The halcyon days of the law library as the heart of the law school, the centerpiece of the law firm, or the legal information watering hole for the legal community appear to be fading into the past. The electronic components of this “heart” are making it easier for our patrons to access legal information in a time/place/manner that is convenient for them, regardless of whether or not our physical doors are open. One of the many challenges law libraries face today is how to reach the patrons outside our walls. The shrinking physical law library is not a new phenomenon: it has been ongoing for the last 20 years. How to reconfigure our physical spaces has been an important discussion for most library managers and directors. How can libraries reach legal researchers who don’t know what services or information our institutions offer? Today’s librarians must think outside the box and be creative in order to draw patrons into the library and showcase the different resources the physical space can offer. Following are best practices for librarians to effectively reach out to their patrons—beyond the physical walls of the library— to
showcase the valuable services that the library provides in academic, private, and government institutions.

**Academic Law Library Initiatives**

The academic law library has seen an increasing loss in foot traffic through its physical facility. This is true for many reasons, including, but not limited to, declining enrollments, the changing study habits of millennials, and the dramatic increases in the dependency on electronic resources. To meet these challenges, academic libraries have undertaken several initiatives to bring information to their patrons outside their physical space.

One initiative academic libraries have successfully implemented is securing subscriptions to online study aid packages that are available from major publishers such as LexisNexis, West Academic, and Wolters Kluwer. Unlimited access to these study aids allows the law library to offer a very useful academic resource to students on a scale previously unattainable with print. For example, in December 2016, the Northern Kentucky University, Chase Law Library saw 256 students (out of 400) access the online West Study Aids a total of 1,661 times electronically.

Further, academic law libraries can harness their electronic resources in other creative ways, such as working with faculty to provide additional research classes as necessary. For instance, the library can subscribe all members of a seminar class to one of the Bureau of National Affairs (BNA) online newsletters. At the University of North Texas-Dallas, librarians build subject-specific Libguides and embed them directly into a course's online page.

Many schools also have electronic bulletin boards (display screens) throughout their buildings. Libraries can utilize these resources to promote the law library and highlight special events, services, and personnel throughout the building. The University of Louisville’s Law Library has control over the electronic display monitor located near the library’s entrance. The library creates slide shows that are displayed on the monitor to provide information about the library, including its hours, short features on a member of the library staff, and new title acquisitions.

**Email/Social Media to the Rescue**

Email and social media can also be useful tools to reach out to library patrons. For example, at Yale’s Law Library, the librarians electronically send patrons a weekly “Tip of the Week.”

Email and social media can also be useful tools to reach out to library patrons. For example, at Yale’s Law Library, the librarians electronically send patrons a weekly “Tip of the Week,” describing an aspect of the law library’s services. Emails, Facebook postings, and electronic bulletin boards all provide law libraries with additional means of reaching patrons beyond the library’s physical space. Further, a library’s physical holdings do not need to be tethered to the physical boundaries of the law library. Many law schools have legal clinics, both on and off campus. These clinics provide the law library with a wonderful opportunity to provide services outside the library. For example, the law library can arrange to have a subject-specific set of materials placed inside the legal clinic. This has the dual advantage of serving students “where they are,” while reminding them of the value that the law library adds to their experiential learning.

**Student Engagement**

Academic libraries can also build small (or large) popular collections in the student commons areas. In fact, some academic law libraries have begun placing study aid collections near popular gathering spots for students.

These common areas provide law libraries with another touch point for students. Many organizations and vendors—think Barbri and the other Bar review providers—have a continuous presence in these common areas, so libraries should aim to maintain a presence here as well. Librarians could host a table day highlighting specific parts of a collection, such as Hein Online, Online Study Aids, or reference assistance for writing papers. Make the event even more special by providing snacks. For example, at Northern Kentucky University, the law library set up a popcorn machine to promote their library’s resources—it is amazing...
how the smell of freshly made popcorn can bring in a crowd!

Similarly, some libraries use special dates, like National Library Week, to reach out to students. Faulkner University Law Library in Montgomery, Alabama, holds creative events including a “wheel of prizes” and a miniature golf course that gets set up in the student commons area. Libraries can host legal trivia or school-centered trivia contests as a way to lure students into the library. All of these events are designed to engage the students and remind them of the library’s usefulness and the many resources it provides.

**People, Not Robots**

The power of personal touch should not be overlooked. At Faulkner University Law Library in Montgomery, Alabama, the law library director recently provided sports equipment for check-out at the circulation desk, including soccer balls, Frisbees, and more. The director went a step further by going out once a week to the central yard to personally join with the students in some athletic fun. One unanticipated benefit of this initiative has been an influx in the number of students sitting one-on-one with a librarian and asking questions related to their research papers and homework.

Academic libraries often serve as research portals for alumni and the local bar. Some law libraries are providing continuing legal education (CLE) research refreshers. For example, Faulkner Law Library and the University of Wisconsin Law Library both provide CLE training for area attorneys. Faulkner advertises the CLE to all bar members, and even provides free registration to its alumni.

Academic law libraries are also reaching out to alumni and members of the bar by publishing research-oriented columns in local bar journals. For example, librarians at Northern Kentucky University’s Law Library write regular research columns for the Northern Kentucky Bar Association and the Cincinnati Bar Association’s monthly publications, the University of Louisville Law Library has a regular column in the Louisville Bar Association’s monthly journal, and the University of Wisconsin Law Library writes articles for InsideTrack, an online newsletter that goes to all members of the Wisconsin Bar.

