

Demonstrating Your Worth to Administration

by

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Conference Program Abstract: Librarians sometimes have difficulty quantifying the value of the services and resources we provide to our constituencies. When financial resources are scarce, persuading administrators of our worth becomes even more crucial to our continued success. Come learn some simple strategies for building your case, presenting a convincing argument to executive administration and creating an organizational culture that values the library.

One of the most difficult tasks that special librarians face is the job of persuading the executive administration of their given organizations of the value of the library programs and services they provide. Much of what librarians do is often considered a “soft” cost and is difficult to quantify in the current business climate that stresses hard numbers, return on investment, and cost-benefit to the organization. Since the majority of special library funding is dependent on budget allocations from executive administration, the development of sound strategies for demonstrating the worth of our services becomes crucial to our continued success. In this article, the author will present key concepts and methods that were used successfully in her former position as a hospital library director to create a culture of ongoing and increasing support for the library within the larger organization.

Develop a “Disaster Mentality”

In any professional setting, it generally pays to be overprepared, whether for a simple weekly staff meeting or a major presentation. My own personal rule has always been, “If they ask for one good reason, give them five.” Always show up with more information than you actually think you need for the given setting.

In addition to arming yourself with lots of information, good administrators also cultivate a tendency towards what I call a “disaster mentality;” that is, always assuming the worst will happen. I think I am naturally a bit of a pessimist, so this comes quite naturally to me. But an optimistic person like my husband finds this kind of thinking to be distressing, disturbing and maybe even counter-productive. Nevertheless, it has served me well over the years in managing change and dealing with the unexpected in the course of my various library jobs.

By consciously entertaining worst case scenarios, the special librarian can actively work through the various arguments that might be presented if the worst did indeed happen. For example, a proposal could be made to close the library entirely. Developing verbal responses to worst case scenarios in your head, or even taking the time to commit them to paper, will improve your ability to articulate your value under all circumstances, not just in times of crisis.

Define yourself accurately

In the business literature, the concept of the “elevator speech” appears frequently to describe a concise, compelling description of yourself, your job, your company or your product that can be delivered in the time it takes to ride an elevator from the 6th floor down to the lobby. In the case of the special librarian, the development of an effective elevator speech is particularly crucial to making our case because our contact with higher-level administrators is often very limited; we may only have a few minutes to make a positive impression. The message that you craft should be crystal clear. The steps in crafting the perfect message should include defining your mission, vision and values; specifying your constituent user groups; and thoroughly describing your resources and services. With a well-rehearsed elevator speech and a clearly defined message, it becomes easier to promote yourself as innovative, focused and essential to the continuing success of the organization.

Collect the right data

Preparing any kind of proposal in the business setting invariably calls for the compilation of some sort of numerical data that shows how much we do or how well we do it. In the library setting, we tend to count standard things like patrons, ILL requests, reference questions and search requests. It is

extremely important to think carefully about what kind of data we are collecting and what exactly we want that data to reflect.

In my hospital library, we stopped counting patrons through the door one year because our very old electronic counter broke and we simply could not afford to buy a new one. Our statistics had not changed in years, and we felt the data was not very useful anyway. During the following year, we received a grant to increase the number of public PCs in the library. Suddenly we experienced a huge rise in patron traffic. Unfortunately, because we did not have good traffic data from the “slow times” during the previous year, we could not paint a particularly compelling picture of how our business had increased. Needless to say, we quickly found a way to budget for a new door counter and got back on track collecting data that we could use to make the case for adding even more PCs in the future.

Bean counters want hard data

Presenting a case for adequate funding during the budget process is one of the most nerve-wracking tasks that library administrators face. In most cases, the people who allocate financial resources within an organization are naturally numbers oriented and look to line managers to present concrete numerical data that justify the monetary requests they are making. There are many different sources for numerical data that give a good picture of the usage level and effectiveness of the library and its services. Because so many of our resources are technology-based, we can collect detailed and extensive statistics from our vendors, web managers and online systems with little or no effort. It is essential that we study the statistics generated by our online activities and use them to prove just how prevalent library usage is, or just how many items were retrieved, printed, downloaded or emailed. No matter what numbers you decide to crunch, make sure they are presented in a clear, easy to read format. Use pie charts, bar graphs or line graphs if you like, but make sure they are very easy to read. A confusing chart or graphic will only hinder your argument and could cause you to lose some of your clout with administration.

