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A column on collection development and acquisitions management ...

Inside Pandora's Box — Power and Influence: You Can Make A Difference

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Column editor: **Jack Montgomery** (Western Kentucky University)

I seem to remember a time, not long ago, when the greatest challenges for library directors centered on resolving personnel issues, developing a long-range plan (five years, remember?), and convincing administrations to increase funding so that we could keep up with the rising costs of books and periodicals—price increases that, in retrospect (and in comparison with today's skyrocketing prices), seem quite modest. Once a year, we would create a budget, submit it, and meet a time or two with the budget office to defend it. Then, as I recollect, it would be back to managing the library; personnel, planning, and networking (of the human kind). Talk about the "good ol' days!"

In today's rapidly changing and highly competitive environment, a good library director surely must place "advocacy" at the top of the list of job requirements. And it's a job that won't be effective unless it's ongoing and aggressive. Rapid fire changes in technology along with dramatically shifting demographics and changing economic values and structures, all impact libraries and put our ability to deliver viable services at risk. In addition, what constitutes "viable service" is becoming increasingly complex and expensive as patron demand and the tools available to meet that demand become more sophisticated. While librarians have always played an "educator" role, that role too is becoming more important and demanding.

It is clear that strong commitment for library funding and a seminal role in setting information policy are necessary at a time when libraries seem to have no more political clout than ever despite the critical role we play on campus and in society. More than ever, we need to develop power and influence within our larger organizations (be that the campus, the corporation, or the community) and we need to become key and respected players in the larger national legislative arena as well.

Ask any librarian why he or she entered the profession and you are not likely to hear that the opportunity to become involved in politics and power were key attractions. Yet, political advocacy is critical to us now, and it is a role that we are, in fact, well-equipped to assume. We have the political tools at hand, what we need to do is learn how to use them effectively.

Developing an effective political presence

Here's the good news—developing a strong political presence on campus or within any organization is not that difficult and, in fact, libraries are in a better position than many other entities to do so. It requires planning, commitment, and activating the passive support we already enjoy to work on our behalf in a concerted, well focused manner. What follows are some tips in creating and disseminating the library's message in a politically powerful way.

The Message

To be effective at delivering a good, strong message to decision-makers, you have to have—you've got it!—a good strong message. "The message" is really a tool. Though if you're really clever you might develop it into a motto, the real value of the message is to keep all of your public relations, professional interactions, and budget negotiations focused where you have pre-determined they should be. Whatever you develop as your message, it should be focused on desired outcome; it should be simple enough that it becomes "repeatable" both by staff and, eventually, by others within the organization; and it should be flexible enough so that it can be adapted to every audience and their concerns.

As you contemplate "the message" you should be sure that you are focused on outcome. What is it that you are trying to achieve? If you are seeking a more active and respected role in setting information policy, then your message should be focused on librarians as information experts in a rapidly changing electronic environment. If you are seeking better funding to keep up with this changing environment, then your message should convey the increasingly indispensable role that the library plays in the institution's competitiveness and credibility. A generic message will, at best, get you generic results. Messages that generally reiterate the intrinsic value of libraries end up being the kind of "mom and apple pie" messages that libraries have relied on in the past. Not very political—not very powerful.

The message itself should be simple. You'll know you've succeeded in developing a simple but strong message when you hear someone generally believed to be outside the library circles repeating it—and if you have a clear message and promote it well (more

on that later) this will happen. Remember "It's the economy, stupid"? That message was originally developed as a reminder for President Clinton's campaign staff to stay focused in developing his message but it was so simple and so strong, it became universally known and used. If your message is designed to insure that you play a lead role as information policy is being developed in your organization for example, then your message may be as simple as "Today's librarians are the experts in the information revolution." OK, maybe not as catchy as Clinton's, but your "message" is not (probably) something you put on your stationery—it's what keeps you focused as you work to influence others.

Simplicity of message also helps to ensure that your staff and library supporters all stay on the same page when interacting with those who have influence over the direction the library and its services take. Speaking with one voice is powerful in itself. If your message is not clear and strong, developed and supported by staff, it is likely to be rendered ineffective as it becomes misinterpreted or even reinvented by some of your (potentially at least) best allies.

Finally, your message should be able to be adapted to whatever audience you're engaging. This is important. If I were to single out the one major mistake librarians make in trying to persuade others to support libraries, it is that we forget that other people have other agendas. Sadly and too often, the people who have the most influence over our future are really not all that interested in libraries *per se*. This can be changed—it's what power and influence are all about. The trick is to link what's important to your library (the message) with what's important to them. If your dean, for example, has the most influence over your library's budget and money is your message then you must learn what is important to your dean. If it's increased enrollment, then make the case that high-tech, state-of-the-art information services are critical to attracting today's students. If your dean is interested in "bragging rights," be sure you let him or her know that cutting edge libraries are drawing national attention. In delivering the message, it's not about what you want, it's about what he or she wants. Know your audience.

Promoting the Message

If any candidate running for office any-

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where in America had the constituency that we do, they would rejoice—not to mention, win! The potential we have in “passive” advocates in the library and throughout the organization is staggering. Our job is to turn passive support into active support. You are not, in all probability, going to increase the power and influence you and your library have single-handedly. It's important that you present your message as often and compellingly as possible and in as many venues as possible.

