

# SOMETHING TO SELL

The common thread in working for four very different employers is having something to sell and wanting to sell it. Having written about the potential of computers in libraries for a diploma in librarianship assignment, arriving newly-qualified at the just-opened National Library was an opportunity to learn about library operations and size them up for automation. This involved working on the small team which 'sold' the National Library Council on the wisdom of computers in libraries. And this in turn led to working with computer suppliers who were as keen to place computers in libraries as we were to have them. Both parties had similar objectives, but came at them from different quarters. The National Library was mission-driven, with enabling legislation which specified and authorised its activities, but our new partners were different. Their objective was to create a new customer, generate a new revenue stream, meet their sales targets, and, ultimately, return a dividend to their shareholders. I had no problems with any of that. The sale to the National Library quickly resulted in Australia's first online information retrieval

systems some 20 years before the availability of the commercial internet. But some of my colleagues were troubled by a developing relationship between government and commerce, not realising that service improvements come from both outside as well as inside the organisation.

So I jumped ship. I signed on with an Australian manufacturing company already running a national computer network and sought to 'sell' them on library uses of the network, and at the same time 'sell' my professional colleagues on the value of database creation and dissemination through this network. How was it different in the private sector? The pace was quicker and it was much easier to get things done. Provided the proposed activity was intended to create a new customer ('selling') or retain an existing customer ('marketing'), it was usually approved. No committees, no meetings without outcomes, no turf wars, no obsessive risk-management – all replaced with responsibility and accountability for profit as the cost of staying in business. I loved it, and our networks flourished.

Then I was persuaded to stand for President of the then Library Association of Australia, and got the gig. Was this different? Was it ever! A whole 12-member Council to report to, one which represented all types of libraries, but predominantly state and university libraries – a very different 'selling' proposition where gentle guidance to consensus was the most effective style. Fortunately my apprenticeship involved watching the late Warren Horton 'sell' a meeting on a brilliant decision reflecting the unanimous views of all present. During this time, the LAA became ALIA and our National Office moved from the former Avery Scales factory in Sydney to purpose-built accommodation in Canberra – probably the hardest 'sell' of all.

Life changes when your heart stops. And when it starts again, 'selling' is different. I was ready to 'sell' for myself, from my own experience and from my own library

consulting company. I had worked for the Commonwealth and respected its mandate. I had worked in the private sector and understood the discipline imposed and the freedom granted by the focus on sales and profit, and I had worked to a Council (now the ALIA Board) and learned the importance of personality in decision-making. I was also invited to participate in the activities of the Aurora Foundation and under the guidance of John Shannon and Becky Schreiber, this provided a theatre for 'selling' the benefits of experience to mid-career librarians, and also helped me clarify what I understood to be important: the value of librarianship rests in the currency of skills to identify and manage authoritative information sources – 'quality information' – and the ability to 'sell' this message to others.

I find it exhilarating and occasionally terrifying to be my own boss, where success in proposal writing, presentation, reputation, and track record directly determine my livelihood, but it's also so liberating to be more or less in control of the way I spend my time. The company I started with Sherrey Quinn back in 1997 is now well-established, with a customer list running to more than a hundred libraries. Much has been learned along the way, and one of the most important lessons is to take responsibility for your own professional development. If you're not aware of what's happening around you, and not reflecting on your professional practice, your isolation will become solitary confinement – hardly a 'selling' situation.

Information technology and the ability to relate software capability to customer requirements, and to create new functionality where there is a need have been the basis of most of the 'sales' I've made. Understanding that persuading people to accept advice is a lot easier to write than to do, but at the end of the day the most important issue for the government, industry, professional associations, and small business is the same: 'Who are the customers, and why will they buy?'

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