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Ask a Catbrarian: Marketing Library Services Using a Cat

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Abstract: This case study aims to describe how employees at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign's Undergraduate Library (UGL) utilized a cat mascot as part of a marketing campaign to promote awareness of library resources and services and to overcome undergraduate students' library anxiety. The authors describe how the idea of a cat mascot emerged, how librarians determined campaign objectives, and the process they undertook for developing videos, social media posts, events and displays for the campaign. This article also describes how the campaign was able to build a sense of community not only among the large university library system but the entire campus community.

Background

The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign is a public research university with over 44,000 students enrolled in the 2016–2017 academic year, including roughly 32,000 undergraduate students. The university is home to one of the largest research libraries in the United States, and the library system is comprised of approximately 30 different libraries, including the Undergraduate Library (UGL), which focuses on the needs of undergraduate students at the University of Illinois. The UGL employs several graduate assistants (GA) to help with information literacy instruction and work on various projects, including marketing and outreach. The Social Media Team at the UGL consists of a handful of GAs who have an interest in outreach through social media and a UGL librarian who supervises the GAs. The Social Media Team plans and implements marketing campaigns and events, and it runs the social media accounts on five platforms, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, and a Wordpress blog.

The UGL's Social Media Team uses a marketing manual that was created and updated by UGL GAs. The marketing manual allows the UGL to remain consistent in marketing efforts and further the UGL mission, while also being mindful of the larger library system and university's policies. The team aims to create posts on social media that are relevant to undergraduate students and promote library services in creative and interesting ways. After researching social media marketing to college students and analyzing previous successful UGL posts, the team established a goal of including more humor. They were inspired when the Social Media Team supervisor, UGL librarian David Ward, introduced a video to the group made by KLM Royal Dutch Airlines about a new lost-and-found service at Amsterdam Airport Schiphol. The video featured a new member of the airport's lost-and-found team: a dog with a great sense of smell. When the Social Media Team members were asked if they had any dogs to recreate the video, the team responded like any group of stereotypical librarians-in-training: no, but one member did have a cat. Armed with a vision and a cat, the Social Media Team began brainstorming how to create a video with the humor of the KLM Royal Dutch Airlines video that would also market the UGL's spaces and services. The team determined that instead of a lost-and-found dog, a "cat librarian" would be the star. In the team's video (but not in real life), the cat would help students find items in the library. And with that, Uggles, the UGL Catbrarian, was born.

Development and Launch of Campaign

The first step the Social Media Team took to produce the video was determining the purpose of the video campaign. They asked themselves: What should this video accomplish? What is it about the UGL that is essential for undergraduate students to know? The team decided that they wanted the video to ease possible student anxiety about the library by demonstrating that librarians have humor and are not difficult to approach for help. The team also wanted to highlight library services and spaces such as the library's books, media collection, and gaming center. Having concrete outcomes made scripting the video an easy process, because the team knew exactly what they wanted students to gain from the video. Having a clearly articulated purpose also allowed the Social Media Team to gather buy-in from library administrators in order to bring a cat into the library space.

Anyone who has ever owned or worked with cats is aware that they are not always the most cooperative of animals. With that in mind, the team wanted to ensure the filming process was as quick and easy as possible by limiting factors that could go wrong on the filming day. Therefore, before filming there was a significant amount of time spent storyboarding (a comic-like way to visually plan out the scenes before shooting) and scripting each scene. This allowed the team to gather and prepare the human actors, materials, and spaces before attempting to introduce a cat into the process. The Social Media Team then shared the storyboards both with fellow GAs who had volunteered to act in the video. This allowed the GAs to know exactly how to execute their scenes and helped the film crew know how to stage each scene efficiently. As expected, the only problem that arose on the day of filming was getting the cat starlet to stay awake long enough to execute her scenes.

After the video was produced, the team's next step was determining how to begin the marketing campaign to share the video. The Social Media Team decided to begin the campaign

on April Fool's Day, which would signify the lightheartedness of the video and make clear that the UGL had not really hired a new feline employee. The team prepared a series of posts for Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Wordpress to showcase the video. Prior to the initial release of the video, teasers were posted on the platforms to create excitement and pique interest. The team also reached out to other libraries on campus to inform them of the campaign and to ask them to share the video on their platforms as well.

Figure 1: Uggles during marketing video filming

On April 1, 2015, the UGL rolled out the "Uggles the UGL Cat" video on social media and in-house video displays. The immediate response to this video was much larger than anticipated. Prior to the Uggles video, successful posts on Twitter and Facebook platforms reached about 150-200 people, and an average Instagram post (the UGL's newest platform at the time) received about 6 likes. The Uggles video reached nearly 4,000 people between Facebook and Twitter, while Instagram posts that featured Uggles received an average of 20 likes. What was even more impressive was the increase of student engagement in the form of comments and replies to posts about Uggles, which were previously rare. Across the platforms, follower counts increased as did student engagement with non-Uggles related posts. The most shocking response to the Uggles video was that many students did not recognize the video as an April Fool's Day joke, but instead believed that UGL had actually employed a cat in the library. The service desk and social media accounts frequently received questions from patrons about the location of Uggles and whether they could meet her.

