication in Library Consortia

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Abstract

The authors interviewed ten library consortia leaders and studied the communication tools used by a number of consortia. Library consortia employ a broad range of communication tools to share information with their libraries. Different methods are used for different purposes, but a hierarchy of utility emerged from our study. Certain communication vehicles anchored nearly every communication message, some provided secondary support, and others suited highly specialized needs. This paper reviews shared communication methods, highlights communication best practices, and shares unique communication ideas employed by library consortia.

Keywords: Consortia; Communication; Communication challenges; Communication best practices

Introduction

In an age of expanding communication options, effective communication in library consortia is growing more difficult. In every minute of the day, over 204 million emails are sent, 72 hours of video are uploaded to YouTube, Facebook users share 2.4 million pieces of content, and over four million Google searches are run.¹ Library consortia leaders report effective communication is growing more difficult and more frustrating. In an age of information overload, it is now a struggle to be heard over a cacophony of noise.

The authors interviewed ten library consortia leaders and studied the communication tools used by a number of consortia. These organizations had memberships ranging from nationwide to smaller, regional consortia with eight member libraries. We found that organization size made no difference; every single leader expressed frustration at how much harder it is to communicate now than it was even five years ago. The leaders reported they were spending more effort to communicate in more ways, and

still their critical messages were being heard less often by the staff of participating organizations.

The importance of communication in organizations has been known for some time. Herbert Simon stated, "Communication... is essential to the more complex forms of cooperative behaviors."² Library consortia cannot exist without cooperation from participating libraries.

From the library organizational perspective, there is a need to deliver a wide variety of messages to a broad array of library staff at all levels in the hierarchy of the member libraries.

In 2012, OCLC³ surveyed 100 library consortia directors. When asked about what was the most valuable aspect of consortia membership, 30% of these directors answered with "professional networking." Professional networking did better than cost savings (23%), e-content purchasing, resource sharing, and shared interlibrary loan systems (all with 11-12%). The importance of professional networking is illustrated by the strong preference found in the study for in-person meetings over other formats (96%), like



Lee & Horton: Communication in Library Consortia

webinars (59%), audio conferences (56%), and video conferences (26%). The OCLC study also found that to communicate with members, these consortia relied on conferences/workshops, email lists, and websites or wikis. Other channels identified, but used significantly less often, were webinars, e-newsletters, Facebook, blogs, and Twitter. LinkedIn and print newsletter use was on the margins.

Communicating with Libraries

To augment OCLC's survey and to learn more about communication practices and challenges, we conducted qualitative interviews with ten library consortia leaders between January and March of 2014. These conversations revealed that library consortia employ a broad range of communication tools to share information with their libraries. Different methods are used for different purposes, but a hierarchy of utility emerged when we reviewed the notes from our conversations. Certain communication vehicles anchored nearly every message, some provided secondary support, and others suited highly specialized needs.

Group One: The Anchors

Several communication tools are used by every library consortia as the primary method of communicating with their libraries.

Email

All of the leaders we spoke with cited email as the most important communication vehicle they employ. Most were surprised that this was still the case even though many seemed to think that something else would have come along that was better than email. CLIC's Ruth Dukelow summed up the collective sentiment by saying: "Don't mess with what works."⁴ Email is an essential tool for library consortia. But email use takes some finesse. CMLE⁵ routinely hears from member libraries that email is the number one preferred method of communication, but that

preference is always followed by "but not too much email!" Consortia are keenly aware of overwhelming their libraries with electronic messages.

Consortia tend to organize email contacts into lists. Those lists may correspond to job-related duties (e.g., circulation staff at participating libraries) or to committees (e.g., e-resources task forces). The number and depth of list depends on the consortia size and the nature of the list. Within our sample group, email list sizes range from a handful of participants up into tens of thousands of subscribers. Minitex⁶ maintains dozens of email lists to help communicate about issues ranging from RDA catalog training to the statewide database collection.

Many leaders acknowledge that email communication from their office tends to be one-directional. They send information out and often do not hear back. Some leaders find benefit in packaging email content into a visual medium (such as Constant Contact) in order to make their messages more appealing. Others avoid this due to concern that such visual messages might be blocked by email filters.

Website

Consortia websites also play an essential role in communicating with member libraries. In many cases, consortia use their websites as a central hub from which all communication radiates. SELCO,⁷ for example, uses their website as a primary place for information and refers library staff back to the site via different vehicles, such as email and video. The Colorado Alliance⁸ uses its website to provide detailed information that is summarized in other communications. The TBLC⁹ website "anchors" their every communication.

