



Cornell University
ILR School

Cornell University ILR School
DigitalCommons@ILR

Articles and Chapters

ILR Collection

8-1999

The Library as an Agent of Change: Pushing the Client Institution Forward

Stuart Basefsky

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/articles>

DigitalCommons@ILR is celebrating its 10th anniversary!

Please share your [DigitalCommons@ILR story!](#)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the ILR Collection at DigitalCommons@ILR. It has been accepted for inclusion in Articles and Chapters by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@ILR. For more information, please contact hlmdigital@cornell.edu.

The Library as an Agent of Change: Pushing the Client Institution Forward

Abstract

The library in today's world must transform itself into an agent of change. Basefsky discusses why informing, discussing, soliciting, targeting, teaming and stretching need to be implemented if libraries want to remain useful and the institutions they serve wish to prosper.

Keywords

library, university, resources, information, client

Comments

Suggested Citation

Basefsky, S. (1999). *The library as an agent of change: Pushing the client institution forward*. Retrieved [insert date] from Cornell University, ILR School site: <http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/articles/189/>

Required Publisher Statement

Copyright by the Special Libraries Association. Final paper published as Basefsky, S. (1999). The library as an agent of change: Pushing the client institution forward. *Information Outlook*, 3, 37-40.

The following article in preprint form appears in Information Outlook (Journal of the Special Libraries Association), Vol. 3, No. 8, August 1999, pages 37-40.

**The Library as an Agent of Change:
Pushing the Client Institution Forward**
By Stuart Basefsky*

ABSTRACT

The library in today's world must transform itself into an agent of change. Basefsky discusses why informing, discussing, soliciting, targeting, teaming and stretching need to be implemented if libraries want to remain useful and the institutions they serve wish to prosper.

The library in today's world must transform itself into an agent of change. While it can still be a place to go for information, the emphasis must be placed on disseminating information outside its walls. The library should be going to its patrons, rather than waiting for them to appear. After all, the inherent strength of the library profession is found in its comprehension of the value of information. The ability to select the best and most useful information and organize it into categories for easy access indicates that libraries possess a detailed understanding of what their clients need. Unfortunately, the traditional role of libraries stopped at collecting, organizing, and assisting. It did not include, in any significant form:

Informing the client about the material being collected presumably on their behalf;

Discussing the issues for which the material was to provide background and enlightenment;

Soliciting users through extensive demonstration programs of how to use best the information collected and for what purposes;

Targeting key individuals in the organization for special services so that they could convey the value of the information to others;

Teaming with management of the institution on addressing problems, projects, research initiatives, and instruction as a player (policy and decision-maker) who brings the significant perspective of the knowledge and information provider (librarian) to the table; or

Stretching the job description of the librarian or the organizational role of the library to fit better the needs of the organization it serves.

These six underutilized actions need to be implemented intelligently if libraries want to remain useful and the institutions they serve wish to prosper. To accomplish this transition, libraries cannot be passive organizations. They must act like some other information providers who, in fact, are often less well-equipped to enhance the position of the institution that the library serves. These are the roles of:

* **Facilitator**

* **Consultant**

* **Trainer**

* **Journalist/reporter**

In making the assertions above, it is necessary to provide some brief background on why libraries are confronted with the choices of either remaining the same (with the risk of being pushed to the margins of the organization), or becoming an agent of change.

BACKGROUND: WHAT HAPPENED?

Why are libraries underutilized and increasingly under-appreciated? Traditionally libraries had an image of a quiet, well-organized place to go for reflection and study. Because libraries had a monopoly on organized and useful information, librarians never had to explain how they acquired information or the policies they devised in making it accessible. The library was viewed as a gateway to information and the librarian as a keeper of information. To be sure, it was understood that the librarian could help a researcher gain access to specific publications or even information otherwise unknown. Libraries provided occasional excitement for a user when better and more useful information was discovered by browsing or good reference service. The power of organizing information for the purpose of enhancing serendipity seemed to be the unique magic possessed by librarians. However, the arcane classification systems and subject headings were little understood and more often simply tolerated by library patrons. After all, the library was the only information game available of any consequence. It was not necessary to trouble oneself with learning all the ins and outs of its use. Librarians were always available to assist someone having difficulty. Even the librarians failed to reflect adequately on their roles as information providers and brokers. When running a monopoly, the lack of competition lulls one into complacency.

THEN CAME THE INTERNET...

