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A Failure in Marketing

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A Failure in Marketing

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Introduction

This essay addresses the current climate in the library world from the perspective of a library student. We are at a point where the actual value of libraries and library services are of the utmost importance, but the perceived importance from our patron base is on the decline. The root of the problem is that of marketing. Libraries need to refocus attention on making sure that people are aware of the services the library can provide even as many believe the role to be lost in increasing obsolescence. As the job has been in the past, librarians are going to continue in the role as “filter” within the ever increasing information repository of the internet. It is our duty to help people find good information in a world where there is more access, and yet less clarity. This essay is a response to recent articles that express anger towards librarians and the library profession. It is imperative that we make ourselves known as a very important resource and to make sure that libraries and librarians represent a good return on investment to the library administration as well as for the users.

Libraries in Popular Culture

Librarians and academics know fully of the intrinsic value of libraries, but despite this fact there have often been opponents who feel that the services provided by libraries are no longer needed. People have, at times, referred to libraries as “welfare bookstores” or with some similar degrading terminology, diminishing the value of libraries within communities and regard their services as mere “hand-outs” and the users as freeloaders.¹ There have been two interesting trends recently in the discussion of the library profession. The first is perhaps the most surprising – that there is discussion of libraries outside of professional literature,

library break-rooms, and library schools across the world.² The second trend is an upsurge of negative and vitriolic feelings against libraries. On one hand, there are high profile celebrities such as Rolling Stones guitarist Keith Richards and author Neil Gaiman speaking about the importance of libraries.³ On the other hand, however, there are just as many detractors, high profile and otherwise. In a recent monologue (11 May 2010), Tonight Show host Jay Leno included the following riff about the proposed recent budget cuts to Los Angeles libraries:

People here in Los Angeles, [are] upset that the mayor’s proposed plan to cut the budget of libraries around Los Angeles; they want to cut library budgets here in Los Angeles. That would affect as many as *nine* people!⁴

In recent blog postings and newspaper articles, there is clear anger at the idea of a well-paid library professional. There is a problem in the perceived value of librarians. Many believe that the job of the librarian is outmoded and obsolete in the current world of information abundance. While we, as information professionals, know how difficult it can be to find valuable information in what David Weinberger referred to as the internet “swamp.” Many people are satisfied with cursory level answers to their queries found through a brief web search.⁵ While this may seem strange to many of us in the profession or in library school, it is worthwhile to investigate why negative sentiments exist and to consider what we can do in the profession to re-justify our jobs to the user-base we serve.

In the blog post, “10 Reasons Why ‘Professional Librarian’ is an Oxymoron,” Ryan Deschamps, who blogs as “The Other Libra-



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rian," lays out his diatribe against librarians. The post is meant to provoke a response from emblazoned librarians who want to prove the sentiments wrong. (It should be noted, however, that this post is written in an effort to challenge librarians out of complacency and into active defense of the profession.) He writes,

...before you comment, yes, this is an unbalanced look at professionalism. Yes, I am trolling a little bit – but with a heart that wants to lead discussion on the topic of library professionalism. Please do write a post about why these ten reasons are bullocks [sic]."⁶

Deschamps points out many of our profession's flaws, or perceived flaws, from the point of view of the users. These flaws are as follows:

- 1) Librarians have no monopoly on the activities they claim.
- 2) There are no consequences for failing to adhere to ethical practices.
- 3) Librarianship is too generalized to claim any expertise.
- 4) 'Librarian' assumes a place of work, rather than the work itself.
- 5) Peer-review in Librarianship does not work because there is no competitive process . . .
- 6) Values are not enough.
- 7) The primary motivation for professionalization is the monopoly of labor.
- 8) Accredited library schools do not adequately prepare students for library work.
- 9) Competing professions are offering different paradigms to achieve the same goals.
- 10) Nobody can name a 'great' librarian.⁷

The mission in writing this paper is not to fully address all ten points, but only the first and tenth reasons in his diatribe that relate most clearly to this paper.

The first point is, "librarians have no monopoly on the activities they claim." What Deschamps is talking about at this point is the idea of knowledge acquisition. From the perspective of many users from all types of libraries, the information housed within the confines of the library is essentially the same

as that available on the internet. While it is true that many answers are available on the internet, it is the job of the librarian to act as a "filter" and "fact checker" for the resources available. It can be a tricky point to convince people of this role as it could lead to a sense that a user's interest and information needs are being censored. There needs to be a clear understanding with users of what exactly librarians do, and do not do, with information. Librarians are trained to differentiate the good information from the bad, and to help users find the targeted and pertinent information they seek. Many users are capable of self-directed searching, but often these individuals have had library-based instruction in the past. While it is true that librarians do not have a strict monopoly on information service, there is a definite benefit to the librarian's expertise. By way on analogy, people have the right to forego an attorney and represent themselves *pro se*. These individuals may get a favorable result in court, but they take a significant risk in not utilizing the expertise of a lawyer who knows the tricks of the trade. The same is true with librarians. One may be able to find good resources, but the added expertise of librarians will help to ensure accuracy in the results *and* serve as a learning experience for future searches. This interaction will also set a user on the path of information literacy.