This first group of communication channels anchors the communication conducted by the majority of library consortia. Websites are the pri-



mary tools consortia use to aggregate information, and email is the primary tool they use to disseminate that information.

Group Two: The Secondary Supporters

A secondary tier of communication vehicles was identified during our conversations with consortia leaders. These communication vehicles were used by a large number of institutions, but typically only under specific circumstances or to reiterate messages shared first via website and email.

Shared sites/documents

Collaborative tools (such as wikis, chat forums, and shared documents) are employed in support of consortia work. SELCO uses Basecamp and Google Groups to help manage communication around specific projects, such as the implementation of new shared products. Minitex also uses Basecamp to organize documents and conversation about large-scale projects. CLIC uses Google Sites and Drive (as well as a password-protected area of their website called CLIC Direct) to share documents related to committee work. MELSA¹⁰ committees share meeting notes and other documents via a “library staff” section of the MELSA website. Marmot employs a wiki with technical and protected information related to a shared system. The Alliance posts sensitive information like budgets to a secure area of their site accessible only to library directors and board members.

Facebook and Twitter

Most library consortia do some sort of social media communication. The most-used tool is Facebook, followed by Twitter. However, almost all of the leaders we spoke with believe that social media is not a primary method of communication with their libraries.

Metronet¹¹ uses Twitter to try to reach front-line staff and regard it as relatively successful, alt-

though they are challenged by the fleeting nature of Twitter messages. MELSA and MCLS¹² echoed this hesitancy. While they both use social media and feel that it may garner “some” success, neither could quantify the exact degree of that success.

A couple of consortia have abandoned their social media efforts. One consortium found that their libraries aren’t interested in mixing their personal and professional lives on Facebook. Another consortium noted that their Facebook account is “kind of dead.”

The majority of consortia, however, do use social media to one degree or another. SELCO shares lighter, fun information via Facebook. CLIC shares updates and news from the broad library community through various means and TBLC reports “aggressive aggregation” of library and technology news which they disseminate via social media platforms. Both CLIC and Metronet noted that Facebook helps keep their organizations in front of their libraries. Metronet, TBLC, and others use Facebook and/or Twitter to promote continuing education opportunities, events, and other routine business.

Some social media use may correspond with consortium size. Large consortia like OCLC¹³ and Minitex are active on a number of social media platforms while smaller consortia tend to focus on one or two services. Individual employees also have an impact on social media use. TBLC has a number of employees that are personally inclined to actively seek out new tools to explore and employ that result in the organization being represented on a variety of platforms.

The tools in this second tier of consortia communication are used by many institutions, but typically only for specific purposes. Shared sites and documents support practical collaborative work. Twitter and Facebook, while used with some reticence, are familiar secondary commu-



Lee & Horton: Communication in Library Consortia

nication tools for the majority of library consortia.

Group Three: Within a Narrow Scope

The final level of hierarchy we have identified is typically used in situations where specific outcomes are desired. Consortia leaders feel these methods are very effective, but their scope of reach is narrow.

Face-to-face

Face-to-face meetings are felt by many to be the most effective form of communication they employ, but realities of scheduling, geography, availability, and cost make them relatively infrequent. CLIC supports a number of “Communities of Interest,” which meet sporadically to discuss issues of shared concern. These conversations are built around in-person meetings, and little communication happens outside of these meetings. MCLS and Minitex find that travelling out to libraries and meeting with library directors in person is important to maintaining open lines of communication. Marmot¹⁴ states that the interactive nature of “humans in a room” is more valuable than other alternatives.

Webinars and online meetings

Consortia leaders are, of course, very aware of logistical challenges associated with in-person meetings, and most offer webinars and online meetings of one form or another. The Alliance provides virtual options for all meetings. OCLC provides webinars to highlight new services. TBLC uses Google Hangouts to support informal discussions about innovative practices from within their libraries. Minitex offers webinars and has used Skype and Google Hangouts.

Shared Communication Challenges

The communication vehicles above are used by most library consortia. While they are employed strategically and thoughtfully, there are certain

challenges in their use that persist nonetheless. Most consortia leaders we interviewed mentioned the following challenges that they continue to grapple with to one degree or another.

Trickle down

Nearly all consortia leaders expressed uncertainty in how uniformly consortia messages are shared within their participating libraries. Many wondered if information shared with director-level contacts was actually passed down through the organization to library staff on the front lines. For certain types of messages, front line staff is the most important audience but at times staff may feel isolated from consortia offices.

Building/managing contact lists

Building and maintaining direct contact lists is a priority for library consortia due to the unpredictability of messages trickling down to library staff and the continued organizational importance of email communication. But this also is a challenge. Keeping lists up-to-date across numerous organizations presents logistical difficulties. Knowing who to contact in a local library (especially those larger organizations) can be another challenge for consortia. MELSA has its library directors review and update their library contact lists once per year.