With the Internet, information became readily and easily available at the desktop. In fact, worldwide information now became so convenient that the perception of former library users changed. Libraries, once having a monopoly on information, were now considered a small piece of the information pie. Some younger potential library clients developed little or no acquaintance with libraries to the extent that for them libraries represented only a small slice or sliver of the pie. Regardless of the merits of the perception, the perception lives and with it a changing reality for libraries and their users. Quality information and products are now exposed to a marketplace of information valued often for its accessibility, not its reliability or even its utility. Quality information is hard to find and often goes unpromoted and certainly underused.

While libraries still do an excellent job providing their traditional services in a relatively traditional manner, they are hampered by a traditional difficulty. Their relationship with users is "one on one." Nearly all library patrons will indicate that they are happy with library service. Unfortunately, none of them goes to lunch with the intention of asking the following kind of cocktail conversation question, "How was your day at the library?" The reputation of the library and its quality services remain with individuals, not groups. There are no natural interest groups coming to the defense of libraries and the services they offer. Only the traditional, scholarly, and cultural imagery of libraries comes to their defense. To paraphrase Oscar Wilde, in a cynical world where one knows the cost of everything and the value of nothing, respect based on tradition or even knowledge of true value is little to rely on. "What is your organization costing?" is the predominant question of the day. "What does the institution gain from your existence?" is the parallel question. Without good answers, the future for libraries is not promising. Consequently, a transformation is necessary.

Why choose the path of becoming an agent of change? What does this entail? How significant a change is this in reality?

Since perception and cost are the dominating issues in most organizations today, libraries have to address how they are perceived and why their costs are justified. Cliche though it may be, the business expression, "If you are not part of the solution, then you are part of the problem," is at the heart of the matter. Aligning the library goals and mission with that of the client institution is essential. However, there are always traps to avoid.

Much like answering a reference question, the library must keep its focus clear. One needs to give the client what they need, not necessarily what they ask for. Consequently, in aligning goals and mission, one must ask, "What does the institution really need that the library can provide?" With this perspective, the answer is relatively obvious - information awareness. Without good, quality information, sound decisions are not likely to occur. Additionally, creative perspectives are likely to be lost. The single greatest contribution a library can make to its client institution is

bringing information to the table of decision-making. This includes the ideas of the librarians. After all, librarians are exposed to competing information perspectives and come to understand the complexities of many issues. Providing those perspectives can be helpful to an institution.

In the past, libraries waited for decision-makers to ask for their services. This stance is now a luxury. Most libraries will have to demonstrate their utility to an organization that no longer understands their role and function. In the process, the role and function of the librarian will not change much. What will change, will be the culture of librarianship. The need for outgoing personalities and persons willing to discuss and suggest ideas to decisionmakers is essential. Sometimes these personalities will need to interact face-to-face with clients in their offices, not in the library. Other times, an interaction will be electronic via e-mail, fax, or telephone. It does not matter whether the librarian is in public service or technical service. Good communication skills will be needed.

The basic principle to follow in this kind of librarianship is, "Information that is out of sight is out of mind." References to information, whether in paper or electronic formats, need to come to the desktops of decision-makers. This information should also be easily and readily accessible. To accomplish this, one will have to take the six actions suggested above and play one, if not several, of the four roles indicated.

FOR EXAMPLE:

Informing may include playing the roles of journalist/reporter, trainer, and consultant.

As journalist/reporter, a librarian may be sending e-mails of information to a targeted audience based on newly published or acquired material, newly received press releases, or simply awareness of another individual in the organization researching a similar topic from a different but useful perspective. Be sure to remind the clients receiving these notices that as journalist/reporter, you are, in fact, outperforming the typical journalist because you are revealing your sources.

As trainer, a librarian may be giving individual or group instruction to those who benefit from e-mail awareness services. The nature of this instruction may include explaining how to store the e-mail messages in a mailbox for future searching. In other words, how to maintain a ready reference file of received messages in order to increase the productivity of the recipient through creative use of technology.

As consultant, a librarian may bring freshly acquired information to a client and attach instructions about how and why it is useful to their research. The librarian may include an example of how to apply the information to the project or research being undertaken. Simply providing the latest data or working paper on an issue is something for which consultants get paid big bucks. You are already on the payroll. This kind of action is a demonstration of your cost-effectiveness.

Discussing may include playing the roles of journalist/reporter and facilitator.

