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Stop Promoting Libraries!

by **Tony Leisner** (Dawson Information Services Group)
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That's right, it is time to stop the promotion of libraries. You have won. **Al Gore** and **Bill Gates** and **Ameritech** and **IBM** and **Apple** and thousands of companies and donors have gotten the message that libraries are critical to our social fabric. Real Estate agents still take newcomers by the library and point with pride at the wonderful facility. American taxpayers have invested billions of dollars in libraries during the past decade and they love their libraries. But, as I said in a speech nearly twenty years ago, "people love their libraries but they don't know anything about their **LIBRARIANS**."

It is not just my humble opinion that we need to move on and address the anonymity of librarians. Just as it took him two decades to grudgingly acknowledge that marketing has a role in library management, no less than **John Berry** of *Library Journal* in the September 1 issue of *LJ*, editorializes that "It is time to advocate librarians." I know how painful it is for him to use the marketing terms, but it is not time to advocate librarians, it is time to shout out from the streets, to it is time to be aggressive and forceful and proud and to promote, sell, mar-

ket so that the public gives the same respect to the librarians who create and run those highly revered institutions. Advocate is such a passive and wimpy word that it hardly reeks of commitment or fire in the belly but then John signs his editorials with his title, Editor in Chief, but doesn't seem proud enough of his MLS to add that he also is a librarian.


John then goes on to find somewhere to place the blame for this failure to promote the value of librarians. He is critical of ALA (easy enough to do in any case), the library schools and then the profession and in particular, the administrators. Well, John, you are missing the point with your well-intentioned editorial. When I first started selling books back in 1972, even as a dumb salesman I knew that libraries didn't buy books, librarians did and if I didn't know any librarians I wasn't going to make any money. That being the case, it isn't too great a leap to conclude that a library wouldn't have anything inside if there weren't any librarians. I told my friends what I did for a living and they were amazed to find out that libraries actually bought books. They knew that schools bought textbooks and that fire departments bought fire trucks so why the great mystery about librarians and book buying? Whose fault is it that this is such a secret? ALA? Library schools? No, it is the fault of the local librarian.

The Washington Post recently ran a story about institutions that invent new ways to serve the public. The lead off paragraph was about the Forsythe County Library in Winston-Salem, North Carolina and a great service they provide, but it didn't mention the name of a single librarian. **Bill Roberts**, the director, is not only an old and dear friend and a man who helped me get started in this business, but he is also one of the most dedicated librarians I have ever met. He chose this profession after he started law school and opted for a career of service rather than profit. He stood up and got counted and was on network news when he took the position that even the KKK had the right to have an exhibit at the library. He is nationally prominent in Kiwanis, has served on ALA council and was a candidate for treasurer a few years ago. Still, even with his visibility, he couldn't get a mention in the *Post* article. Once again, the value is placed on the library and not the librarian. In part, I'm sure, this is because Bill is also a modest man who gives credit to his staff first and then to the community that supports his library, but it is time to come out

from under the bushel basket and give librarians credit where credit is due. If there are great libraries, then there also must be great librarians because great libraries don't happen by accident.

Unlike Berry, I suggest that it is time to make sure that every press release you send out, every piece of literature, every promotion and event have a librarian's name attached. It is time to personalize your service and to hand out business cards with your name and remind your customers that you are proud to be a librarian of service to them. It is too late for the library schools to help and ALA can't keep an executive director long enough to take up the cause. The ALA board needs to stop spending money on lavish parties and limousines and the Council needs to stop spending its time on Bosnia and China. But that is unlikely to change, so it is up to you in your library to make sure at least one person each day knows the name and face of a librarian. No one else is going to do this for you. If you want some real good reasons to take some personal action right now then read **Charlie Robinson's** comments in *Library Administrators Digest* September issue. Charlie is the editor as well as a first class marketer of libraries and library services. Robinson and Berry couldn't be more apart. Robinson addresses the issues of the future and provokes thought rather than blame on faceless institutions. You will be inspired.

Timbuctu and Tony Too

I will miss the **Charleston Conference** this year, but at least I will be somewhere equally as interesting. My new bride, Patti, and I will be on our way to Timbuctu in West Africa. Patti and I met last year while I was on a cruise following the IFLA conference in Istanbul She has worked on cruise ships for twelve years and been almost everywhere so a honeymoon in a unique place became a real challenge. This will be my third trip to Africa and we need to go in November when the Niger river is high enough to allow the very unreliable river steamers to make it from Bamako to Timbuctu. So, if anyone asks where I am this year, you could say, for all I know he could be in Timbuctu. 

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