Commanding attention

Library consortia leaders realize sometimes their messages are not given much priority by library staff. Leaders understand that everyone is overwhelmed with information and that attention can be a rare commodity, but communication can be especially challenging when library employees seem not to read emails, when surveys are not responded to, or when event calendars are not checked. That frustration is compounded when consortia staff hears complaints by the library staff with whom they are trying to



communicate about lack of communication from consortia.

Shared Communication Practices

To best use available communication vehicles and attempt to surmount communication challenges, library leaders employ several similar best practices in communicating with their libraries.

Brief communication

Consortia leaders understand that time is short among the membership and attention tends to be limited to the most important aspects of a message. CLIC operates under the principle that people will read the first paragraph of a message initially, but not read further once they have found the needed information (“Now, where is today’s meeting?”). MELSA pays attention to the number of ideas within a given email, and streamlines messages by avoiding the inclusion of too many. OCLC is increasingly conservative with press releases because of “overkill” in the past. WiLS¹⁵, as part of their recent reorganization, eschewed formal communication style and went with a more folksy voice, often using humor.

Some consortia, however, also feel it is their duty to challenge their libraries on more weighty matters as the situation may arise. In their communication about issues facing libraries, CMLE balances lighter messages with those that require deeper thought and more time. Although the latter are less popular than the former according to website analytics, CMLE leaders feel it benefits library staff to be challenged at times.

Use a predictable framework

Many library consortia communicate within an established framework using a regularized communication schedule and/or format known to library staff. Library consortia do not want to surprise their libraries. Many distribute weekly

or monthly correspondence on a specific day and even at a specific time.

Follow library preferences in the communication vehicles you use

Consortia communication strategies should follow the preferences of member libraries. A clear example of this is consortia leaders’ varied approach to using social media. Some consortia depend on social media; others decry it. Either approach is fine so long as it adheres to member library expectations.

Newsletters provide another example. Some consortia have found libraries are not interested in newsletter content. CLIC, for example, proposed the idea and found little need, so did not force the issue. But other consortia employ online newsletters and publications as an information service to their libraries. Metronet and MELSA collaborate on the email newsletter, *Metrobriefs*, that has proven very popular among library staff and allows the consortia to expand their reach through an opt-in mechanism for building contacts. Marmot produces *The Skinny*, a weekly publication providing the basics of what library staff in the region need to know. OCLC produces *Nextspace* to share trends and general library news.

In his review of organizational communication, Dilenschneider¹⁶ recommends additional best practices that library consortia can adapt to better communicate with their libraries. We’ve expanded upon Dilenschneider’s main ideas in relating them to the library consortia world.

Know your audience by listening

Interaction with consortia members is the key. Knowing their concerns, responding to their needs, and asking their input on how to communicate is important. CMLE and WiLS surveyed their members on communication preferences and used feedback to craft new communi-



Lee & Horton: Communication in Library Consortia

cation plans that are very responsive to library desires.

Establish trust through transparency

Successful consortia should be open and honest about the strengths and the shortcomings of their organization. Transparency in both finance and functionality is required. Trust-building takes time, and can be fragile. One slip-up can undo years of hard work, so conscientiously making sure all communications are accurate is crucial.

Being visible is a form of communication

There is a reason that the OCLC library consortia survey found that professional networking, in-person meetings, and conferences/workshops were considered crucial by consortia directors. Interaction between library staff and consortial employees builds the connections that allow consortia messages to be noticed and received. Consortia in financial trouble often lay off trainers, consultants, and technology support people first. This choice has the unintended consequence of reducing the human face of the organization and can adversely impact the communication process.

Keep it short and simple

Consortia directors reported time and again that they know their member libraries are overwhelmed. Keeping a message short and simple can greatly increase the likelihood of it being received.

Over-communicate

Patrick Lencioni argues that to overcome skepticism, a message must be repeated many times over a long period of time and through many channels. Lencioni goes on to argue that leaders confuse “transfer of information to an audience with the audience’s ability to understand, inter-

nalize, and embrace the message that is being communicated.”¹⁷

Interesting Communication Ideas

While many consortia employ similar tactics and face similar challenges, a number of initiatives struck us as being particularly novel or interesting. We share some of those ideas here with acknowledgement that this is a subjective list and does not represent the entirety of interesting communication practices employed by library consortia.