Academics are not alone in facing these issues: firms and county law libraries can also benefit from a few of these out-of-the-box ideas to engage with their patron base.

**County Law Library Efforts**

Public law libraries must serve local attorneys as well as self-represented litigants. Reaching out to all of these patron groups requires a different approach. Collectively, the most popular way to reach out to the legal community seems to be through a newsletter. The Franklin County Law Library in Columbus, Ohio, sends out a monthly newsletter listing programs, new available resources, and articles of general interest. Feedback response shows readers’ appreciation in receiving only one email per month and enjoying newsletters they find visually appealing. Other libraries, including the Alameda County Law Library in Hayward, California, use various social media platforms such as podcasts, vodcasts, Facebook, Pinterest, Twitter, and Instagram to reach out to their patrons.

**Bringing Resources to Patrons**

Many libraries, including the Richmond Public Library in Richmond, Virginia, have found that going out into the legal community is an effective way to reach new patrons. For example, librarians can offer to speak at bar association committee meetings, or better yet, offer to host their meetings in the law library. The presentation you give can be catered to the group to whom you’re speaking. In addition to committee meetings, ask to speak at special events, such as Law Day or at annual meetings. In-house CLE programs on a variety of topics will also bring new attorneys into the library. The Harris County Law Library in Houston, Texas, reaches out to future attorneys and professionals by offering tours of the law library to students.

When reaching out to the self-represented litigants, community outreach seems to be most effective. Try partnering with a local legal aid group to offer classes or legal clinics on various topics, and arrange to have lawyers in the library at designated times for pro bono services. Several libraries, including both Oklahoma and Tulsa County Law Libraries, offer “lawyers in the library” programs with great success. Invite public librarians into the law library and explain what resources are available. Public library reference librarians get lots of legal questions and don’t always know where to refer patrons. Ask other public libraries if your law library can conduct programs at their locations.
Explore options to provide public libraries with legal resources of their own including a computer terminal dedicated to legal research. The Kane County Law Library in St. Charles, Illinois, recently began training public reference librarians on legal resources and receiving feedback from them on resources to purchase. Similarly, the Minnesota State Law Library has started loaning out its reference librarians to the public libraries. The librarians have scheduled hours to work at special reference desks that are set up within five local public libraries.

Most urban law libraries are in buildings where patrons must pay to park, pass through security, and then make their way through a maze of buildings to find—often out of the way—the law library. To alleviate confusion, a well-designed, user-friendly website can be most helpful. Links to forms, online legal research guides, and community agencies can bring your library to self-represented litigants in their own homes.

Lastly, don’t forget to celebrate events such as library anniversaries, community festivals, Law Day, and National Library Week. Lancaster County Law Library in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, holds trivia contests during Library Week with prizes; one of the most treasured prizes is money on patrons’ copy cards. It doesn’t cost the library anything and the patrons are thrilled.

**Law Firm Initiatives**

In many law firm libraries, attorneys are located nationwide, so working outside of the physical library space is the rule, rather than the exception. As a result, many law firms have multiple locations with up-to-date print collections, but only the main office has library staff on the premises. This makes outreach and breaking down the physical barriers of the library the reality of the job, as the vast majority of attorneys will never enter the physical library space.

A firm library can do several things to stay engaged with its attorney population electronically. Most firm libraries maintain a library portal on the firm’s intranet pages. These pages often contain links to not only the firm’s library catalog, but also direct links to non-billable electronic resources that the firm subscribes to (i.e., Lexis Advance, WestLaw Next, CCH IntellifConnect, etc.). They can also contain links to both practice group and state-specific resources. Links to internally created video tutorials that cover various resources the firm subscribes to can also be added. These intranet pages are also the perfect place to host in-house wikis for best practices and tips for researching specific subjects or using specific databases.

Another tool that is being frequently used is the creation and distribution of electronic resources. Librarians from Howard & Howard Attorneys PLLC-Chicago, Butzel Long, Reinhart Boerner Van Beuren, Porter Wright Morris & Arthur LLP, and Drummond Woodsum, reach out through monthly electronic newsletters that highlight new additions to the catalog, specific resources, or just general research tips and best practices. These newsletters not only assist the attorneys but also serve as a gentle reminder of the library and the services it offers.

Finally, also on the electronic front, the reference desk can be completely virtual. A central email address for the library can be used for all reference and research assistance requests. The “desk” can be covered during normal business hours by rotating librarians.

**Physical Outreach**

Physical outreach is equally as important and can be done in various ways. The library should be part of the onboarding process for all new and lateral hires, and it should participate in all new hire orientations. Many law firm libraries offer training on relevant library resources (this includes the annual Summer Associate class as well). Librarians can visit other offices to have one-on-one sessions with the attorneys to provide assistance and check in to make sure their research needs are being met. At Reinhart Boerner Van Beuren, Barclay Damon, LLP, Dilworth Paxson LLP, and Porter Wright Morris & Arthur LLP, librarians are present at practice group meetings, both when there are new resources to push and to maintain general awareness with the attorneys of relevant resources and services the library can provide.

Firm libraries, similar to their public and academic counterparts, are also using events such as National Library Week as a way to promote their services.

**Moving Forward**

As physical spaces shrink and patrons begin to research from their offices, homes, or local coffee shops, law libraries should continue to reach out beyond their physical walls to engage their patrons and showcase the vast resources the library has to offer.