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We're Different: Influencing Skills and Special Librarians

By Stephen Abram

The normal librarian context is quite . . . shall we say . . . immense and focused on the traditional library context. It's not as focused on the value of an individual library professional. Our profession's value proposition is quite complicated and complex. We're never about just resources and buildings, despite what some people think. As such we see a lot of advice about marketing the library, public relations for the library, library branding and the like in our professional literature. I've been quite uncomfortable with that positioning for special librarians. Librarians can practice their profession anywhere and it doesn't require a physical library, nor indeed books, collections, databases, resources, etc. Nowhere is this more true than for special librarians and information professionals.

So, I thought I'd invest some time writing some of the things that I think matter to the positioning of special librarians on our specialized contexts. I believe that professionals, such as us, are different in terms of tone and positioning than those teams of librarians in larger institutional settings where they must balance the marketing of the library with the librarians. In special librarian context we can emphasize the information professional over the resources and spaces. Our key positioning strategic messages include:

1. Personal relationships are paramount. Being on a first name basis with every important user and knowing their needs deeply is different in a special library when compared to those libraries that must serve people on a different scale – for example all students and faculty or an entire community.
2. Understanding a core business and the context of our users changes everything. Special librarians are often quite expert at understanding their company, industry or sector and the enterprise's goals of very specific research needs, strategies, and profit/loss measurements. We're often the only information pro or part of a very small team.
3. Special librarians are often part of the larger organizational team of a diverse range of professionals - not just enterprise teams for operational management work but client teams working on specific projects and contributing their specific skills and insights. These teams may be far more multi-functional and may have allegiance to an external (sometimes paying) client rather than being tasked with achieving host institutional goals.

4. Special librarians and information professionals are often measured on a different –more personal – scale and performance contracts may be tied to very specific goals and agenda.

I'm not saying that librarians who practice in academia or public library settings don't have these tasks but these are often not as critical to long term *personal* success as in special library settings.

What do special librarians need to advocate for?

Special librarians can be one bad budget away from being cut without the personal respect and allegiance and support of strong relationships built over time. Their own position and budget, not just the existence of a library, depends largely on their own personal positioning. So special librarians can look for evidence of successful positioning by testing and observing:

- Visible respect, positioning and awareness of their personal competencies and trust, referrals, and testimonials for them as individuals and not just solely the generic library operation.
- Clients can specifically, articulate and make explicit the transformational value they add on a personal relationship level and in specific interactions and projects - not just on an enterprise basis.
- Management acknowledges the contributions of the information professionals on teams and to external clients, special projects, corporate strategies, and strategic investments.
- The special librarians are acknowledged for their advice and consulting skills and not just for getting information quickly on a transactional basis. They are respected as 'professionals' and not 'support staff' and this is evident in the reporting relationship and flexibility with respect to spending and budget.
- Measurable impact on such organizational issues like white-collar productivity, research success, timeliness, and decision-making quality.

What does Cialdini tell us?

A recent (2013) Ph.D. dissertation by Dr. Cheryl Stenström, at San José State University School of Library and Information Studies and Queensland University of Technology, explored the factors of influence in libraries around funding and support with key decision-makers. Stenström used the Cialdini framework known as the Six Principles of Influence (also known as the Six Weapons of Influence) that were created by Robert Cialdini, Regents' Professor Emeritus of Psychology and Marketing at Arizona State University. He published them in his respected 1984 book, *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*. Cialdini identified the six principles through experimental studies, and by immersing himself in the world of what he called compliance professionals – salespeople, fund raisers, recruiters, advertisers, marketers, and so on.

These are people skilled in the art of convincing and influencing others. (See more at: <http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/six-principles-influence.htm#sthash.2yXY5asQ.dpuf>).

Cialdini's six universal tactics of influence are:

1. Authority: hierarchical or by expertise
2. Consistency and commitment: alignment with personal or organizational values
3. Liking: popular definition; familiarity
4. Reciprocity: prior exchanges
5. Scarcity: the possible lack of availability
6. Social proof: what would others do?

These tactics should echo well with special librarians. We need to position our professional competencies with respect to information in the context of the professional competencies of our client groups – be they lawyers, doctors, engineers, or whatever.

Stenström discovered that, with librarians, liking and familiarity played a huge role in successful influencing funding and support strategies and that being face-to-face often and in context was a key strategy for success – from both the librarian's and client's point-of-view. Apparently likability has been shown in the research to increase with consistent interaction and face-to-face events.

What are your goals?

So, we find ourselves, as special librarians, needing to focus on relationships in order to have the positive impact we desire. That requires us to focus on building positions deep in the minds of our clients based on:

- Understanding our professional competencies – largely through personal experiences
- Trust – the role of professionalism, confidentiality, and delivering on time and high quality.
- Relationships based on personal experience and mutual need.
- Permissioning – invites to meetings, social gatherings, and contributions to projects

What strategies work?

I've written in this column before about elevator speeches being insufficient if they don't lead to something greater – deep and growing relationships. Broadly you use your elevator speech to introduce yourself to your target audiences. You tell the story. Ultimately you build engagement and therefore permission to ask for and receive more time. This 'time' looks like a coffee break at Starbucks, a shared quick lunch on the hot dog cart in the Square, a real lunch or dinner or drinks after work. It might even look like an office or water cooler meeting that is quasi-casual. Each interaction builds on

the one it follows and your relationship deepens. Relationship building is not an event but a long term process that builds over time. In special libraries our relationships are a mosaic of interactions and shared stories with clients that build into a shared portrait of value and impact. Doing great work of high quality and impact isn't enough – you must ensure that the right people know and share the story.

So there it is. Simple really. Your mission, should you decide to accept it, is to make sure that you, as a librarian in a specialized setting, serving specialized needs, have a relationship with everyone who matters, can count on their endorsement through thick and thin, are a critical part of the important teams and projects, and know them as people, and not just users. Influence comes from relationships with your management and you clients. The ultimate strategy is to be “*authentic*” in who you are and *intentional* about how you tell your story. Here's how:

1. **Know who you are.** What do you value? What do you believe? What are you passionate about? Why? What are you really good at? What are you really bad at? Be intimately acquainted with your unique story... your *why, and then*:

2. **Tell your story.** Find ways to tell your story in meaningful, raw, and human ways. And tell it as best you can right now. And tell it to the right people and encourage the right people to share stories about how you made a difference in their work.

3. **Engage with your clients.** Visit and talk, Listen and reflect. Share stories with impact that change relationships and build on impact, productivity and success.

As Cialdini noted in 2004: “*The relationship is the message.*”

Stephen Abram, MLS is a strategy, marketing and direction planning consultant with Dysart & Jones. He is a past president of SLA, the Ontario Library Association and the Canadian Library Association. He is the author of ALA Edition's Out Front with Stephen Abram and Stephen's Lighthouse Blog. Stephen would love to hear from you at stephen.abram@gmail.com.