The tenth point that Deschamps makes is that, "nobody can name a 'great' librarian." The role of the librarian is much like that of a teacher. The aim of the profession is not to promote one's self, but to propel others to greatness. Because of this supportive role, knowing about great librarians is not very important. It is important, however, that users are aware of the influential role libraries have played in the lives of great people. As mentioned above, high profile celebrities like Neil Gaiman and Keith Richards have spoken about the wonders of the library. Libraries would do well to promote their formative role in the lives of shapers of history and contemporary culture and society.



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This being said, though, there have been famous persons throughout history who served as librarians. Twentieth century notables such as Jorge Borges and Philip Larkin are examples of literary figures who worked as librarians. Noted German intellectual, Adolf Harnack, philosopher David Hume and the (in)famous Casanova were also librarians at some point in their working lives. There are also examples of famous and influential librarians in their own right, such as the much written about S. R. Ranganathan and Sir Anthony Panizzi. The latter would be intriguing to many different people, not simply those interested in the history of cataloguing. And Ranganathan potentially could be of interest to those studying mathematics or computer science. The point simply is that, while librarians often function behind the scenes of greatness, the profession should receive its due credit given through the testimony of people for whom libraries were a great force in their lives and careers. Deschamp's two points reflect the poor job librarians generally have done in marketing their services. The general public is not at fault when it does not regard libraries and librarians in what we believe to be a correct light. The fault is our own.

While Deschamps' blog post is more of an internal call to action, a more vitriolic article was recently published in *The Ukiah Daily Journal* from California. The article, "Save the County, Close the Libraries," by Tommy Wayne Kramer should serve as a wake-up call for our profession. The article begins, "... if Mendocino County is strapped for money, and I believe it is, the most logical thing it could do is close down all the libraries." Kramer's rant continues, "lock the doors, shut off the lights, sell the books. Rent out the buildings to Domino Pizza outlets and Verizon franchises. Turn the bookmobile into a taco truck. Libraries are the blacksmith shops of the 21st century, obsolete relics of another era."⁸

Taking Stock

Recently, the Ottawa Public Library (OPL) began an active campaign to curb the perceived notion that libraries are obsolete and out of touch with the community's needs. In May 2010, OPL began a library awareness campaign with the catchy ad slogan, "If it's out there, it's in here."⁹ This ambitious program was to advertise the vast resources that the library offers the public and to profile what the library has already been doing in the community. Here is a perfect example of how libraries need to clear away the cob-webs, get outside, and push their services.

The initiative of OPL in shameless self-promotion should be adopted by all types of libraries. Academic libraries should work in greater partnership with their universities in order to let the students know that the library holds all the information that they seek. Academic libraries also need to teach students how to use these resources in more efficient and effective ways. As is common in a number of academic libraries, librarians are designated subject specialists and often work directly with faculty in selecting and using resources. This is a good first step, but more can be done, especially in regard to student involvement. We need to convince students of the value in using library-housed resources in addition to basic web resources. While many academic departments, including my *alma mater*, University of Maryland, do require basic library skills, increasing these requirements would equip students with better information seeking behaviors.

The fact that students often are satisfied with cursory "answers" is highlighted in a study where Library and Information Science students were tested on their interest in and use of Web 2.0 technology. This research conducted by Noa Aharony of Bar-Ilan University in Israel asked questions about Web 2.0 to a community of Library and Information Science students. Aharony's findings illustrate that one's ability to take on Web 2.0 has much to do with one's



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cognitive ability. Based on John Brigg's distinction between "deep learner" (DL) and "surface learner" (SL) it was found that motivation to learn and the ability to relate new information depended on one's stock of previously acquired knowledge (DL).¹⁰ The inverse of DL, the SL student does not make these meta-cognitive connections but simply addresses surface problems without considering context or causal situations. This student is more likely to simply memorize facts as opposed to making lasting connections among units of knowledge.¹¹ All of this is to say that in marketing services to students, it is important to realize all students are not the same, and that library resources and services need to be presented in ways relevant to the users, and, in the end, to help students become deep learners.

Relevance as a quality in marketing relates also to the adoption of new technologies. One of the most interesting inclusions in libraries today is the use of mobile technology. During the joint OCLC and *Library Journal* online symposium, representatives from Verizon, IBM, and Blazing Cloud spoke about the possibilities of a new "4G" world of mobile technology and the role that libraries can play in this new chapter of innovation.¹² The symposium was very informative and encouraging. Since library users want more usability, and as more and more people are using mobile technology in their research process, then there is no question that libraries should embrace this current trend.

Interestingly, though, there was a surprising backlash to the various talks by symposium speakers that surfaced on the Twitter back-channel (<http://twitter.com/#search?q=%23fomo10>). Postings expressed a great deal of suspicion about sales pitching from Verizon, and more than a couple pleas were made for more direct relevancy to the library field. However, many, including myself, could not help but feel that these objectors were misguided in their frustrations. Libraries and librarians should be on the front lines of these innovations, not sitting back pretend-

ing that they will just fade away. We should not fear for our jobs, but instead embrace the change that is actually underway. The ability to adapt is the ability to survive. Adaptability determines which professional sectors in society in general are the most fit and relevant for the future.

