Viewpoints

You Want Me To Do WHAT?
Lessons Learned from Mary Ellen Bates and the Special Library Trenches

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During my semi-annual office purge last week, I ran across a folder I'd labeled "PR/Proactive Ideas for Library Service." Inside it, I found my notes from a talk that Mary Ellen Bates gave at the 2000 Special Libraries Association Annual Conference. As I read through them, I realized two things. First, this session could have been given last week rather than nine years ago. Everything she said still applies, even in our Web 2.0 world. Second, I had evidently internalized all of the things she covered because her talk very accurately reflects my current vision of librarianship. This essay is an attempt to combine her words and mine into something cohesive to share with you.

Information is a commodity. Librarians have to set themselves apart by showing that we add value to information and transform it into knowledge. We must market ourselves, rather than a physical or virtual library. Without a librarian, a library is a collection of resources (books, videos, links, etc.) without context.

Technology is a tool, not the answer. Librarians need to think about other sources their clients use to find answers to their questions. We need to make ourselves as streamlined and painless as a search engine. Besides Google, we're competing with the engineer down the hall or the colleague on another campus.

Once you've identified the competition, you need to figure out how to do it better. Ask yourself, "Whose reality is it?" In your reality, your users will always come to you to find the answer. Is that what happens in your organization? Or do your users say, "Everything is on the web. I can Google to find it." If you start from your reality, your library will probably be a pretty lonely place. If you start from their reality, you can work to change their expectations. Ask them, "You're settling for what?" Teach them to value their time. You're a trained professional who can search many resources, including the web, quickly and efficiently, which leaves them more time to do their research. Show them what a trained information professional can do.

This is why I believe that librarians need to get out from behind the reference desk and go talk to users on their turf. If you get yourself invited to their staff meetings, visit them in their labs, attend their seminars, and catch them in their offices, you have more chances to showcase your skills and can become an integral part of their team. It's much more difficult to do that when people have to come to you.

According to Darwin, survival of the fittest means survival of those best able to adapt to change. If you isolate yourself in your office or in the library, you're less likely to change, which reduces your ability to compete. Having a big budget doesn't necessarily lead to stability. It may just make you a bigger target when cuts are being made. You need howls of pain if people lose your services. You need user addiction.

Librarians must think like entrepreneurs. To do this, start with your users and work backwards by figuring out what they need, then asking yourself how you can blow them away when you give it to them. One great way to develop market driven services is to interview some of your current and potential clients. Sit down with them over a cup of your favorite beverage and ask them, "How can I help you do your job better?" Listen to what they have to say and develop services that reflect their responses. You're on the way to building strong customer relationships because you've shown them that you're interested in what they need.

Use technology to develop and market your services. Don't look at technology as a means to an end. Always ask yourself, "What's in it for the user?" Services like blogs, Twitter, and Facebook are great for marketing, but you need to be sure you have something people want to look at.

Create job titles that reflect your organization. If you work at a university, Librarian makes sense. If you work in a corporation, you may not want that image. Research Analyst, Taxonomy Specialist (cataloger), Information Specialist, Global Content Manager, or Intranet Manager might work better for you.

Don't count only librarian stuff. Count what matters to your organization. Show your direct impact on the bottom line and highlight your partnerships with key groups within the organization. Important achievements are more important than large numbers. Ask your users, "How did this help the organization's bottom line?" For example, compare how long it takes for you and for your clients to find answers, factoring in salary and hours spent. In most cases, librarians are much more cost-effective.

Your users are always asking, "What have you done for me lately?" Remind them every day. Develop a new product or service every quarter. Prove your worth in tangible ways. Follow up to see if people got what they wanted. Focus on services and branding, rather than facilities. Don't just deliver the minimum amount of information that will answer their question. Add extra analysis to your reference responses. Explain why you're including what you're giving them. Offer to show them how to use current awareness tools and citation managers to make their jobs easier.

As a profession, we need to redefine ourselves. We are information dealers. We give them the first one free and get them hooked on the service. We are information co-conspirators. We bring vendors inside the firewall to show our users how their products make our services better. We are the Information Highway Patrol ("You relied on that? Here's a better source.") We are information infiltrators. We use viral marketing to get our users to spread the word about our services. We are information futurists. We live this stuff every day. We must be on the lookout for new tools to help users manage information. We are information counselors. We do needs assessments and information audits to ensure that our users are getting what they need. We are NOT data managers. We are NOT repositories. We are not necessarily even a physical space any more.

So, here's the bottom line. Push yourself past your comfort zone. Reinvent yourself. Don't just pay lip service, but do things that make you scared and uncomfortable. Examine everything about your library as if for the first time. Hone your entrepreneurial skills. Listen to your users. Be nimble. Be adaptable. Most importantly, be client-driven.