

## ***Historical Resource Marketing in Institutional Archives: The University of British Columbia Experience***

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In his book *The Image of Archivists*, Sidney J. Levy found that archivists have enjoyed very limited success in communicating the exact nature of the profession to resource allocators.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps such miscomprehension stems from a failure on the part of archivists to promote their programmes sufficiently. Archivists should fully explore ways in which they might more effectively “market” both themselves and their services. “Marketing” here is used in the broadest sense of the term to include identifying marketable archival resources and determining how best they might be employed to promote the archival programme amongst the largest possible audience. People must obviously be made aware of the existence of a service before they can use it. Consequently, archivists should attempt to develop comprehensive and innovative outreach programmes designed to maximize the size of the potential audience while at the same time minimizing the direct involvement of the archivist.

At the University of British Columbia, we have found that one of the most effective and efficient ways in which to raise the profile of the university archives and to develop outreach programmes is through the publication and distribution of historical photographs. Even people who have had no cause to use the archives for research activities enjoy historical mementos. We are currently using our historical images of the university to develop Christmas cards, postcards, and calendars. These public relations projects are intended to expand our potential audience. Such projects are particularly viable in corporate archives established in universities, municipalities, labour unions, hospitals, and businesses. This is true because people in each of these settings tend to enjoy a certain level of homogeneity of experience and background. The larger the institution involved, the less such commonality is possible.

Our program began in 1988 when we printed and distributed two Christmas cards which featured historical campus snow scenes from our extensive collection of photographs. We spent a great deal of time selecting images that were both interesting and would reproduce well. The first photograph consisted of a more traditional or institutional image which featured the imposing stone facade of the University Library. The second, a more whimsical photograph, showed students walking around campus carrying umbrellas in a snow storm, and gave the feeling of a French impressionist painting.

After selecting the images, we shopped around for a printer. One must choose a printer very carefully, as both the quality and cost of their work varies dramatically among firms. Costs will also vary depending upon the volume of work printers have at any given time. One should not necessarily seek the lowest bid, but rather seek out the lowest quotes and acceptable quality of work. Always get samples of printers' work; some printers may promise the world, but it is always reassuring to have the physical evidence of their capabilities in hand. Spending a little time to ensure the best possible quality for your project will pay dividends in the long run. Using the university's preferred list of printers, we obtained quotes and samples from four printers before making a decision.

Before the printer can provide a quotation, you must decide on the printing process, the colour of ink to be used, the quality, colour, and weight of stock for the card, and the size of the print run. A knowledgeable printer will soon help to smooth out many of these difficult decisions. After sorting out the technical aspects of printing the cards, we were still left with perhaps the most difficult decision of all: how many cards should be printed? This decision is complicated by the fact that, the larger the print run, the lower the per-unit-cost. Rationalizing that we would probably sell more than ten and less than five thousand, we decided to print 2,500 cards, trusting that we would be able to sell most of them.

Cards in hand, we began to decide the most efficient ways in which they might be marketed. Obviously, products do not sell themselves, particularly if no one knows of their existence. Some archives which have developed very attractive notelets or cards have experienced difficulty, because they established prominent displays of material at the reference desk and simply waited for patrons to purchase their wares. If one views these ventures as a means by which to establish at least preliminary contact with a new clientele, then displays established only within the archives are virtually useless. Instead it is incumbent upon the archivist to devise a strategy to best market the material.

Fortunately, we had a clearly defined market. Aware that our product would consist of historical images of the university, we decided to focus our marketing activities solely on the university community, a potential market of approximately forty thousand people within a very small geographical area. We contacted the university newspaper, which ran a brief story and photograph of the cards. A library publication which circulates to all faculty members also provided us with free publicity. We set up displays in the Faculty Club and the main foyer of the library. We next contacted some campus retail outlets to whom we sold cards for resale. Next we identified and approached groups and organizations on campus which might be interested in bulk purchases: the Alma Mater Society, Alumni Association, Development Office, and the Chancellor's Office. The response was very positive, and we received orders for a few hundred cards from each of these sources. One feature which emerged from discussions was the general surprise that no one had previously thought about using historical images as greeting cards.

