Special Library Potential
of the Public Library

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The distinguishing characteristic of special librarianship is service. It is service which stops at nothing short of producing, on request or without request, information which is needed, at the time it is needed, in the form in which it is needed, and in a manner which inspires confidence and respect for the librarian on the part of the user. It is a noteworthy “instrument of civilization” since through it the “blue prints for action” as found in books, periodicals, documents, and reports become alive. As such, it has a definite place in the public library.

To be sure, not all public libraries offer such service. This fact is due, perhaps, to the still widely prevalent notion that public libraries are general rather than special and therefore need no specialists on their staffs. Such a position is tenable today only in instances where the public library is considered a luxury which the public is more or less welcome to use if it wishes, provided it can find its own way around the mysteries of cataloging, classification, and arrangement of the books therein. The same is true of smaller libraries where the librarian, who must be “jack of all trades,” rarely comes in contact with many potential users of the library. It cannot be condoned in the large public libraries which depend on public monies for their revenue. Fortunately, in recognition of this, a few already have established subject departments or departments for special groups in the community; for example, educators, musicians, engineers. These are in fact special libraries within the framework of the general library.

Special library service in a public library, however, should not be confused with similar service within a private organization. Obviously no public service can provide all the information needs which a special library for one organization can—and should—supply. The similarity

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lies in the “how” rather than the “what”; the “way” rather than the “means.”

There is considerable evidence that, more than ever before, public librarians are growing special library minded while special librarians in private organizations are beginning to appreciate and to make more intelligent use of their trained associates within public libraries. This in itself would indicate that the special library idea has taken fire in the public library, and that librarianship as a profession has taken fire in the special library. It is natural that this should be so, for there is considerable exchange in the matter of personnel for these libraries. Industrial and business concerns frequently seek personnel for their libraries from the business and technical departments of public libraries, and with notable success. Frequently, too, workers are chosen from the more general departments, for example, a children’s librarian for an insurance company library and another for an airplane manufacturing concern. But in each case the determining factor in the choice was their outstanding service-mindedness.

Conversely it might be equally true for the public library to seek personnel for a business or a technology department from industry. Instances on record are the Cleveland Public Library and, more recently, the Buffalo Public Library, where the organizers for these new departments had been librarians in industrial concerns. It would be true more frequently if public libraries were more prepared to meet the salaries offered in industry for comparable work.

The work of a business or a technical department in a large public library differs from that in a private organization, to be sure, but by no means to the degree which merits the assumption that the one is less specialized than the other. Even in special fields the public library will have fewer materials but cover more phases of the subject while the private organization will find it necessary to have more materials on fewer phases of the subject. The work, however, of using these materials to provide answers, in whole or in part, to the problems of the clientele requires identical ability on the part of the special librarian. And it is this ability which is the secret of the potential herein discussed.

A perennial topic for discussion in special library circles has been the question, “What is special librarianship?” or “What is a special library?” Many papers have been written attempting to define these phrases, but to Herman H. Henkle should go credit for clarifying the issue by changing the question when he said:

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For many years I have had the opinion that the question should be not so much “what” but “how.” It seems to me that the primary characteristic of special librarianship is not so much the subject content of the collections, nor the type of organization in which the library is operating, nor the particular personnel which it serves, but rather the kind of service which is given. When the emphasis is upon the latter characteristic, much of the basis for debate seems to me to be dissipated. Certainly we all know of libraries in companies in which the activities are little more than routine housekeeping. On the other hand, there are a number of public libraries in which the attitude toward organization and dissemination of business and technical information is hardly distinguishable from that which characterizes the approach to library service in some of our finest industrial libraries.

It is significant to note that special libraries are quite widely believed to be primarily business or technical although, professionally speaking, a special library may cover any field. That this has been true from the beginning of special library history was confirmed recently when Sarah B. Ball revealed a bit of the Special Libraries Association’s beginning in a note to the Association’s president on the occasion of its fortieth anniversary in 1949. As librarian of the Newark Free Public Library’s Business Branch she had discussed, with John Cotton Dana, the desirability of making provision for informal meetings at American Library Association conventions for those librarians “doing special work in public libraries” and more concerned with business and technical services than with the other fields. Dana thought well of the idea and with characteristic vision enlarged upon it, suggesting that invitations for such a meeting be sent to librarians doing special work in public libraries and all small special libraries throughout the country—financial, commercial, scientific, and industrial, as well as special departments of state, college, and general libraries.

Accordingly such invitations were issued for the meeting to be held in Bretton Woods in July 1909, where Dana coined the phrase Special Libraries Association as the name for the new organization formed there. The rest of the story is history, but this serves to explain why the phrase “special libraries” is widely interpreted to mean business or technical libraries. This is also the reason special librarianship brings to mind assembling and dissemination of practical information in these fields, in contrast to providing books for cultural pursuits.