Campaign Growth

Due to the warm reception of the video, the UGL embraced Uggles as a mascot and began brainstorming ways to include Uggles in other marketing efforts. Sticking to the original mission of the video, the team used photographs of Uggles, and sometimes the actual cat, to make undergraduate students excited about the library and aware of what the UGL has to offer.

Events and Partnerships

One of the UGL's most successful events every year is Therapy Dogs, when animals and owners from a local therapy-pet group visit the UGL, along with other campus libraries, during finals week. In May 2015, the UGL decided to partner with the campus health and counseling centers and turn the event into a De-Stress Fest, complete with stress management techniques, coloring books, and an Uggles Meet and Greet. The Social Media Team wanted to take advantage of the Uggles momentum and use the popularity of the video to strengthen the outreach for this recurring event as well as to cement campus partnerships. The event saw a high turnout (about 200 students). Students were encouraged to take selfies with Uggles and post them on social media with the hashtag #AskUggles, so the Social Media Team could later find and repost images from the event.
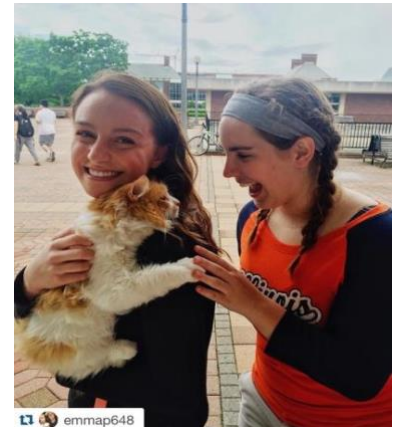

Figure 2: Uggles with students during Meet & Greet

Social Media

In November 2015, the Social Media Team planned a weeklong Uggles social media takeover. The team focused on a different social media platform each day of the week and produced posts as though they were written by Uggles. They kicked off the week with a blog post that featured the "autobiography" of Uggles, providing a back story of how Uggles became a cuddly librarian at the University of Illinois. The team followed up with posts on Twitter, Facebook, and Pinterest that recommended cat-themed books from the UGL collection and encouraged followers to ask questions and interact with Uggles. The social media takeover succeeded by increasing engagement and cross-promoting our social media platforms. Also, by making the #AskUggles hashtag more recognizable, the takeover encouraged consistent user tagging.

Library Spaces and Services

Equipped with a roll of magnet tape and an incredible amount of cat puns, the Social Media Team used Uggles to promote some of the unique spaces and services in the UGL during the fall semester of 2015. The team chose the cutest pictures of Uggles and transformed them into magnets with accompanying cat pun thought-bubbles. Staff placed the magnets near the UGL's gaming center, audio recording studio, media collection, and other spaces. The magnets provided another means to subtly use Uggles to draw attention to library services while avoiding oversaturating social media posts with cat pictures.

Library Policies

In the spring of 2016, the Social Media Team was determined to forgo its usual, dry approach to policy reminders and instead communicate library policies in an engaging way. Inspired by MTV's television series *Silent Library*, the team created videos with a similar premise: *Silent UGL*. The series featured Uggles and several GAs as they attempted to complete tasks while remaining quiet. "Food Foolishness" communicated the UGL's new lenient food policy, while "The Staring Contest" reminded viewers that the library's lower level is a quiet floor. The

videos provided a fun way to talk about rules and provided viewers a glimpse of Uggles interacting with her human colleagues.

Growth in the University Library

As Uggles' popularity grew, other University Library units became interested in utilizing Uggles as a mascot. This interest provided an excellent opportunity for collaboration. The first use of Uggles outside the UGL was in the University Library system's "Meet Your Librarian Campaign." The campaign strove to highlight the many excellent librarians throughout the library system and ease some of the anxiety students may have about librarians. Uggles appeared in the campaign as "Meet Your Catbrarian," with fun facts such as "the long-term effects of catnip on study efficiency." Uggles was also able to help by posing for photos for several other library marketing campaigns, which helped bridge the gap between library units and build meaningful connections across the library system.

Growth in the Larger Community

Uggles's popularity did not end at the library doors, or even at the campus borders. In January 2016, Uggles was invited to appear on a local radio station, News Talk 1400, to talk about Uggles's role as a catbrarian and to share fun facts about the UGL. Uggles appeared on the show with a GA as "interpreter." This radio show sparked community interest in not only Uggles, but also UGL services that are available for members of the Champaign-Urbana community. The radio interview also gave staff an opportunity to promote the UGL social media platforms. Following Uggles's radio debut, Uggles became an important member of the University of Illinois community. The University of Illinois Twitter account (@illinois_alma) tweeted Uggles's image in spring of 2016 and the university's admissions blog listed Uggles as one of the top 220 reasons to become an Illini. The spike of Uggles's popularity on campus and in the Champaign-Urbana community resulted in increased attendance at the spring 2016 Uggles Meet and Greet and an increase in engagement with the UGL's social media platforms, which helped raise awareness of library services.
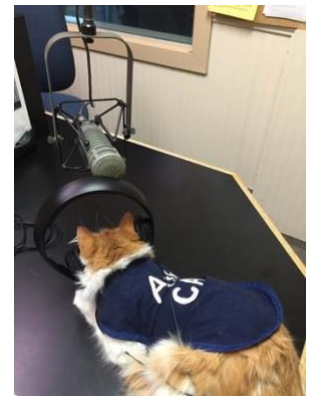

