Surveying Users and Setting Goals at the LACMA Research Library
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ARLIS/NA 2013 Poster Session

INTRODUCTION
The Mr. and Mrs. Allan C. Balch Art Research Library at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art maintains an extensive research-level collection of approximately 210,000 books, journals, and periodicals. This non-circulating collection consists of monographs on artists and specialized art subjects; art reference books; collection and exhibition catalogues of museums, galleries, and private collectors; scholarly periodicals in the field of art and related areas; current auction catalogues; artist files; and material in related fields of study.

The Research Library’s most important functions are to satisfy the needs and demands of the curatorial and research staff, museum docents, and public patrons; develop the library’s collection to reflect the museum’s mission and curatorial pursuits; catalog current acquisitions and backlogs of material in all formats; manage the collections of the main library and 9 satellite libraries; and develop the museum’s institutional archive.

MOTIVATION
In 2011, library staff was assigned the task of writing a five-year plan for the LACMA Balch Research Library. We thought that surveying our users would not only help to shape our goals for the library but would hopefully justify and validate our services to museum administrators.

SURVEY PLANNING AND EXECUTION
Working within very tight time constraints we picked a freeware online survey tool hastily (kwiksurveys.com). We had last surveyed our users in 2004 and though the findings of that survey were outdated as our user population had changed due to the arrival of new staff and docents, we were able to use many of the questions in our new survey. The current survey placed a greater emphasis on electronic resources.

The survey was sent out as a General Announcement to approx. 400 museum staff, docents, and volunteers. We received 110 responses. When asked which best described their position in the museum, respondents chose:

Curator – 17%
Research/Curatorial Asst. – 6%
Curatorial Administrator – 7%
Educator – 3%
Conservator – 7%
Docent – 16%
Other (Development, Exhibition Programs, Art Admin., Publications, etc.) – 44%

USER SURVEY RESULTS
The feedback we received was overwhelmingly positive. Major findings of the survey include:

- Approximately 60% of respondents use the library at least once a month, with 40% using it daily or weekly.
- 25% of respondents said their research needs are always met by the library; 48% said their research needs are usually met by the library. Other libraries most often used to supplement our services are The Getty and UCLA.
- If given a choice between print and online exhibition catalogs, the majority of respondents would prefer access to print catalogs. The inverse is true for journals. 62% of respondents would prefer online access to journals.
• The two most-often used kinds of print resources in our collection are exhibition catalogs and periodicals. JSTOR is the most used electronic resource, with online auction databases in second place.
• The majority of respondents (68%) would be interested in workshops and additional training offered by library staff on using electronic resources.
• 80% of respondents rated the library staff as Good or Excellent.
• 35% of respondents rated the library’s hours as being less than Good (Average, Fair, or Poor).

Common suggestions made were to increase library hours, including weekend and evening hours; increase book budgets; offer additional training of online resources.

GOALS

Formalize Bibliographic Instruction for all staff and docents
• 68% of our respondents said they would like to see the library offer classes or workshops on using online resources. Topics for the workshops may include Basics of Art Research and Use of Online Databases, and they may be offered on a quarterly basis. As always, individual instruction may be accommodated at any time. In addition to live workshops, short instructional videos could be posted on the Library page of the museum website for viewing by staff, docents and the public.

Build on the popularity of our online journals
• Improve access to our collection of online journals by incorporating Full Text and Article Index searching in our online catalog.
• Heighten awareness of lesser used online resources.

E-books
• While the majority of our respondents prefer print to online exhibition catalogs we are committed to building our e-book collection as e-books become more available and stable as a format.

Engage a larger audience through coordinated outreach

We received some comments that led us to believe we need to increase the library’s visibility in the museum. Curatorial staff, docents, and educators are heavy library users, but a large portion of our respondents fall outside of those categories and have been largely ignored by our outreach efforts. Our goals to address this problem are:

1. Invite all museum staff and docents to a library “open house” to introduce them to our collection and staff.
2. Develop the library’s presence on lacma.org (both public and internal versions)
3. Contribute to Unframed (LACMA blog)
4. Plan library exhibitions that showcase Special Collections, archives, and ephemera collections
5. Coordinate with museum departments to present public lectures and talks with authors and artists.

CONCLUSION

The feedback we received was overwhelmingly positive but it did highlight areas where we could improve our services. Our findings served as strong justification for programs we were requesting to implement in our five-year plan. They also served as a reminder to museum administrators of the importance of the library’s existing programs and shielded them from harsher scrutiny.

For any further information please feel free to contact me: pwolsten@lacma.org.