

# Marketing the image: the image for the market

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Perceptions and images: they are important. That's why our latest brochure is different. It defies the usual image and text about library and information studies. What is more, it suggests an ebullient, pro-active and self-assertive profession, one that is proud, strong and in demand. We have legitimate claims here. According to a recent federal government survey a sixty-one per cent growth in jobs for librarians — from the present 15 000 to 24 000 — is projected by the year 2005. (*Weekend Australian* 30–31 May 1998, p33).

So what is the problem? Firstly our students tell that their friends studying other courses are genuinely surprised that anyone studies librarianship. 'Why do you need a degree to check out books?' or 'Who'd want to be a librarian!' they say. Secondly, each year in Canberra, thousands of potential new students annually march into our careers market at Bruce Stadium. They are 'shopping around' for a tertiary course. They hurriedly pass their eyes over the course materials from Universities all over Australia. The pile of library and information studies material remains high; 'popular' course material must be constantly replenished. Similarly, at the recent careers markets throughout Tasmania, potential students bypassed the library and information studies brochures.

Each year several thousand students descend upon the University during our September open-day. Again, we anxiously watch our too slowly disappearing brochures. We have observed and pondered why this might be so. When we have the opportunity to talk about our course, enthusiasm can be engendered.

Our students, present and past, have become so concerned with negative perceptions towards their course that they are pursuing research studies in this area. A Masters student is currently surveying students at three Australian universities to find out why they chose their course in library and information studies, and she will compare these responses to those of students who have selected other courses. The results so far have been both dismaying and heartening. Another stu-

dent, keen to undertake an Honours year, proposes to examine the perceptions of librarians.

We know we have reason to be concerned. There is a need and a demand for information professionals imbued with the traditional research and service philosophy combined with well-honed skills in information management and retrieval in paper-based and electronic environments. But we need to get this message out there to those who count: the potential new members of the profession.

So where do students get their information on careers? Career counsellors would appear to be a prime source. But with a profession such as ours which is continually changing, career counsellors no doubt find it hard to keep up-to-date. This was brought home forcefully to us when we examined the *Vocational interest questionnaire*, designed so students can identify occupational areas in which they're interested. Three out of 220 questions hint of a career in the information professions; books feature prominently in these. Not only is the career information lacking, but also the public face of librarians is notably a limited one which fails to reveal the richness of the profession.

Curious about our first year undergraduates, we analysed University Admissions Centre preferences (our undergraduates select their courses through this Centre). We examined those who accepted a place in our course, and those who expressed an interest, but did not take up a place. In analysing all preferences, we made some interesting discoveries. With startling regularity, students who accepted a place chose us as their first preference — not unusual in itself, but again with startling regularity, they expressed few other preferences. If they wanted to undertake our librarianship course, frequently our course was their sole choice. So we have a committed cohort of students. But remembering our experience at public showcases for our courses, there are a vast number of po-

tential students who are not willing to countenance even reading information about librarianship studies, let alone considering it as a serious career choice.

Hence, this year, at the University of Canberra, we have developed a calculated marketing strategy. We have worked closely with marketing and public relations experts to develop a new way to express our profession both in print and through images. We are offering two new double-degrees, combined with law or information technology. We are targeting areas where we have determined there are gaps in the market, and we are selling ourselves hard — what we do well, what we have to offer, and why we should be the chosen career.

The problem is whom we are *not* attracting for lack of information and pre-conceived notions of the information profession. *If* they had appropriate, informative material that reflected the present and future prospects of the information professions, and *if* that material was disseminated to influential persons and positively promoted in influential forums, and *if* we could demonstrate the potential of our profession, then just maybe we would be attracting more young people that this profession needs and deserves.

The challenge — schools of library and information studies in tertiary institutions are designing and delivering courses to meet the needs of the information profession. Who will lead the charge in changing the image of our profession?

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