Vote for a librarian

Introduction

Information is knowledge. Knowledge is power. Are library professionals powerful? Lou Rosenfeld (http://louisrosenfeld.com) realised his librarianship skills were grossly undervalued in a world that prizes information. A former librarian from the University of Michigan, he repositioned himself and his skills in the new field of information architecture in the 1990s. Lou, described as a 'technology pioneer', taught his seminar, Enterprise Information Architecture: Because users don't care about your org chat in Sydney on 28 February. He tells Geraldine Barkworth that library professionals are the 'ultimate service professional' and should consider a role in world leadership.

Geraldine Barkworth

Bold Women Big Ideas

Louis Rosenfeld

Rosenfeld Media

Transformation. Opportunity. Future trends.

...a new series of interviews with library and information professionals rising to the challenges of the modern LIS sector.

Suggestions for interviewees are always welcome. Please contact Geraldine Barkworth via e-mail. ∎

How would you describe what you do?

I've been an information architect for about a dozen years. I help large organisations – mostly corporations, but also universities and government agencies – do a better job of organising, structuring, and labelling their content to make it navigable and searchable. In the past few years, I've done less design and more consulting, often helping clients develop, staff, train and mentor their own in-house information architecture teams. My transition mirrors what's gone on in the field as a whole, as information architecture (IA) has become an increasingly strategic area for my clients.

Why should Australian library professionals care about information architecture?

Well, all library professionals should care about information architecture. LIS is one of IA's many parents, but more importantly, IA is perhaps the only new and growing field that truly values LIS skills. Librarians who value practicing librarianship over solely working in the traditional physical spaces known as libraries will find many new opportunities in IA.

Apart from ruling the world and IA, what vital future roles can you see as opportunities for librarians to step into?

Speaking of ruling the world: elective office comes to mind. Really, why not? Information is so critical to how the world operates, especially its governments. Wouldn't it be a breath of fresh air to vote for a candidate who actually values facts and, when he doesn't know them, will acknowledge his ignorance and make every effort to find the truth?

Seriously, we are in many respects the ultimate service professionals. A major reason that citizens are so frustrated with their governments, local and federal, is that governments are woefully inept at providing basic services. Sure, the lawyers that typically run governments have their origins in a service profession, but they've had their crack at things, and haven't done so well. Maybe it's time for a different kind of service professional to rule the world.

How can library professionals become more information architecture savvy?

Librarians are already somewhat IA savvy by definition. In fact, I can't imagine many better ways to learn about IA than through experiences with reference and cataloguing. But there are many other fields that contribute to the practice of IA, which itself is really a synthesis of existing fields and their practices. To learn more about IA, one needs to become aware of those other fields and practices. IA's strength is in providing a common vocabulary that describes and unites concepts from all those disparate sources, thereby enabling new conversations about design.

Along those lines, I recommend reading a book or two as a way to become familiar with the vocabulary of IA. Christina Wodtke's *Information Architecture: Blueprints for the web* is a great introduction, and the book I co-wrote with Peter Morville, *Information Architecture for the World Wide Web* serves as something of a bible for the field. Joining the Information Architecture Institute (http://www.iainstitute.org), especially in its moderated discussion list, is another good way to become familiar with the field. Finally, *Boxes & Arrows* magazine (http://www.boxesandarrows.com) is a great source of articles about IA and such related areas as interaction design and usability engineering.

How did you evolve from librarianship to IA consultant, author, publisher, and entrepreneur?

I've always been interested in digital information and its use, both inside libraries and out. And I've always had a bit of an entrepreneurial streak. Combine those with the fabulous opportunities that the early 1990s afforded, and it's hard to imagine not starting a business that specialised in organising and labelling information. My former firm, Argus Associates, was a leading IA consulting firm for about a decade.

Does librarianship need to develop more of an entrepreneurial spirit?