There are also cases where “low tech” statistical methods work equally well. One year I was trying to demonstrate just how much our Loansome Doc and ILL service had grown. So I printed out the entire patron database in QuickDoc and took it to the budget hearing with me. It came to about a half ream of paper with names, addresses, departments, email addresses,

etc. In the course of my defense, I heaved the list onto the table and invited the CFO to take a look at how extensive our patron database was (over 2,000 names). He rifled the pages with his fingers, shook his head and promptly gave me an increase in ILL money for the following year. So remember, you don't have to use a pie chart to present hard data!

The killer stat: don't leave home without it

Thinking of creative ways to present yourself and quantify what you do is probably the most valuable skill special library administrators can develop. One effective tool that can aid in the process of crafting an effective message involves the “killer statistic” that you can tout at the drop of a hat. I was privileged to work for a very gifted CEO while at my hospital. One of his great strengths was his ability to present numerical data about the hospital in a memorable and meaningful way. He would often seize upon a particularly amazing statistic and repeat it endlessly in interviews, memos, press conferences, commercials, emails and newspaper stories. Advertisers and marketers have known the value of the sound bite statistic for years. One famous example of this is the Trident advertising campaign, “4 out of 5 dentists recommend...”.

At my hospital, we tried to study our statistics from all our different sources in order to come up with a few that really resonated. After gazing at our e-journal usage statistics for about a half hour one afternoon, I noticed that we had a very large spike in traffic during one month of 2004. I stared at the spreadsheet and realized I had found my “killer stat”: Nearly 1,000 articles accessed online in one month! I am reasonably certain that I know what caused the spike (promotion and tenure dossiers, resident research day, spring conferences and accreditation all happening at once) but regardless of the circumstances, this new factoid became my mantra for the next year. So look around at the data you collect and see what interesting numerical facts you can isolate to convey the message that your library is accessible and well-used.

Some executives respond to soft data

Not all administrators are “bean counters.” Some executives are more “visionary” thinkers and respond well to different persuasive tactics than do financial officers. A good special librarian is careful to cultivate a fan base of loyal, satisfied (and vocal) customers. These are the users who will write

a letter in support of you whenever you need one, and sometimes even when you don't. I used this tactic to great advantage at my hospital by dutifully asking any enthusiastic and satisfied customer to write to my VP and let him know what a great job we were doing in the library. Once senior management receives a few of these letters, the library's reputation as a high quality service is cemented in their minds. Another way to collect soft data is to use surveys with open-ended questions at the end such as "Is there anything else you'd like to tell us about your experience using the library?" If you are doing your job properly, you will get praise and positive feedback from that type of question.

Storytelling as a persuasive tool

Seeking descriptive feedback from customers is just one way to harness the human side of what we do and use it to our advantage. Another -- perhaps even more powerful -- means is to collect human interest stories that you can use much like you would your "killer stat" to reinforce your reputation for exemplary customer service. In a medical setting, there is no shortage of human interest stories that can be used to illustrate the dramatic differences we make in the lives of doctors, nurses and patients. Not all special libraries have this advantage, but even in a law or corporate library, there are likely stories of the library going the extra mile and saving the day for a patron, customer, or employee. The use of a narrative storytelling approach is particularly powerful because stories captivate people, entertain them and, perhaps most importantly, encourage a connection between the storyteller and the listener. In those rare moments when you *do* have the ear of an administrator, I highly recommend telling them a memorable and inspiring story about the human side of what you do.

Demonstrate cost-benefit

Return on investment is an all-important criterion in the business world. Since library activities do not always translate well into the rigid financial ratios of the business world, we have to develop effective ways of documenting the sometimes hidden benefits of what we do. At my hospital, we came up with numerous ways of illustrating how the money spent on the library benefited the entire organization. Any library initiative that improves efficiency or saves money for the organization is a good place to start.

Special libraries often centralize access to information through the creation of an intranet portal with consolidated access to databases and an A-Z e-journal list. This centralization can save a great deal of time and money if it can eliminate duplicate subscriptions to expensive materials purchased by various departments or divisions throughout the organization. The library can spearhead integration of the library's online databases and research tools into departmental intranets and websites, leading to more efficient research and faster answers to work-related research questions. The library can facilitate time-saving services like SDI, Table of Contents alerts and RSS feeds in order to improve employee skills, knowledge and productivity. Membership in library-related consortia and professional associations can yield significant discounts on electronic products and services that would not be available to the organization if they did not have a library. As always, financial or statistical data should be collected whenever possible to document savings, usage and effectiveness.