In recent years there has been much discussion on the advisability of changing the name for workers in the special library field. Documentalist, Information Director, Statistical and Economic Research
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Bibliographer, Technical Information Chief, Information Service Director, Factician, are just a few of the titles suggested. These discussions arise primarily because such a large number of businessmen and industrialists are unfamiliar with the resources available to them through libraries or library service, either public or private. It is assumed that they will comprehend more readily, words signifying the practical application of knowledge or supply of information, while other words will so confuse them that in self-defense a person carrying a more descriptive title will be hired in the hope that needed information will get to them “when they need it and in the form needed.” Lionel R. McColvin has this to say on the subject:

. . . I was delighted when a capable chairman laid it down, unequivocally, that a man whose job it was to assemble the material in which information is embodied, to arrange it and make it useful to those who wanted to use it was a librarian and must have the training, experience and background of a librarian, and that the man who used it, who publicized and public relationed it, wasn’t.

. . . All the nonsense about information officers and documentators and what not must often arise only from one cause—that people who are incapable of doing the job of librarianship, or who are unwilling to learn to do it properly, want to justify their inefficiency as librarians by calling themselves something which cannot be assessed, as can librarianship, in the light of accepted standards of professional experience and training. So it will be a good thing for everyone concerned if we revert to the old phrases “special libraries” and “special librarianship”; these are phrases open to criticism because some of our most special librarians work in general libraries and many of our general libraries employ in their special departments special librarians—but at least we remember that they are librarians.4

The words, after all, are inconsequential so long as they identify the high type of service which special librarianship has heretofore represented.

Special librarianship in a public library is most clearly identified with a separate business information department or business branch. Smaller libraries have combined business and technology or business and economics, or made a combination of all three fields. In some cases a beginning has been made within a general reference department. A large proportion of the resources needed is of common interest to all these fields and requires duplication when not readily available to all three.

To set up such a program in a public library, it is necessary to follow
the same procedure which industry pursues when offering a new product to the market. The basic techniques for the program may be simply stated:

Select the person with the best possible qualifications and experience. This is of paramount importance. In addition to general library training and experience he, or she, must have the necessary knowledge of business to be able to speak almost with empathy concerning the problems of his potential clientele. There must be no doubt that he understands their problems thoroughly, can ask intelligent questions concerning them, and, above all, can recognize when an available bit of information will serve their needs or business interests and will see that they get it. Such a person must be alert but not meddlesome, dynamic but not officious, confident but not arrogant, obliging but not obsequious. It is a job for one who has had the experience of a lifetime but kept the approach of enthusiastic and expectant youth. It is no job for a novice. Ruth Savord has stated other needed qualifications in this way:

Native ability—a bit above the average; a sense of humor as a cushion against the irritations and the stress and strain under which he is apt to work; mental curiosity to goad him into learning more and more about his subject and his organization; quickness of comprehension to enable him to understand the need, to ask intelligent questions which will clarify the problem and to speak the language of the inquirer; accuracy and more accuracy; resourcefulness, for the answer is not always written in black and white and he may have to go down many byways and reach out by telephone, telegraph and cable before tracking it down; breadth of vision to enable him to see the many ramifications which may enter into the solution of a problem; initiative to keep him ahead of the game and thus to have the basic information available before it is asked for, and, finally, tact—if he has it, he can deal successfully with the many temperaments—and tempers—from the president to the office boy. These qualities are fundamental because, by most standards, they are innate and not a matter of education. The potential special librarian should have a broad cultural, literary and factual background as well as specialized training in a chosen field of activity. He should develop the ability to analyze all the factors involved in a problem, to separate the essential from the non-essential, and to condense information to present all pertinent facts.

Experience in general reference, technology, sociology, and economics in a public library plus experience in a business organization would provide the perfect work experience prerequisite.
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He must survey his “market.” Just as a special librarian in a company must study the organization to be served, so the person inaugurating a business information program in a public library must study the community and the organizations to be served. Ideally this would mean calling on each firm to discuss its library needs as well as the contemplated service planned to meet these needs. From a practical standpoint no such detailed analysis is possible but a sampling should be made following recognized statistical sampling procedures. A list of the industries within the community might be compiled and trade papers for those industries examined to acquaint the librarian with current problems facing his potential clientele. Annual reports of many companies are available as well as the corporation data in investment manuals which would serve to supplement the librarian’s knowledge of the business activity in the community. The city and telephone directories as well as existing community surveys such as those included in Editor and Publisher’s annual Market Guide, the Standard Rate and Data Service’s Consumer Markets study, Sales Management’s Survey of Buying Power, and others may well be used as tools for information on community characteristics.

Finally there are the community’s newspapers. A trade association executive whose duties included investigation of business possibilities in various cities once said, “Before I contact our members I study a week’s file of the newspapers in the respective city under discussion. Our members continue to be amazed at the information concerning their city which is at my finger tips on so short a stay. Not one has guessed my secret!” What proved good for the trade association executive is equally pertinent for the business librarian.

To make such a study as is indicated above may seem like a large order, but it is essential. It will enable the librarian to proceed with precision in developing a collection pertinent to the community to be served. Automatically it will also provide the first step in public relations—acquainting the potential clientele with the potential service. And, unless carefully worked out, the demand for the service may easily far exceed the supply long before details have been completed.

