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Scott Rummler

scottrummler@universalpowerauthority.com

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Look Out! The Biggest Library Problem

Scott Rummler
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The Scare Factor

Most librarians have an admirable dedication to their profession and are not focused on issues of power and control, particularly outside the realm of their job descriptions. In addition, we may have a blind spot about forward-thinking strategy and analysis for developing new programming and seeking new audiences. These factors combine to create the biggest library problem: political power and control in their institutions. Symptoms of this problem include the much-delayed website redesign, lagging program redesign, testing, and promotion, and adoption of open-source technology.

This problem is an artificial one, since librarians already have a key product and service. The real issue is losing control of library operations, beginning with institutional support. Avoiding this means going beyond the traditional realm of librarianship and into the role of activist. Libraries need to innovate, be creative, promote their services, and make the case for controlling their space within the larger institutional framework.

What's Really Going On Here?

Librarianship is sometimes being usurped by an institutional view of mass information services. Information is being seen as a public commodity, based outside the realm of libraries. As a result, new information products are being developed and promoted which are not library-centric. Poor management and turf battles often result in transference of power for library decision-making away from librarians. Dubious episodes of political infighting may end up being the decisive factor.

The Driver's Seat

The Internet. Google search. What is on the web? Students have preconceptions: "Why not just use google instead of all these library databases?" "Can I find my email through google?" A recent [washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com) article stated that google was better than formal research. The author must have used google to verify this claim, because he seemed to miss most of the key examples.

Pursuing this meme to the next level: information is now a mass-market public commodity. From a top-down perspective, a CEO or President is influenced by popular culture and the news in his efforts to attract support. This puts downward pressure on operating units to respond in kind. Going forward, programs will be funded based on popular appeal, and a kind of leverage libraries have not traditionally been geared to handle. Moreover, the pace of change is

accelerated. Most web pages last three months and most software is obsolete yearly. How do libraries compare and compete?

The Stage

Information science is a subtle field that is liable to be appropriated by neophytes in IT, PR, and management. We may see a consolidation of information services based on backend (from the wire back) or front-end (from the wire forward) management, heavily influenced by public relations. An information culture centered on a commons may appeal to the masses and be promoted by management. Over the next ten years, libraries will be almost fully integrated into the information economy, and by that time will have staked out turf as either focal or marginal players in the larger information space.

The Characters

The following are fictional characterizations of real-life situations in the world of libraries:

- The dummy expert: an incompetent, usually in administration, not interested in latest practices in the field, not competitively qualified. Reassures the CEO or President in information areas the CEO is ignorant of, in a nonthreatening way. Becomes the CEO's go-to guy or gal for the issue.
- The clueless leader: "what is all this new stuff?" Stubbornly refuses to get up to speed. Eventually runs out of time, and when the issue is forced, cobbles together a poorly-planned scheme with his cronies aimed at risk-free, short-term gains.
- The hidden value of the clueless CEO: his idea is great; it's the specifics that are terrible. Typical scenario: "I know this guy who has x and is an expert in y." Guess what? He doesn't and he isn't. Try telling that to the boss.
- The opaque labyrinth. Many organizations, particularly in academia, do not operate in a transparent or regulated environment. They attract investment and perform public service without being accountable for effectiveness or efficiency. Therefore, it is in their best interest to appear to espouse values associated with transparency. Many of the key drivers are not those with objective value (quality of education, increased enrollment, efficiency); rather, they are related to PR and power struggles amongst dysfunctional units.

A study by New York Senator Charles Schumer showed that higher education costs have gone up by 300% in the last five years. New York Attorney General Elliott Spitzer's comments and governance activism could apply to higher education as well. Market forces without regulation do not always result in optimal scenarios. Transparency in governance would be an important step in optimizing and aligning accreditation, financing, and operations.

Case studies

Management Mix-up: Special Library

The library of a huge industrial company has been shut down for a year and had a backlog of millions of randomized documents and archival materials. The company is lax technically with little IT understanding from the top of a vast org chart. Many do not know there was a library; the CEO thinks it is a public library.

