



Up Against the Mini

by Stephanie Burke

Cars. Trips. Cash. Big vendors such as LexisNexis™ and Westlaw are offering prizes galore to lure customers to their online products and services. While Westlaw is currently offering a Mini as a prize in their rewards contest to draw customers to its Web site (<http://www.lawschool.westlaw.com/>), LexisNexis (<http://www.lexisnexis.com/lawschool/>) is enticing customers to its research system by promising a Lexus as part of its sweepstakes.

With limited budgets and personnel resources, can law librarians compete for their patrons' attention in the wake of these high-priced marketing strategies?

The Big Guys

According to the May 2002 issue of *Advertising Age Global*, Reed Elsevier, parent company of LexisNexis, posted revenues at \$6.6 billion. Thomson Corp, parent of Westlaw, earned approximately \$7.2 billion in revenues that year. In fact Thomson spent \$5.4 million last year on sales, selling, marketing, general and administrative expenses, according to recent Thomson audited consolidated financial statements. Even the Internet portal Yahoo spent \$314,000 for the first nine months of 2002 on sales and marketing despite the plummeting stocks of the dot-com industry last year.

The Real Minis: Law Libraries

Unlike the corporate sector, most law libraries can't afford to include a separate line item for marketing expenditures in their budgets. Many law libraries are struggling to maintain adequate funding for their collections. Many have even been forced to cancel subscriptions in the face of budgetary constraints. This is not a situation where most can introduce a new expense such as marketing.

Whether at a firm, government or law school library, most law libraries are reducing their staffs or grappling with how to maintain current staffing levels in the face of budget constraints. Few, if any, have the luxury of increasing staffing numbers. In addition to facing this

marketing onslaught, the library has the same, if not a smaller, staff to provide services to students and take on whatever marketing efforts the law library can afford to undertake.

What can law libraries do to meet the challenge of these corporations' marketing efforts? Should we fight fire with fire? Perhaps offer a car in a random drawing of submitted reference questions? Offer a cash prize for the patron who asks the most questions in the course of a year?

Most library budgets can't afford such a luxury, nor is this necessarily the best tact to take. However law libraries must acknowledge the competition. Then they must evaluate the resources already in their arsenal and learn to develop their other assets to meet the challenge posed by these corporate giants.

Visibility

The money LexisNexis and Westlaw spend on marketing, in large part, is to increase their visibility. Law libraries located at law schools, in firms or close to the government agencies they serve already have a clear advantage over these vendors. These law librarians are in daily contact with their patrons. Law librarians shouldn't limit their contact with students, attorneys and other users to just helping them find legal information. Capitalize on those less formal everyday activities with users, such as getting coffee or riding in the elevator, by appearing approachable and friendly. Patrons will then feel more at ease visiting the library, asking questions and using the library's services.

Connectivity

Corporate vendors have the funds to provide various convenient means for users to contact technical and reference support for their products and services. Law librarians can follow suit by offering phone, e-mail or even live chat support for patrons linked from each library Web page.

Signs

When the law library creates signs to advertise, for example, an upcoming series of legal research workshops, take a cue from Westlaw and LexisNexis' signs and promotional material. Use color, graphics, catchy phrases and tear-off cards with information rather than plain black type

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on 8½-inch-by-11-inch white copy paper. Free clip art is available on the Internet. Almost all libraries have access to a color printer or copier and colorful paper. With a little bit of creative effort, the impact of a sign can be increased exponentially.

Give-aways

Even if it is not a car, offering free items always draws a crowd. At exam time, I often fill a basket with candy and leave it at the reference desk. It is not expensive and builds a lot of good will — the students really enjoy the candy and spend a minute chatting with the librarians.

Just as vendors also give away countless pens, bookmarks and sticky notes, some law libraries already offer similar give-aways to promote their own services. For example, the New England Law Library Consortium recently coordinated a virtual reference live-chart pilot project. To promote the service, a group of local law librarians created marketing tools, such as bookmarks, signs and posters, that each participating library can use as is or customize to its particular needs. Go to <http://www.nellco.org/librarylawline/> for more information.

Although the marketing efforts of corporate vendors are out of law libraries' financial leagues, their marketing ideas are still at the disposal of law libraries. After all, competition leads to innovation. And if all else fails, let's take up a collection at the AALL Annual Meeting in Seattle and offer a chance for our patrons to win a Mini!

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