A Lesson from History

While librarians, historically, are not known for their adaptability, there are noted exceptions. In previous eras, the library opened doors for patrons by opening the stacks and by offering an unparalleled wealth of knowledge in public lending libraries. In the Eighteenth-century, admittance to the British Library was "obtained only by ticket, and that only by persons 'of condition'."¹³ One of the main reasons for this closed policy, of course, was the ornate quality of the room, designed by Lafosse and Charles Rousseau, and housed within the building also containing the Royal Library. The library staff during this time composed of elderly physicians and clergymen was equally as "standoffish" as the lavish décor.¹⁴

As Head Librarian at the British Library from 1856 to 1866,¹⁵ Panizzi's work in creating a usable catalogue effected a democratizing of the library itself. The British Library was under threat by labor movements like the Chartists and other groups that wanted equal access to the materials housed within the library. The British library eventually opened a public reading room around 1857 which functioned much in the same way as the modern public library. This was a crucial first step in the movement towards free information for the public.¹⁶

Other British community libraries began to open similar reading rooms and city or borough librarians became important people in the creation and promotion of working-class literary circles.¹⁷ This development of service to the working-class was an important moment in literary history.¹⁸ Writers who did not have the luxury of lounging about Bloomsbury were able to get away from their often chaotic home life by sneak-



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ing away to the public library for a few hours in order to have a chance to write.¹⁹ While expressions of the library's mission have changed through the years since the opening of the stacks and the creation of public reading rooms, the core value of providing information and an environment of learning has remained crucially important. In today's world, we must still provide equal information to all.

Seizing the Opportunity

Times are changing and, thankfully, so are librarians. Thomas Benton recently characterized the current climate of the library profession this way. "[F]or all the concern expressed about the imminent demise of the college library, there may never have been a time when librarians seemed more vital, forward-thinking—even edgy—than they do now."²⁰ Thankfully, there are new books like Marilyn Johnson's, *This Book is Overdue: How Librarians and Cybrarians Can Save us All*. Johnson's work aims to promote an image of the new librarian as one who does not even remotely resemble the stereotypical version seen in almost every pop-culture depiction of the library professional.

Amongst core users, the word is out. People who use libraries know that the services offered are not outdated. For business entrepreneurs, professionals, and the knowing public that rely on skilled information-seeking behavior and quality information, they know that libraries remain the most reliable source for finding what is worth finding. Librarians need to get this word out more widely.

There are methods for implementing marketing strategies, but these are as varied as user populations. One cannot dictate what an individual library should do in order to improve its marketing strategy. But regardless of the type of library—public, academic, school or special—it is important to engage some plan. While there are many different methods available for marketing, a mathematical approach seen in the commercial world may be one worth considering. John R. Hauser and Kenneth J. Wisniewski lay

out a mathematical process to assess marketing plans using the "Semi-Markov Process," in, "Dynamic Analysis of Consumer Response to Marketing Strategies." This process evaluates and anticipates the impact of marketing campaigns in a new area where two other products dominate.²¹ While libraries may not *per se* be a "new product," they are in direct competition with chain booksellers and the internet, and perhaps this approach to assessment may be helpful.

For a more general consideration the topic of library marketing that covers planning for library marketing, discussing new directions in marketing, and guiding in the use of specific marketing tools, see Suzanne Walter's excellent presentation in *Library Marketing that Works!*²² Essentially a workbook, Walters addresses the key issues for all types of libraries and offers inspirational testimonials from libraries that in recent years have successfully undertaken marketing campaigns.

In order to address a general failure to market library resources and services, some plan, perhaps one of the few suggested here, needs to be put in place to combat a deepening decline in support of libraries and to reverse a broadening negative perception of the library profession as a whole.

Conclusion

A failure in marketing is to blame for the upsurge in negative feelings toward libraries. Many users feel that libraries are an outdated relic of a world that is no longer relevant. It is the duty of librarians to forge ahead into the uncertain waters and attempt to reinvigorate the profession with a refocus of mission more fully embracing technology and modern life. One of the key issues that must be addressed when discussing library marketing is the same as in the commercial marketing world—how does one sell oneself to people who do not wish to be sold to? Some librarians have taken it upon themselves to post videos on online video sites like YouTube offering dancing and singing

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of modified Lady Gaga music (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a_uzUh1VT98&feature=player_embedded). This is a fun and quirky method of (largely) free advertising. It does not make sense for all libraries to follow in this manner, but perhaps it could be a viable way to attract teen and young adult users by showing that librarians have a sense of humour and are not stuffed-shirted statues.

Libraries have every opportunity to be on the cutting-edge front lines of new technological innovations. Companies like Verizon and IBM see libraries as an important place to implement technology and to work with the smart people in the profession. Those who believe that libraries are outmoded and obsolete will no longer have an argument the more we actively engage a positive and substantial momentum forward into the future and as librarians more accurately market their increasingly relevant services to various user groups.

Endnotes

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