The library encounters resistance to approving any materials and to reorganizing documents. The library does promotional work, which is not understood by the corporation. It succeeds in getting verbal support from the CEO and SVP. The company is interested in cutting costs and controlling legal and PR issues rather than in improving its products, which is the orientation of the library. The library becomes part of the purchasing department, and creates a sophisticated website, in spite of a lack of IT departmental support, which attracts 9,000 hits the first day, in addition to processing the load of documents. The IT department lodges vague complaints to the purchasing supervisor. The purchasing supervisor is pressured to reduce costs and justifies eliminating the library because of low foot traffic and a lack of contribution to the purchasing unit.

The Startup: Tell us what we want to hear, or you're fired!

A new search engine needs a librarian/information scientist to spider pages for the new demo engine to search. The company can only afford a 5 million record license with which to emulate the entire web, which it hopes to do seamlessly. Instead of addressing the content issues, it focuses on techniques to process batches of records. The librarian foresees disaster and recommends technical innovations and information quality solutions, which have worked well in trials. These recommendations fall on deaf ears, as the rest of the staff is thinking in purely mechanical terms. The librarian is voted off the team. When the demo launches it retrieves mostly bad information and does not display its merits, and goes out of business.

The College Library: backstabbers and tax breakers.

A midsize college library has planned to upgrade its website and systems for three years but has not gotten around to it, due to lack of resolve, organization, project management acumen, and technical skills. A new systems librarian is hired who resolves these problems. In the process she notices technical problems, which she reports along with suggestions.

Suddenly her supervisor is inundated with complaints about her. When she takes a small amount of sick time she is repeatedly questioned about it and her health. Her application for an internal position is not kept confidential: the head of the search committee calls his current supervisor and makes negative statements about her suggestions for improvements if she were hired. The systems librarian discusses these issues with her supervisor, who does not take action. She is unable to stem the tide, and begins to wonder if she is being discriminated against.

Apparently she is not alone, as the Provost issues a memo that several employees have complained about retaliation when they have reported problems or made suggestions but have not given their names for fear of losing their jobs. He assures them that if they come forward they will not get in trouble. The systems librarian contacts the Provost and HR with her retaliation concerns, but her concerns are not dealt with and she is fired. The systems librarian asks that her grievance be heard, in keeping with standard procedures as outlined in the employee handbook, but his request is denied. She asks to have COBRA health insurance immediately but her request is denied.

The library director now reports to the IT department, a change made without input from the administrative and faculty council, as required by college bylaws. The library is downsized and used as IT Helpdesk space, even though funds for the space were donated expressly for library purposes.

The systems librarian contacts the accreditors, requesting a review of ethics and employee handbook statement obligations, but her request is denied.

Prepare the Crowd

In order to deal with this situation, libraries need to focus on analysis, strategy, and execution rather than internal administration issues and library-centric traditions. It can be helpful for staff to triangulate the skill gaps between libraries, IT, and PR. This means rapidly getting up to speed in key areas in which one is unfamiliar.

Key Opportunities

One strategy would be to swim upstream in the information services value chain to provide institutional information services and snag key clients. Examples of this would include:

- Become think-tanks and labs for technological development in information science
- Become players in institutional fundraising, PR, and records management
- Try using user market segments, extensive image and design PR, budget tactics, project management, prototypes, creativity, and think tanks
- Develop programs that increase use and satisfaction as their goal
- Gain publicity as clout
- Become early adopters of open source technology, breaking the grip of lousy committee- and vendor standards-driven library systems
- Use sophisticated project management techniques
- Become experts in usability design and testing, with a focus on users
- Think CRM: customer relationship management
- Do Information Architecture, a web discipline, created by librarians. Create blueprints for organizing, finding, and using information.
- Do ERP: enterprise resource planning with a focus on managing the big information picture
- Develop a rapid-prototyping and testing culture
- Spin the spinster librarian in a new PR movement