Figure 3: Uggles during radio interview

Find Uggles Campaign

In fall 2016, the Undergraduate Library utilized Uggles to continue building strong community connections by creating a campaign that required collaboration across the University of Illinois campus. The Social Media Team decided to to emulate a contest by the St. Louis Cardinal's Instagram account (www.instagram.com/cardinals/) in which a picture of a baseball hall-of-famer was hidden in a recognizable St. Louis location every Tuesday during baseball season. The Cardinals' account would post a photo with a clue, and the first person to find where the picture was taken would win a pair of tickets to a baseball game. The Social Media Team thought that a similar contest would increase interaction on social media platforms as well as encourage students to come into the library in to claim their prize. For the "Find Uggles" contest, pictures of Uggles would be hidden in various places around campus and show enough of the background that the location would be recognizable but not immediately obvious. The first student to bring Uggles back to the UGL would win a prize and would also be entered in a drawing for a grand prize at the end of the year. The contest would span from October to May, and staff planned to hide the image of Uggles a total of 16 times.

Figure 4: Find Uggles contest featured on Instagram

With the University of Illinois' 150th anniversary approaching, it made sense to incorporate elements of university history into the Find Uggles contest. In collaboration with Student Life and Culture Archives, two members of the Social Media Team created a list places to hide Uggles that consisted of 16 campus locations with historical significance. These locations were based on a historical walking tour of the University of Illinois campus that Student Life and Culture Archives had previously created. After all of the locations were selected, Kirsten Feist, acting Social Media Team supervisor, coordinated with campus administrators to get permission for pictures of Uggles to be hidden at each location. Although this took some time, it allowed the Social Media Team to build connections with many people across the campus. These connections paved the way for future collaborations and created a stronger sense of community on a very large campus.

Once the locations were approved, Social Media Team members placed a picture of Uggles at each location and took a photo of it for Instagram. Then, the day after Uggles was found, staff created a "reveal" post that combine an image of the winner, a full shot of the area where Uggles was hidden, and some historical content about the location.

Although Uggles was already well known within the library system and among many of the undergraduate students, Uggles's popularity really took off once Uggles began "hiding" around campus. The UGL Instagram account saw a dramatic increase of followers and interaction on posts in the form of likes and comments. When the contest wrapped up at the end of the year, many students reached out to ask if Uggles would be hidden again next year, eager for their chance to find our catbrarian. One current student informed us that their younger sister decided to attend the University of Illinois because of the UGL's use of cats on social media, saying that Illinois seemed more engaging and "fun" than other schools they were considering.

The Find Uggles contest attracted the attention of other members of the campus community as well. The Illinois College of Veterinary Medicine asked to use pictures of Uggles to promote their new MRI machine and a ribbon cutting ceremony. Other departments simply wanted to volunteer their location on campus as a potential hiding place for Uggles. Several libraries on campus have since asked the team to come and speak at their social media meetings about the work that was done with the Find Uggles campaign. What began as a project with a goal of reaching out to other members of campus resulted in a campaign that motivated people to reach out *to the library*. The impact of the Uggles campaign surpassed our expectations.

Recommendations

Creating marketing campaigns can be an overwhelming process, and adding a cat to that process makes it cuter—but even more difficult. The following recommendations will help one get started on a path to a successful mascot.

- **Develop a plan**
  A successful marketing campaign requires concrete objectives. What does the campaign need to achieve? How would a mascot help in this endeavor? A clearly articulated plan allows one to share it successfully with other stakeholders. After creating objectives, proceed by developing a storyboard or script in order to concretize the marketing strategy.

- **Stay on brand**
  Keep the marketing plan in mind for each stage of the marketing campaign's implementation. The campaign should have a purpose, which will over time develop the mascot into a brand that patrons and followers grow comfortable with and respond to. Keep the mission of the library and institution in mind as well to ensure consistency.

- **Do not overuse**
  In order to keep followers interested, do not overuse the mascot or image. Patrons and followers should be excited by posts. If their social media feeds become saturated with a specific image, it will be overlooked. Use mascots or other campaign messaging intentionally and sparingly.

- **Plan for the future**
  Develop a plan for longevity. Things change and sometimes cats and their owners move to Utah. Decide what needs to happen for the brand to endure, whether that means developing a stock of photos and videos or planning a storyline in advance. Thinking ahead will help strengthen the brand and avoid panic if anything major changes.