Once you have developed the message, it will be very easy to weave it into every public relations opportunity. For example, if your library has a newsletter you have the power of the press at your disposal. Typically, newsletters are used to communicate upcoming events, new acquisitions and items of interest to library users—the standard approach is to inform, not to influence. Time to change the approach. You don't need to change what you include, but to be more powerful, you should be sure to include why everything you do matters. If you are touting a new program, explain in terms of your message, why it matters—show what difference it makes to your institution and your institution's goals. Show how the library is a key player in the achievement of those goals.

Creating a strong base of support requires that all constituents are well informed about your goals and what it will take to achieve them. Further, they have to know how they can help. Depending on your own political environment, you (or a Friends' group or an advisory board) should stay in constant touch with the constituents and, when necessary, be very clear and blunt about how they can help. Look around and decide who holds the most

sway over decision-makers and target them. If it is alumni, send out a special newsletter using your message to influence them to influence the administration. Similarly, an annual newsletter to parents could be an extremely powerful instrument to influence those who have influence. Be clear about your message, how they can help, and why it matters to them.

Though studies have shown that as a group librarians aren't typically extroverts, assertiveness is critical to the establishment of power within the organization. Assertiveness can be difficult for shy people, but it does get easier with practice and nothing will sell like our own passion and belief in why we're important. Be prepared (“the message”) and willing to stay in touch with decision-makers and be sure they understand what support your library needs and can give an institution—even when your input has not been invited. To build power and influence, it's important to place yourself in positions to contribute to the overall strategic planning and policy setting within the institution. Be seen as a player in the institution's direction setting and show yourself as an expert in areas of information policy.

There's nothing magic about building political power within your organization. All it takes is focus, commitment, tenacity, and assertiveness.

A final note

If ever libraries existed happily in a microcosm, they do not now. Every day, legislation is being introduced at the state and national levels that will have or has the potential to have profound impact on you and your ability to provide comprehensive services. You must become involved and you must encourage your staff and supporters to become involved as well. I believe that now more than ever, the future of our services depends on it.

The electronic information environment is bringing new and influential players to the table. Legislation today is moving quickly ahead and is being urged on by private interests which, quite naturally, want to find ways to capitalize on the commercial potential of the Internet. If we do not protect fair use and open access, no amount of money will enable us to provide the limitless information to our clients that we currently do.

Government information is coming online and that is wonderful news for access, but issues regarding perpetual access and archives have yet to be resolved. Librarians are in the best position to educate legislators and ensure that today's information is safe-guarded for tomorrow. Again, legislation and policy regarding government information online is moving quickly—we must be vigilant and assertive.

Good intentions to protect minors are everywhere and passage of highly restrictive filtering laws have the potential to significantly reduce access to much useful information. Again, librarians are in an excellent position to help our legislators understand the risks as weighed against the benefits. Librarians can and must show themselves as the “information experts” best able to manage dissemination policy at the local level.

Being an effective advocate for libraries may be one of the most important roles for today's librarian. It is no longer a role that can be successfully played once a year at budget time and it is not a role that can be confined to the “home front.” These are exciting and perhaps even scary times, but if you became a librarian to make a difference, the opportunity to do so has never been greater.

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having to print off the info, so would rather have hardcopy to begin with.” As with phone calls and fax transmissions, only email messages concerning works of local interest were ever welcome.

One concern with all types of publicity distributed by publishers was inaccurate or incomplete information. Panelists at the “Libraries: The Invisible Market” seminar urged publishers to provide complete information, particularly ISBNs. An incorrect ISBN can lead to the receipt of an incorrect edition or title, since many vendors use the ISBN, rather than the title, to determine which item fills the library's order request. While not frequent, this problem occurs on average of once every semester at **Western Maryland College**.

Another concern is that much of the information distributed by publishers often supplements information derived from other

resources. A study performed at the **Library of Congress** indicated that materials located by selectors in publishers' catalogs were often already on order or included in the collection at the time the selector made the request.¹⁵

To be sure, some publishers are aware of these potential difficulties and are working to counteract them. One publisher, recognizing librarians' reliance on reviews, attempts to supply librarians with favorable reviews of their publications.¹⁶ Publishers do believe one obstacle to effectively marketing to libraries is that libraries order most of their materials through jobbers. Individual publishers are therefore unable to determine the amount or types of imprints which individual libraries purchase; therefore, they have difficulty in determining how to market their publications. Some publishers therefore rely on surveys, phone calls, or focus groups to determine the interests and needs of individual libraries.¹⁷

Conclusion

Vendors, publishers, authors, and review

media offer a wide array of resources for notifying acquisitions personnel of the appearance of new materials. However, not all of these resources are valued equally by acquisitions librarians and staff. Librarians especially value information gathered together into convenient packages by review services and vendors. Other resources are used to fill in information not available from review services. The most useful resources in this respect are publishers' catalogs for non-book materials, foreign imprints, and items of local interest. Electronic sources of information on new materials sometimes supplement or replace traditional resources, although resources in traditional media continue to thrive. Because acquisitions departments disseminate more information on new titles than they actually use, it is possible that electronic versions currently available may gradually supplant their traditional counterparts, and reduce the number of resources that acquisitions staff must consult or manage.