

CONSISTENCY AND CHANGE



Working in a school is daunting. It is also vitally important, so much so that ALIA's Futures Report described it as the most important job of the library and information sector. With that in mind, James McGoran asks how do you successfully engage with students in a meaningful way – students who sometimes seem beyond engagement?

School libraries have to maintain a strange mix of consistency and change. Students thrive on freedom, exploration and creativity, but they also need to follow strict rules and schedules. So how can you strike a balance? One possibility may be customer service.

All libraries are a service. That's our foundation. School libraries have to offer high quality customer service experiences, with an end-user focus. Just like big retailers, we have to look at how we are perceived by our clients in order to better tailor our services. Effective marketing strategies and consistent branding can greatly help to change the image of your service, especially when combined with outreach and classroom projects to help draw in those students who would otherwise ignore the library.

It's not all external though. I recently went to a seminar on positive behaviour management that emphasised student ownership and managing the environment. These ideas are so important when trying to engage students.

If students feel they have ownership and are involved, and you are prepared for them, then it's much easier to fully engage with them.

Manipulating your environment is a powerful tool. Space itself can be used as promotion and sets the tone for your library. If you make the library inviting and interesting then students are more likely to come back. Cosy reading spaces, open study areas and integrated classrooms all add to the learning experience.

Marketing techniques complement the use of a controlled environment well. Promotions and displays can easily be left to stagnate, as other priorities become more important. Remember that mix of consistency and change? It's a good idea to be constantly searching for events and ideas and recording them in your calendar. Library and Information

Week, World Book Day, literary awards, International Games Day, Free Comic Book Day, local memorials, sports, and holidays can all feed into your promotional calendar.

Gauge what your students might be interested in. Having a good grasp of popular culture can prove to be invaluable.

Do they love manga? What about cricket? Try and use this data to help tailor their experience, and if you're not sure what interests they have, ask. Most students love to talk about what interests them.

Nothing you do will engage everyone, however. That's why change (there's that word again) is so important. If something doesn't suit, how can you adapt it to make it more desirable? Think laterally and align your engagement techniques with your students' interests.

Digital is high in teenagers' priorities. Social media and games are massive but it's important to remember that many families don't have access to some technologies or possibly even to the internet.

I was surprised to find that interest in non-digital pursuits such as treasure hunts, board games and LEGO® is still strong. Alternatives such as these give you a valuable opportunity to engage with those students who may not usually visit the library, and show them that the library is an okay place to be. You can even make it competitive; it's worth remembering that competitions are always regarded well.

Cultural diversity is vital. Tie-in events for new book release and guest speakers might be a good idea. One amazing initiative has been the Human Library, an organisation that sets out to 'promote dialogue, reduce prejudices and encourage understanding' by making available different individuals with different experiences from many different backgrounds and ages to talk with library users who are interested to learn about them.

The importance of getting teaching staff involved can't be overstated. Often we've seen enthusiastic teachers bring students to the library regularly, only to see the teachers thrive as well as the students. They begin to understand the value of the service we offer, of being able to navigate the catalogue, the shelves and many other facets of the library.

Several words have kept reappearing in this piece. Engagement. Change. Service. These words should be part of our daily work practice.

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