Develop a proactive approach

The reputation for outstanding customer service is built over time and requires steadfast commitment to quality and consistency. One aspect of good customer service is a thorough knowledge of your customer base. By learning as much as possible about the changing needs of our users, special librarians strengthen their ability to identify new ideas and developing trends within an organization or industry. This awareness will assist the special librarian in crafting an array of services and resources that are dynamic and far more likely to match current user needs.

Along these same lines, careful attention to who is using the library can also unlock potential new customer groups and eventually help you create new services to meet the needs of those groups. The proactive approach involves keeping an eye out and an ear to the ground within an organization or community. A willingness to step in and fill newly-identified needs will only enhance the library's reputation.

At my former job, when a hospital membership club was started, one of my library assistants suggested that we offer consumer health information services as one of the benefits to members. We set up several meetings with the marketing department, pitched the idea to them, and wrote and submitted a successful NLM Consumer Health Outreach Grant in the amount of \$33,000.00. Because the library staff was so willing to dive into

new projects like this one, the administration of the hospital developed a very positive view of the library programs and their value to the employees, the patients and the community.

Practice careful stewardship

Money is serious business. Particularly in healthcare, dollars are scarce and competition for funding is fierce. Because financial performance is so closely scrutinized, it is essential that special librarians practice extreme care in managing their budgets. Never, ever overspend your budget, if at all possible. In my 9 years as a hospital librarian, I never once overspent my budget, nor did I make a mistake in accounting for my expenditures. On three occasions, I was questioned about a discrepancy in my budget, and on all three occasions, the mistake was on the part of the accounting department.

Because the library had an outstanding reputation as a trouble-free, efficient and well-managed cost center, when the time came for me to ask for additional money, equipment, or staff, my requests were taken seriously and my figures trusted as accurate. Each time a budget was prepared at my hospital, the technique known as “zero-based budgeting” was used. This approach assumes that your budget is empty at the beginning of the year. Each expense request you include in your budget must have an explanation of the nature of the expense, a justification for the purchase and some sort of price quote, invoice or other documentation to prove the cost. The library collected a great deal of both hard and soft data to justify our expense requests, and our strategies paid off over time. Because we were always able to document the heavy use of our resources, our requests were virtually always granted. Here, all of our data strategies paid off - hard data, soft data, killer statistics and storytelling. When you add those to a reputation for financial accuracy, you will have a far easier time persuading the powers that be of your need for future funding.

Participate institutionally

Woody Allen said that 90% of life is just showing up. Making your presence known within the organization is a powerful way to build your social capital and increase your visibility. In any large organization, there is no shortage of task forces, committees, events, clubs and boards. While in healthcare, I signed up to work a booth at half a dozen health fairs and screening events

in order to demonstrate my willingness to help and to generate contact with the public, stakeholders, and potential customers. Each time there was an accreditation visit, I made certain I was included in the task forces or committees that were engaged in preparing for the visit.

When the hospital hired a new web designer to overhaul the website, I phoned the CIO and immediately volunteered my services on the web redesign committee. Through participation on this committee, I was able to ensure that the library featured prominently on the new home page when it debuted three months later. Although the library manager position was not a part of the management forum at my hospital, I made certain that I was invited to as many of those meetings as possible. If I could not be at meetings, I submitted agenda items, or served as a stand-in for my VP when he was on vacation or otherwise unavailable. Any and all efforts the special librarian can make to serve institutionally will reap benefits in terms of visibility and knowledge.

Maximize your visibility

Service on committees is not the only way to increase your visibility. A savvy special librarian will seek out opportunities to raise community awareness of the library through various media outlets. All local newspapers have reporters assigned to different areas such as education, healthcare or business. At my hospital, we had an excellent relationship with the local newspaper. I was able to get my hospital library featured in a story on at least three different occasions. I made sure that all the local newspaper reporters covering healthcare in our area had my business card and knew they could call me if they needed research support for a story . This way, I could get my foot in the door with them in terms of generating future stories about my library.