No, you can't impose the entrepreneurial spirit any more than you can make someone musical. I will say that librarians could certainly do a better job of welcoming and encouraging the natural entrepreneurs already in their midst. I recall feeling a bit unwelcome at times, and even a bit mistrusted, when I worked in traditional library settings. All personality types are part of a single ecology; to thrive, every field needs them to co-exist and co-operate.

On your website, all listed media interviews are from the IT industry, none from the library and information field. Are you perceived as part of the library profession?

Unfortunately, many librarians have been too quick to judge those of us who don't work in traditional libraries to not be 'real librarians'. This is frustrating, as it means that for dubious reasons, traditional librarians are squandering partnerships with colleagues who work in other, non-traditional settings. It also misses the point that *librarianship* is the value we bring, regardless of where we practise it.

What is it you want the world to know about librarianship?

That liberty dies without us. And that it's nice to have help finding answers: that's what we're here for.

If you were in charge of a librarianship PR campaign, how would you repackage librarianship?

I wouldn't repackage it; it's about time for us to stop being embarrassed over who we are and pretending to be something else. And I'll bet that, silly stereotypes aside, the public has a very positive impression of librarianship. Why squander that? Build on the many positives, rather than mask the few negatives.

A PR campaign should make clear that it's librarianship – the skill – that's important, not the venues or the job title. And that librarianship is all around us, impacting our everyday lives in ways we wouldn't normally imagine. This may sound obvious, but sometimes it's necessary to state the obvious. And some of the best PR campaigns are the ones that are first to state something that only seems obvious in retrospect.

What would be your PR catchcry?

'No librarian ever bankrupted the country or launched a disastrous war, so you might as well vote for one of us.'

Have you gained more clarity about the value and opportunities of librarianship since leaving the field?

Not especially. However, I do see many other people, especially in the IT industry, now valuing librarianship. As that's always been a personal goal, I'm proud to have contributed to that recognition some tiny way.

What are your top tips for organising a web site's search engine to help users find what they are looking for?

Determine what are the most common queries are for your site. For the top 100 queries, provide best-bet search results (see BBC for an example). For the common queries that retrieve zero results, figure out why and fix the problem (it'll usually be quite clear what needs to be fixed). Consider installing a spell-checking function. These few and often relatively inexpensive steps can radically improve users' experience searching your site. That's good news, especially considering how many users bypass other forms of navigation in favour of searching.

What's next for information architecture?

If I had to pick three frontiers in IA, they'd be:

1. Designing information architectures for global information systems that serve multi-lingual, multi-national, and multi-cultural audiences.

2. Designing information architectures that enable large enterprises to tie together content from disparate, politically and technologically divided content silos. (This is called 'enterprise information architecture', and it's what my seminars address.)

3. Designing information architectures in a changing environment where the page is no longer the logical unit of content. This is becoming increasingly the case as Rich Internet Applications multiply and technologies like AJAX, news feeds, and aggregators change the paradigm of how we create and consume information.

And what's next in life for Lou Rosenfeld?

I'm actually moving away from IA. I recently launched a new publishing house, Rosenfeld Media (http://rosenfeldmedia.

com) that is dedicated to publishing short and practical books about user-experience design. Just as IA is really heating up, I've decided to enter an industry – publishing – that is sickly and stunted. Wish me luck!

'Sickly and stunted...' so how will you work your library and IA magic on publishing?

There's so much to say here that I'm afraid it would require another interview. I can say that I'll employ an IA approach to making my company's books easier to navigate and understand, much like I would with a web site. And that user research, user testing and user participation will play a far larger role in developing my books than is typical in the publishing industry.

What thoughts would you like to leave us with?

Simply a reminder of a point I've probably made too often here already; what's important to our field's future isn't libraries or librarians. What's important is librarianship, a critical skill that has applications in all venues and for all media. Whenever we feel pessimistic about the future of the field, it means we've forgotten this important distinction.

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Geraldine Barkworth works confidentially with big-picture library professionals to embrace the future. Obtain her free LIS e-zine at geraldine@boldwomenbigideas.com.au or 02 6685 1917.
Join her '6 Steps to Career Sizzle' teleconference program from 10 May–13 September 2006.

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