- SELCO maintains their website as the primary point of information about consortium business but sends occasional one-line emails about timely topics to accommodate library requests for reminders.
- TBLC actively experiments with a wide range of social media, from Google Plus to Pinterest to Instagram and more.
- CLIC encourages consortium committees to share broadly with member libraries by including a section for “committee news to share” on their meeting minutes form.
- The Alliance maintains an online, openly visible database of Frequently Asked Questions to provide system-wide guidance and codify system policies.
- CMLE provides community to small, isolated libraries with a rotating feature that gathers input on a question from other libraries in similar situations.
- MCLS personnel travel to small group discussions throughout the region to engage with community needs.
- SELCO, Minitex, and TBLC employ online video for sharing news and information.
- MELSA has a staff member designated for community relations to work with



media and other outlets to share information locally.

- Metronet identifies appropriate goals for specific communication projects.
- Marmot uses surveys to interact with members in a more engaging way.
- CMLE has weekly production meetings to plan communication topics.
- Metronet uses posters to get certain messages out when email contacts are not available.
- OCLC has a network of ambassadors throughout the country and world that share information from OCLC with local contacts and bring local feedback back to OCLC.

Conclusion

Every membership organization grapples with communication challenges. The art of communication is one best refined over time. Successful, nimble organizations reevaluate strategies and shift course when needed. In the end, consortia managers need to accept that communication is difficult and time-consuming. The best strategy for consortia is to follow Lencioni's advice: "Effective communication requires that key messages come from different sources and through various channels, using a variety of tools."¹⁸

Interviews informing this article revealed that there is no magic bullet for consortia leaders who are looking for the perfect communication tool. This absence is not specific to libraries, of course. Dilenschneider suggests that there is too much "uncertainty and change" for any organization to stick to a single communication tool or practice. The process of finding the right communication strategy is an ongoing one. As Dilenschneider writes, "No, one size does not fit all. And what fits today may be an impediment tomorrow."¹⁹

Endnotes

- ¹ "Data Never Sleeps 2.0," Accessed August 6, 2014. <http://www.domo.com/learn/data-never-sleeps-2>
- ² Herbert Simon. *Administrative Behavior: A Study of Decision-Making Processes in Administrative Organizations* (New York: The Free Press, 1997), p. 115.
- ³ OCLC Report. "U.S. Library Consortia: A Snapshot of Priorities & Perspectives." 2012 <http://www.oclc.org/content/dam/oclc/reports/us-consortia/214986-member-communication-survey-report-consortia-review.pdf>
- ⁴ CLIC is the Cooperating Libraries in Consortium a consortium of eight private academic libraries in Minnesota. <http://clic.edu/>
- ⁵ CMLE is the Central Minnesota Libraries Exchange, one of seven regional multi-type library systems in Minnesota. <http://www.cmle.org/>
- ⁶ Minitex is a multi-type consortium that serves over 900 libraries in Minnesota, North Dakota, and South Dakota. Minitex does provide some nationwide service. <https://www.minitex.umn.edu/>
- ⁷ SELCO is the Southeastern Libraries Cooperating, a public library regional system, and SELS, Southeast Library System, a multi-type regional system, which support 11 counties in southeastern Minnesota. <http://www.selco.info/>
- ⁸ The Alliance is the common name for the Colorado Alliance of Research Libraries, representing thirteen major libraries located in Colorado and Wyoming. <https://www.coalliance.org/>
- ⁹ TBLC is the Tampa Bay Library Consortium, a multi-type Library Cooperative representing over 120 libraries in Florida. <http://tblc.org/>
- ¹⁰ MELSA is the Metropolitan Library Service Agency an alliance of over 100 public librarians.



ies in the seven-county Twin Cities area of Minnesota. <http://www.melsa.org/melsa/>

¹¹ Metronet serves all types of libraries in the seven-county Twin Cities area of Minnesota. <http://www.metrolibraries.net/library-wire/overview.html>

¹² MCLS is the Midwest Collaborative for Library Services which serves primarily Michigan and Indiana, but also has nationwide services. <https://mcls.org/>

¹³ OCLC is a global library service consortium. <https://oclc.org/>

¹⁴ Marmot Library Network is a consortium of over thirty libraries from Western Colorado. <http://www.marmot.org/>

¹⁵ WiLS is formerly the Wisconsin Library Services and provides services to multi-type libraries, including some national services. <http://www.wils.org/>

¹⁶ Robert L Dilenschneider, "Organizational Communication," *The AMA Handbook of Public Relations*. (New York: AMACOM, 2010.)

¹⁷ Patrick Lencioni, *The Advantage: Why Organizational Health Trumps Everything Else in Business*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2012), p. 142.

¹⁸ Lencioni, *The Advantage*.

¹⁹ Dilenschneider, "Organizational Communication."