When we launched our consumer health program, the local NPR station offered to run a commercial for the service at a steeply discounted rate. That commercial generated a great deal of interest in the library among a desirable and well-educated demographic. Once the program was firmly in place, I also made an appearance on the local “News for Women” television segment at lunchtime to pitch our resources and services. The marketing department at my hospital also felt that internal marketing for the library was important. At their urging, we created a table topper for the cafeteria that gave “Top 10 Reasons to Use the Medical Library” and also

listed directions and hours for interested patients, family members, and physicians. All of these efforts paid off in heightened awareness and increased use of the library at my hospital.

Broaden your network

Malcolm Gladwell writes about the concept of “weak ties” in his popular book *The Tipping Point* (2000). Weak ties are social connections that we have with people who are outside our everyday network of co-workers and family members. Individuals who have large networks of weak ties have the greatest networking power due to the greater number of social circles with which their weak ties intersect. Someone with a well-developed network of these ties can easily come up with someone to phone if they need specific information or a referral. For example, if I need information on lawn services in my town, I know that the father of one of my younger daughter's classmates is in the landscaping business. I would simply call the wife, ask her about her husband's business, perhaps get his number at work, and call him for a referral.

This same principle can be applied in the workplace. I routinely volunteered to do classes and presentations that were outside my normal duties as a health science librarian. I led a monthly fiction book club aimed at senior citizens for three years. I taught community education classes in the evenings on surfing the Internet and learning to use a computer. I helped put together hospital exhibits for Black History Month and Women's History Month. Each of these activities placed me a little bit outside of my normal work and social circles, introducing me to people I never would have met under any other circumstances. The senior citizen book club in particular yielded many connections to older, influential community members, who in turn referred their relatives or members of their own social networks back to me for library assistance and even volunteer opportunities. So a good rule of thumb for solidifying your position within the community is to participate in activities that are outside your normal work and family life routines. The social capital that participation will yield might surprise you.

Practice impression management

It cannot be overemphasized how important appearance and behavior are in the workplace. The face that we wear when at work is the basis for the opinions that others form of us. First impressions and nonverbal

communication provide powerful cues that humans use to judge one another. A positive attitude and professional demeanor leave a lasting impression on everyone you meet. I have tried very hard over the years to always make sure I greet everyone with a positive attitude and a smile each time I see them. I have run into fellow managers outside in the parking lot in the pouring rain and still tried to be cheerful and glad to see them. That might be taking things a little too far, but keeping your professional face warm, open and enthusiastic will only strengthen the impression of the library as a welcoming, engaging place within the organization.

It takes very little for a negative impression to form in someone's mind. It is very important to keep personal moodiness, workplace complaining and gossip out of the picture as much as possible. Everyone has bad days when they have a fight with their spouse, get bad news from the boss or have the car break down. It takes a great deal of self discipline to push those every day frustrations out of your mind and keep your outward demeanor positive, but it is important to do so to avoid a negative perception taking hold in co-workers' minds. Once a negative impression is formed in someone's mind, it is very difficult to undo.

In addition to what words we use, librarians should pay attention to how we look on the job. Everyone has heard about dressing for success. The idea persists because it has proven to be true over the years. First impressions carry a tremendous weight in the business setting, so it is crucial that create an impression of yourself both verbally and nonverbally that indicates you are a book that *can* be judged by its cover.

Build in ongoing assessment

The final piece in the puzzle of demonstrating your worth is learning to keep your finger on the pulse of the library and its forward progress. In a small library where there might be only one professional librarian on staff, the jobs of keeping abreast of the professional literature, investigating new systems and online resources, developing long range plans and shaping the vision for the future can quickly become exhausting.

Building in the habit of ongoing assessment can ease the stress of keeping up with change. Making a practice of setting aside time to examine performance, consider new options and adjust your direction will help keep

the library on the right track and hopefully keep the special librarian from experiencing burnout. Enlist the help of support staff or loyal customers. Get a second mind or a second set of eyes to take a look at what you have done and solicit feedback on what they think has worked. Use that information to think of opportunities to re-use those strategies or incorporate those techniques into other areas of your workflow. A mindful, attentive approach to management and planning will only make it easier for the special librarian to remain responsive to user needs, aware of trends in the field, and ultimately, respected and entrusted by administration.

Conclusion

These are just some basic tenets and strategies that the author has used successfully in one special library setting. Current special librarians may only be able to apply a few of these to their own work settings. It is important to remember that not only are all special library environments unique, but the librarians that manage them are also highly individualistic in their personnel styles, mindsets and daily work habits. So take these recommendations with a healthy grain of salt and apply any you think might work to your own particular set of circumstances.