

# First steps in an incredible journey

Event management at the University of Birmingham



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In March 2013, Library Services at the University of Birmingham was asked to run the Vice-Chancellor's 'Great read at Birmingham' (GRAB) project. Now in its third year of a three-year pilot, GRAB is a common reader programme, widespread in the United States but still relatively rare in the UK (Thorne et al. 2014). At Birmingham every incoming undergraduate receives a copy of the same book, and a series of events and activities are arranged around this title, with the aim of facilitating a 'shared intellectual experience'. This article explores the event management and marketing aspects of the project, highlighting how libraries are well placed to run campus-wide events, capitalising on connections with academics and daily contact with students.

## GRAB 2013–14

The GRAB book for 2013–14 was chosen from a shortlist by a panel of academics from each of the University's five colleges. *The incredible human journey* (Bloomsbury, London, 2009. Paperback edition 2010) by Alice Roberts was selected, based on its inter-disciplinary appeal and the Birmingham connection of the author, as Professor of Public Engagement in Science at the university.

Six hundred copies were procured for academics and administrative staff working directly with incoming undergraduates to incorporate into induction activities, and over 6,000 copies were distributed to students, via halls of residence and welcome events on campus. The initial GRAB activities were designed to raise awareness of the project and give students starting points for getting involved. Library Services ran a photo / Instagram competition, in which students were invited to tweet a photo of 'their incredible journey', whilst colleges ran tailored bespoke activities.



Fig. 1 Winner of the 'My incredible journey' photo competition

These ranged from short presentations on substantive aspects of the book (evolution, dentistry, archaeology etc), to discussions around the nature of academic writing and the use of artefacts for exploring history vis-à-vis literary sources.

## LIBRARY EVENTS

The GRAB team decided early on against organising a traditional author talk, as had been done for the past two years of the scheme. Although successful, these were often attended by more staff than undergraduates, so the community and the team agreed that events should focus on undergraduate students at whom the project was aimed. To this end the team organised two main events:

### *Alice Roberts presents... The incredible human journey*

Based in the University's Lapworth geological museum, Professor Roberts used the fossil events and specimens from the museum to discuss and illustrate the key themes of the book. The size of the venue limited us to 64 places for this event, and these were filled within two weeks, with over half of the tickets taken up by students. There was a great atmosphere, and students asked lots of questions and were keen to have their GRAB books signed, and to speak to Professor Roberts individually.



Fig. 2 Professor Roberts presents

### *GRAB Conference – The incredible human journey: past, present and future*

Inspired by the idea of TEDx (<https://www.ted.com/about/programs-initiatives/tedx-program>) and ‘ideas worth spreading’, the GRAB conference included speakers from all five colleges talking on a range of topics for a maximum of ten minutes. Whilst Professor Roberts opened the conference, other talks ranged from ‘intelligent robots – our future or fiction?’ to ‘the ethics of genetic engineering’ and ‘intelligent design’. As well as the talks, there was book-signing and a panel question-and-answer session. In all over three hundred people signed up for the event, with just under two hundred attending on the day. The majority of attendees were again students, who attended from all the colleges, but external attendees were also welcomed and ranged from schoolchildren who had been inspired by Alice, to a professor from a nearby university!



*Fig. 3 Speaker from the GRAB conference, sporting the GRAB t-shirt*

### **EVENT MANAGEMENT**

For both events, professional event management software, Xing Events (<<http://www.amiando.com>>), was used. At the beginning of the project this was free to use, but by the time of the events it was chargeable at the rate of £0.89 per registration. The team felt this was money well spent, and the whole registration process was streamlined and easy to manage, including bulk reminder and

update emails, and the ability to analyse sign-ups in order to refine our marketing and promotional strategies.

### **MARKETING AND PROMOTION**

Promotion was a key strand for the project as a whole, and for each event. The project had inherited a strong brand and logo, which was used on all promotional materials.



*Fig. 4 GRAB logo*

The team purchased branded t-shirts that were worn initially when we were distributing the book so that we were easily recognisable on campus, and there was a pop-up banner, and pens that could be given away throughout the lifetime of the project. In all more than ten different leaflets / postcards / posters were developed over the year to promote different aspects of GRAB. For example, a leaflet was placed in pre-arrival welcome packs, and another was distributed during welcome to encourage students to enter the photo competition; there was a postcard for academics to provide an overview of the scheme, and posters and leaflets were created for each event. Most of these were developed by library staff themselves, drawing on the Photoshop and design skills of one member of the team.



*Fig. 5 Student flyer for GRAB conference*

## **SOCIAL MEDIA**

The planned use of all aspects of social media was critical to the project. Twitter schedules and Facebook messages were planned well in advance to layer and target promotion, and build up towards events. To this end, joining up with the university's Digital Marketing team proved essential. After meeting them to talk through the project, they were happy to re-tweet key messages and post on Facebook to the 20,000+ followers they had. This had a very direct impact and led to substantial sign-ups for events; it was useful to find out that this was far more successful than for example, inclusion in e-newsletters that went to all first-years. Library Services also paid for an advert on Facebook that went to library followers and their friends, and again this had a direct impact on registrants, with over a hundred people linking directly through to the registration page. The project used #uobgrab throughout the year, which was used as a feed on the internal and external GRAB webpages to keep them current.

## **CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT**

Early on in the project we recognised that whilst students, especially first-years, were our key stakeholders, students from other years, academic staff, and externals would be interested in the project and events, and were also important conduits to the first-years. We developed an integrated marketing strategy to focus on this, so that for each of these groups we had tailored messages and routes by which to reach them. For staff this included the general university newsletter, and individual academic GRAB contacts in each school. We worked with the external relations team, who had contacts with people who had attended previous events, to invite them, and promoted via the public events webpage. For students, as well as the social media routes outlined above, we asked the speakers to tweet, organised lecture shouts and recruited four student volunteers.

## **FURTHER DEVELOPMENTS**

Initially, we planned to develop video ads to promote the GRAB conference in particular, and envisaged filming the talks and making them available on YouTube. Although time and resource restraints prevented it this time, it's something we feel should be further explored. The potential for viral marketing is huge, and could perhaps be better harnessed to promote

what libraries have to offer, and to reach students in ways to which they can relate.

Although this year's GRAB project completed the third year of a three-year pilot, Library Services is considering its own next steps in event management, whether that is using the skills and experiences learnt during GRAB to run an annual conference, or arranging smaller-scale activities and events and tying into the public engagement angle of our work. Whatever we choose to do, through GRAB, Library Services has made very positive steps in the right direction, and has begun its own incredible journey!

## **REFERENCES**

Thorne, A., Plum, C., Wood, P., Carter, T., (2013) Beach Books 2012–13: What do colleges and universities want students to read outside class?' United States: National Association of Scholars. Available at [http://www.nas.org/articles/beach\\_books\\_2012\\_2013](http://www.nas.org/articles/beach_books_2012_2013) [accessed 24 April 2014]