As journalist/reporter, a librarian may get better informed about the needs of individual clients and a better understanding of the research they are doing through discussion. Make appointments and meetings. Ask to be included in departmental meetings for broad awareness purposes. As a journalist, you are able to bring "fast breaking" information to the table if you know it is needed. If you are unaware of your client's needs, you cannot help. Do not promise you will come up with information. However, inform the client that in the process of your work you may come across useful information that you will gladly bring to their attention if you know it is needed.

As facilitator, a librarian, by means of discussion, may realize another individual in the organization is working on the same topic. You can offer to introduce this client to the other if appropriate. Librarians are uniquely positioned to know what's going on in disparate parts of the organization - sometimes with greater awareness than management.

Soliciting may include playing the roles of journalist/reporter and trainer.

As journalist/reporter, a librarian may be wearing the "public relations" hat when promoting training sessions that will increase awareness of new information tools. This awareness, when coupled with multitasking on the computer, can "increase the ability to do more with less." This is the message that management wants to hear. How is it that investments in technology can increase productivity and reduce the need for additional staff? This is an opportunity to write a story for management while extolling the virtues of the library. The library reaps the benefit of its aligned mission.

As trainer, a librarian provides specific examples that will be immediately useful to one of the participants. Solicit from the client to be trained what it is that would be helpful in the demonstration. Do not use canned examples that are not of immediate benefit to someone. This is an opportunity to make a lasting relationship with a client.

Targeting may include playing the roles of trainer and consultant.

As a trainer, a librarian, having identified a key individual in the organization, can become a personal trainer. Make an appointment to give an individualized lesson in their office. This is not a poor use of time or overly labor-intensive. This is an investment. If the person is a leader or decisionmaker, they will encourage others to get the training. For those others, you may choose to train them as a group. Without the support of key individuals, your services may go unnoticed.

As a consultant, a librarian may make extra efforts to please these key individuals by doing value-added research. By demonstrating the kinds of information that a good librarian can bring to an organization, you are selling your potential. Of course, you cannot devote this kind of effort to everyone. Let these key individuals know that what you are doing takes extra effort. While not egalitarian, it exposes the true value that a library can offer if and when it is supported adequately.

Teaming may include playing the roles of consultant and facilitator.

As a consultant, a librarian needs to be self-confident that their knowledge is valuable to management. Any initiative or project undertaken needs information. The library needs to be a partner with any and all significant departments of the organization. Of course, the library should not be considered the staff of another department. It should be, however, a collaborating entity. The library can assist a department by training its staff to use appropriate information, for example. Management needs to know the librarians can help their staff members be more efficient.

As a facilitator, a librarian can bring awareness of other initiatives, programs, and researchers both in and out of the organization. This is a common service provided by librarians. Unfortunately, management is generally uninformed about its existence and utility.

Stretching includes all four roles.

By extending the job descriptions of librarians and the organizational role of the library, the library has an opportunity to define the role it wishes to play in the organization. It is essential to demonstrate a willingness to be a key player in the future of the organization for which the library operates. Without this effort, decisions are likely to be made by others. The library will be caught in a passive role without an opportunity to make its case. It can only hope for the enlightenment of others if this happens. It is better to educate management than to rely on their education. Too often heard is the refrain, "Who needs libraries now that we have the Internet?" Unless libraries stretch, management may come to believe that.

In reality, a world confronted by technical change and an information explosion needs guidance. Libraries are well-positioned to explain how information can be used best in this new technical environment. If libraries do not take an active role in pushing their institutions forward, other information providers will. These may be facilitators, consultants, trainers, and journalist/reporters. In most instances, their services will be less useful to the organization than that of libraries. Almost all organizations know that they need to change the way they operate. Information is a key element in making wise decisions. If libraries do not simultaneously collect and disseminate information, they will all become archives in the eyes of their institutions and users. The perception will be that the Internet keeps them informed, while the library gives them

background and history. Unfortunately, most decision-makers do not ask for background and history. Only the library can provide current information with a historical and background context. Since everyone would be better served if libraries make this kind of effort, one wonders why more libraries are not doing it.

*Stuart Basefsky is an information specialist and instructor at the Martin P. Catherwood Library, School of Industrial & Labor Relations, Cornell University. Since 1993, he has specialized in workplace information issues. Among his accomplishments is the design and creation of the award winning course, "HR Online Research and Reporting Methods" in collaboration with the Center for Advanced Human Resource Studies. He may be reached at smb6@cornell.edu