



TREASURES AND SECRETS

Secrets and treasures are often, by their very nature, quirky things. They can make us smile, they can make us proud – and they can make us uncomfortable. Patrick White's glasses, featured on our contents page this month and part of the National Library of Australia's collection, may make you smile, but how do you feel about Azaria Chamberlain's hospital identity anklet? It might give you pause for thought but it certainly qualifies as part of our national journey, and so, as an artefact to be treasured and preserved (it's part of that same collection by the way).

Our contributors this month have approached the theme from a variety of perspectives. From the professional advantages of keeping a secret or two, to sharing some hints on what to do when you are confronted with an unusual and fragile artefact for your collection and on to proudly displaying some of our most valued treasures, we're delving deep and travelling far this month.

As it's also the last issue for 2012, here's a thought to take to the Christmas party – people are treasures too. If you need proof, flick back a few pages and re-read what Richard Watson has to say about public librarians.

Professional Secrets

Doreen Sullivan says keeping secrets, and the art of revealing them at the right time, is a great tool for professional development.

The US World War I slogan "loose lips sink ships" warned people of the danger of giving inadvertent information to enemies, perhaps in everyday conversation. The phrase was part of an overall campaign that stated "careless talk costs lives".

The mores of the world have moved on since then and people are often drowning in information. Careless talk abounds. Lives might not be lost, but sometimes jobs and careers could be, and reputations might be ruined.

Both inadvertent and deliberate information and misinformation is often posted on social media. Cases exist where LinkedIn participants, for example, submit in-confidence material to their personal profiles and get fired soon after for breach of contract. Unless LinkedIn participants lock down their settings, the automatic broadcasting of updates of groups joined and people connected with can also indicate the person is about to make an employment move. As ever, we all need to factor in the potential consequences of our communications, especially given the ease with which they can spread beyond our original confidantes just because the technology makes it happen. Then there is the more obvious and very necessary secret-keeping, of information such as records of borrowers, and not inadvertently broadcasting the personal employee details of an entire workplace.

There is, however, a flipside of the lure of keeping secrets: revealing them. That is, revealing them at the right time. Half the joy of a secret is to be first with the news when information is no longer hidden but on its way to common knowledge. A sweet spot exists between concealment and revealment: working mystery for professional advantage. That's when secrets become a professional development strategy.

Illusionists, for example, do not disclose their magic tricks. Transparency is not needed and indeed, is frowned upon. The joy of the trick is in the reveal. The audience

suspends their disbelief. The job hunter is best served when he or she keeps some job search strategy secret and does not blurt it out to the nearest competitor in a fit of self-sabotaging self-disclosure. But the job hunter is well served when he or she lets the search panel in on the secret.

Journal readers and conference attendees like to have a taste of what is in store, but if too much data or too many pre-prints are given then the audience might feel as if there is no need to investigate further because they begin to feel as though they have read or seen the whole event already. Even worse is when a convenor or a master of ceremonies, for example, details each and every hassle to mounting an event—unless the topic of the presentation is learning from failure. The audience member just wants to get on with the show.

Similarly, if a client asks for five research articles on topic, and it takes the librarian two hours and 50 articles to narrow these down, the librarian delivers the articles—and keeps her mouth shut about the discarded 45 and how she trudged through 17 databases to emerge triumphant. The librarian cares, but the client does not. So keep that little secret, though she may share with some fellow LIS workers for a sense of achievement.

A lot of library work is like what we see when we look at swans: serene on the surface yet paddling madly below to keep afloat. A lot of secrets are like this too. Mostly concealed, and seen only as a gently floating bird. Professional development tricks about the art of concealment and revealment can be learned from illusionists, swans and others, giving the secret-keeping LIS worker a great advantage.

Doreen Sullivan
RMIT University Library
doreen.sullivan@rmit.edu.au