He must contact and keep in contact with business associations. Numerous business and trade associations exist for the purpose of discussing problems and interchange experience. The business librarian can glean much from these and also make significant contribution to them. Naturally he will be most effective as a member, active or associate, although other means for keeping in touch with associations are
possible. Indefatigability and imagination are the *sine qua non* here.

*He must be able to speak before organizations on request, and where invitations are lacking use supreme tact to bring them about.* Tact is always an important factor in educating a potential public to realize that their library can—and will—provide factual information for practical use.

*He must develop and maintain an adequate supply of resources.* The services, the business books and periodicals, and numerous other materials are, by and large, expensive. There are, however, many which are available for the asking. The problem here is budgetary but also a matter of knowing what to buy.

*He must adapt general cataloging and classification procedures to business information sources.* When this is done within the business department there is relatively no problem, as those working with the subject can quickly develop necessary classifications for their materials. When, however, it is fitted into a general library scheme, a great deal of cooperation and understanding is needed on the part of the processing department to get needed groups of materials where they will be most useful.

*He must assemble or recruit and train an enthusiastic staff.* No one person can handle such a service. Consideration of staff is necessary at the outset—staff that will enjoy this lively and rewarding work and be willing to supplement their professional training with continuous study of new business developments and sources of information concerning them.

*He must prepare special indexes to supplement those published commercially.* Business literature has grown in volume literally by leaps and bounds. There is no comprehensive index to it as yet. *Industrial Arts Index, Public Affairs Information Service, Labor-Personnel Index,* and the other well-known H. W. Wilson Company indexes are indispensable, but at best, provide only partial coverage for this growing field. The gap between these indexes and ideal coverage is bridged, to a degree, by the lists and bibliographies published by other libraries, universities, government agencies, research bureaus, periodical publishers, and commercial bibliographies: the section entitled “Looking Around” in current issues of the *Harvard Business Review,* the bibliographies compiled and published by Princeton University, Industrial Relations Section and by the Amos Tuck School of Business Administration as well as the bulletins issued by the business departments of public libraries, notably those of the Boston Public Library’s Kirstein
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Business Branch,\(^9\) the Cleveland Public Library’s Business Information Bureau,\(^10\) and the Newark Free Public Library’s Business Branch.\(^11\) All these are but a beginning. Much supplementary indexing and development of bibliographic tools is required.

He must give service with a capital “S.” (a) At the top of the list comes reference and information service, the actual answering of quick reference questions by phone, by telegram, by letter, or in person. These answers must be accurate and specific. If, for some reason, complete answers are not available, evidence or proof of this should be confirmed and any partial answer at hand made available. At all times facilities in other libraries and elsewhere should be considered and used whenever possible, even if only as a referral measure.

(b) Research service. Usually only a limited amount of research service can be offered through a public library without charge. But when facilities of staff and materials permit, such research may be offered for a fee.

(c) Literature searches and compilations of bibliographies. In this category, also, only a limited amount may be undertaken, without charge, but a start may be made in outlining for clients the procedures involved and the sources available within and without the library at hand.

(d) Consultative service. As prestige develops, built through service, the demand for consultative service arises. This may range from “advising” where to get business in another city, state, or country, to providing guidance to other public libraries or to business and industrial firms planning business service. Other types of problems likely to be presented for consultation are where to find speakers for special occasions, how to inaugurate programs for education of workers or executives in industry, how to develop classification systems for specific purposes, and a host of other problems.

(e) Publications. A bulletin, issued regularly, is one of the best means for calling clients’ attention to the library’s resources. The bulletin may be devoted to new accessions, but if possible such a title should be avoided; it means little to the work-a-day world. It may be an annotated list of references on a subject of current interest and include books, periodicals, special reports, documents, and other data. Or it may consist of extensive abstracts of information available.

Public relations. Volumes are being written at present on the place of public relations in library programs with considerable confusion as to where responsibility for public relations should be placed. Suffice it
to say that, in the field of business information, it is part and parcel of the work and should be constantly kept in mind. Whether the department negotiates contacts with newspapers, publishers, exhibitors, associations, or whether this is done through a centralized department devoted to public relations techniques is immaterial. It matters only that it be done.

Conclusion. These simply stated, basic techniques should not delude the reader into thinking the performance of them is a simple matter. They are given primarily to help crystallize the task.

A prerequisite which goes without saying, yet merits thought, is that nothing of the sort should be undertaken without wholehearted support of library boards, encouragement and cooperation of library administrators and library associates.

The returns to the library from such service as herein indicated are inestimable. It is apparently still so rare that it causes much comment when and where offered. It serves as a focal point for attention to the library on the part of a vast section of any library’s potential clientele. Workers, whether they represent management or labor or the consumers, rarely expect to find anything of practical help for their jobs or other business needs in a library and are the best promoters for such service when they do.

Since money still talks, it is heartening to be able to say, with factual evidence, that business will endorse, effectively, requests for additional library appropriations for such libraries as have given the community a sample of the meaning of business service. This, in turn, enhances the appropriations for all departments of the library.

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ADDITIONAL REFERENCES