

# The business of libraries

Self-funded libraries — it's a target set for a growing number of library managers these days. Jennifer Croll, the Corporate User Scheme Librarian, University of Witwatersrand ('ridge of white waters') in Johannesburg, South Africa, is rising to the challenge better than most. She tells Geraldine Barkworth that library professionals will ensure a healthy future for themselves only if they expand their interpersonal skills, embrace change and gain the ability to 'drag users over the threshold'.

## What do you do?

I really enjoy hunting the elusive and I really enjoy motivating and teaching people. I'm a kind of entrepreneurial librarian, a 'one-man band' micro-enterprise within a macro-enterprise. Through selling a subscription-based information service to the corporate community in Johannesburg, I create funding to cover the costs of my salary and some information resources. I also work in harmony with the Library of Management branch of the University of Witwatersrand. I have been in this grant-funded post for two years and the profit margin is not large and there is no room for complacency. Public relations is paramount. I have about 120 corporate clients and most have some sort of resource centre. They use subscription membership to my service as a top-up. I 'live on the databases' to locate and deliver print and online information to my subscribers.

## How is your role viewed by other librarians?

I take a collaborative 'let's all pitch in' approach. It's a symbiotic relationship, a healthy exchange of information. I help you, you help me. I enable the corporate librarians to service their clients more extensively, allow access to academic databases and save costs in avoiding resource duplication.

## What about the future role of librarians: does anything need to change?

Library professionals have got to be prepared to widen their scope and diversify: to move, change, adapt — otherwise they may feel sidelined, bored, frustrated. The way people built furniture in 1800 is not the way they do it in 2005. Initially, technology forced librarians to change, but now librarians are driving their own direction.

## And what is that direction?

It starts with asking the client 'What do you want?' and really listening to them. I feel that librarians often say they 'know what the client wants', but they rarely ask, they just make assumptions. Librar-

ians — in my experience — don't listen deeply. I trained as a Lifeline counsellor, which gave me valuable insight into the power of building rapport and effective listening...it's not just what clients say, but what they don't say.

It comes back to having enough professional staff trained in reference interview technique. Far too often the first person the client sees is someone untrained in interview technique. Clients end up going back to Google. We need more professionals on the floor. Cost-cutting on the floor leads to a negative situation for libraries in the long term.

Library study needs to be less academic; it needs to return to being a more practical profession. For instance, four-year library graduates can do thesauri and indexing but they can't shelve a book. I've spent thirty years in libraries and I've never had to create a single thesaurus. Users don't care about using thesauri. They just want the results interpreted by the librarian. There should be less emphasis on perfect subject headings and more on finding out what your client really wants.

## How would you start marketing a library service?

I'd ask, 'What is our unique selling point?' I'd position the library as close as possible to the entrance of the organisation or make sure it is signposted. And it would appear prominently on the intranet. I make sure the library is really in the face of users. I am willing to be pushy. I would position the library in the mind of the users in terms of our unique selling point. I have built my business service through word of mouth, client referrals, special interest group meetings, a monthly newsletter and I target the corporate librarians by offering a collaborative service.

I also work to position the library in the minds of internal staff, like academics. If you don't have management support and collaboration, you may not have clients in the long term. I confront my potential user; I drag them over the door, because once inside, I offer a huge world.

## What's been your greatest challenge to overcome?

I don't see challenges, I see opportunities. Therefore, there is nothing to overcome.

## OK, what's been your greatest opportunity?

At Eskom (electricity supply company), I converted the entire card catalogue to a database within a year. At the same time,

I motivated all four of my staff to study for additional qualifications. What I really learned from this experience was how to learn. Previously I had learned by osmosis, now I learn by staying open and keeping abreast of things.

## What gives your life meaning and purpose?

My daughter. I married late, at 40 and had my daughter a year later. She is at the centre of my being. She is my biggest mentoring challenge ('The young and the old pea in the same pod' says my husband). She's a challenge, she's an opportunity, she's a joy. I look at this person I've made and I want her to be the very best she can be. I've learned that I must override my desire to give her what I think is best for her.

I've learned about extending my tolerance levels — I'm very pernickety — 'pencils go in the same place'. I've learned to not sweat the small stuff. My daughter has taught me to back off and not impose my views.

## How has what you've learned as a mother impacted on the way you work?

I'm much more tolerant at work. Tolerance has made me realise my standards aren't the same as every one else's.

## Is there a lesson here for us all?

Librarians need to be flexible and move with the times and the constantly changing needs of the client. Listen to them; they'll tell you what they want. The 'willow that bends in the wind has a better chance of survival than the oak...'

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Jennifer Croll can be contacted at [croll.j@mgmt.wits.ac.za](mailto:croll.j@mgmt.wits.ac.za).

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