

Definitions Without Terms

JUDITH ANN HOUK

THE OBSCURE TITLE "Definitions Without Terms" illustrates the point that an infant industry is being defined, but that many of the people involved with that industry are struggling to come to terms with their clients, their colleagues and themselves. The nascent character of that segment of the information industry occupied by free-lance librarians is admitted in the fact that we lack an agreed-upon name. The *Oxford American Dictionary* defines a nascent chemical element as one "just being formed and therefore unusually reactive." That may define our nature.

Nomenclature difficulties abound. Free-lance librarians prefer to call themselves *information brokers*, *information consultants*, *information specialists* and avoid the term *librarian*. In 1972, I formed a company with the unwieldy name, Library Reports & Research Service, Inc. (LRRS). I chose that name with some defiance as I wanted to maintain the "library" appellation and proclaim that librarians are in the business of providing information.

The confusion of labels is manifested at the most personal level. I conducted an informal poll of several free lancers and everyone acknowledged that the question they most dread to hear is: "And what do you do?" Not one would say, "I'm a librarian." Some of the answers they described are: "I'm a consultant in the organization of information." "I obtain information for people for a fee—it's like having your own personal librarian." "We do library research for... ." "I'm an

Judith Ann Houk is Chief Executive Officer, Library Reports & Research Service, Inc. (LRRS), Westminster and Denver, Colorado.

information consultant—we organize internal information and provide access to information.” Perhaps the most honest answer is: “I’m an information consultant—I used to be a librarian.”

After twenty-plus years in the library world, I rather regret these imprecise descriptions of our work. Free lancers know that word-of-mouth advertising is the most effective way to obtain clients. Many free lancers are developing attractive, attention-getting advertising copy and some are becoming familiar names. All of us are faced with translating that amorphous commodity, information, into a service comprehended and desired by clients.

It’s fascinating that information consultants have *clients* while libraries have *patrons*. That distinction is telling. Clients pay, patrons support. Payments from clients may be sporadic, patrons’ support is assumed to be constant.

The public/private sector pull is faced by many free lancers who “grew up” in publicly-supported institutions. As the director of a suburban library in the early 1960s, I sensed that some patrons needed intensive information assistance that could not be provided by the library staff and that those patrons might be glad to contract with an experienced librarian who would devote exclusive time to their information needs.

By the early 1970s several free-lance information services were being formed. Our stated purposes were to handle the “above-and-beyond” requests for information and to provide services not available from libraries. We free lancers insisted that our services complemented rather than supplanted those available from established libraries. Some librarians were suspicious of our intentions. There were some abrasive contacts.

In 1976 I returned to the public sector and placed LRRS on hold. For five years I observed free-lance librarians while I practiced institutional librarianship. That vantage point qualifies me to comment on some of the considerations that librarians should make before jumping into the private pool of entrepreneurs.

The *Oxford American Dictionary* defines an entrepreneur as “a person who organizes and manages a commercial undertaking, especially one involving commercial risk.” The key term here is *risk*. Since clients pay and patrons support, consultants earn fees and librarians receive salaries. That distinction applies only to the relative security, not to any divergence of quality of service between free lancers and librarians. No one has measured that relative quality of performance. Several studies have decried libraries’ inadequacy of response to information requests. None has measured the performance of free lancers.

Definitions without Terms

Quality of response is an ill-defined concept with which we should come to terms.

Transitions can be difficult. Librarians considering going out on their own may be tempted to test the market by suggesting to some patrons with unusual information needs: "We can't spend that much time to get all that stuff for you, but if you meet me in the parking lot at 6:10 maybe we can make an arrangement for me to moonlight on your project." This tactic may hurry the decision to free lance.

Librarians who decide to become free lancers should heed all the good advice available in the literature—if you're going to run a business, get an attorney, get an accountant, get insurance, get organized. Read all about the pros and cons of sole proprietorship, partnerships and corporations. Choose the advice and form of organization that feel right to you. Those decisions will influence the soundness of your business structure.

Each librarian-turned-free lancer influences the impression of information brokerage held by former librarian-colleagues. To gauge the free lancer's probable effect, the consultant should consider how, as a librarian, he or she would feel about free lancers as library patrons. The free lancer's services must complement, not compete, with those offered by or for libraries.

As publicly-supported institutions are being required to recover the costs of their programs, several agencies are developing services that compete with those offered by information consultants. At a Special Libraries Association meeting in Denver recently, one free lancer described a service she proposed to offer to libraries. Simultaneously, directors of two regional library service agencies said: "We could do that." Were the market wars joined?

After walking the perimeters of both public and private sector information services and after being submerged in each, I conclude that the dog-eared image-problems of librarians still obtain. I would alert each person who is considering being a free-lance librarian to be sensitive to the fact that scrutiny of the image will come from both clients and colleagues. Because the number of free-lance librarians is small, each member of the community bears a heavy responsibility for establishing the free-lance industry's reputation.

Perhaps chivalry should provide our motto. It was those mercenary knights whose wanderings (This Lance for Hire) originated our generic name.

This Page Intentionally Left Blank