Despite a very late start in our first venture (we did not receive the cards until the last week of November), the project exceeded expectations. Not only were we successful in selling the 2,500 cards, but we also had to order a second printing. In addition to numerous bulk orders, we also enjoyed a very good trade in the sale of cards to

individuals. Traffic into the Special Collections and University Archives Division increased noticeably as people who had seen or heard of the cards came to pick up the cards, which had been prepackaged in groups of ten and twenty-five.

As the curtain closed on the Christmas season, we sold some 4,100 cards. This generated a net profit of \$1,500 after expenses of \$1,200 for the printing of the cards. We were extremely pleased with the result, given the late start and the fact that this was our first attempt at such a venture. More important than the profit was the fact that we were able to raise the profile of the archival program at the university. Many of the people coming into the archives to purchase Christmas cards had never been to the archives before, and often did not even know of its existence.

The approach of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the University of British Columbia in 1990 has resulted in two new projects designed to raise the profile of the university archives, particularly during this period of heightened awareness of the institution's history. During the summer of 1989, the archives published a series of postcards and a 1990 calendar. The postcards featured six images of the university drawn primarily from the 1920s. An initial run of five hundred copies of each postcard cost approximately eight hundred dollars. Unlike calendars and Christmas cards, postcards do not have a fixed period during which they have to be sold. Consequently, they will probably enjoy a slow but steady sale for the foreseeable future. As in 1988, we requested and received free publicity from the university newspapers and set up a display in the main entrance to the library. Free samples were sent to the large administrative and academic units on campus. We also took samples to the campus retail outlets for resale. The 1990 calendar consists of thirteen (twelve months and a cover) historical photographs of the university between 1911 and 1953, each with captions and explanations. The main problem with the calendar was determining how many to print. Calendars are slightly more complicated than Christmas cards or postcards because they can be sold only in the period leading up to or just shortly into the year for which they have been printed. This limited shelf life and the expense of printing made it critical not to overproduce the calendar. Drawing upon our Christmas card experience, we used a mockup provided by the printer to generate advance orders for the calendar from some of the larger administrative units on campus. This exercise resulted in orders for some 1,400 calendars. Even with a significant discount over the retail price, these orders have already financed an initial print run of 2,500 orders. The remaining calendars will be offered for sale at \$9.95 per calendar. Finally, we will produce and distribute another two or three Christmas cards this season, using new campus snow scenes. A much earlier start and the experience of last year will undoubtedly result in the distribution of significantly more cards than last year.

The positive response generated by these projects certainly outweighed the challenges which were encountered. We hope to continue to combine these outreach projects with other media coverage for the university archives, particularly during the university's seventy-fifth anniversary celebrations, to make as many people as possible aware of the existence and the importance of our archival program. In this whole process, the publication and distribution of items as simple as Christmas cards, postcards, and calendars will play an extremely important role.

It is not suggested that archivists should be transformed into cost-conscious business executives, interested only in the proverbial "bottom line." Finally, archivists

should not adjust appraisal criteria to include resale potential and marketability of potential new accessions. While the primary institutional goals of the archives must not be overlooked, they might successfully be augmented.

Archivists should seek to develop new and innovative ways in which to exploit their rich historical resources to raise the profile of archival programs in ways that are interesting and perhaps even profitable. Whether the process be called outreach or historical resource marketing, the effect is the same: reaching those people who might not normally have the opportunity to use the archives, or perhaps might not even know of its existence.

The publication of historical memorabilia is very valuable in broadening the base of support for an archival programme. Although such projects may not lead to an outpouring of support, they might help to dispel attitudes of total indifference. The effective use of archival material to help raise the profile of our programmes is bounded only by the imagination of archivists.

#### Notes

- 1 Sidney J. Levy, *The Image of Archivists: Resource Allocators Perceptions* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1984).