THE LIBRARIAN AS INFORMATION CONSULTANT
Transforming Reference for the Information Age

Sarah Anne Murphy www.alastore.ala.org
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Why write a book on library and information consulting, or more specifically, on repositioning reference librarians to function as library and information consultants? In January 2008 I accepted a new position at The Ohio State University as coordinator of research and reference. While I intuitively understood my role, I still had many questions. After three years in exile off-campus, the university’s main library was preparing to move back to its renovated facility during the summer of 2009, and I was fielding questions from administrators, library faculty, and staff regarding how the reference desk would be staffed when the new building opened. Some pressed whether the desk was still needed, while others adamantly argued it was. This astounded me, as I couldn’t reconcile unleashing more than fifty thousand undergraduate students into an eleven-floor, 202,047-square-foot building without defined service points. I started reading the debates in the library literature about the future of the reference desk and quickly realized that many of my colleagues were confusing the desk with their professional value and worth as reference librarians.1 Just what is a reference librarian anyway? Although the definition for reference from the Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) now recognizes the fact that reference is much broader than a single transaction with a consumer, could the reference desk debate really be about the word reference itself?2
Reference librarians have a strong history of matching information to consumers’ information needs. Information, however, is no longer location-dependent in today’s networked society, and libraries now have many competitors willing and able to satisfy an individual’s information needs (regardless of quality). To remain competitive, reference librarians must focus on their strengths as advisors, helping consumers to understand the structure of information both within and outside of our library facilities, to make sense of the information found, and to use this information in the format (books, e-journals, microform, etc.) presented. As library and information consultants, reference librarians are well-positioned to adapt to shifting consumer expectations and the changing information environment.

The premise of this book is that reference librarians must reposition themselves as library and information consultants. The book is grounded in the fundamentals required for sustaining a successful consulting practice. A small subgroup of librarians already function as information brokers or consultants for both libraries and the public sector, usually providing independent research services. Some function as library consultants exclusively, advising library organizations on issues such as reorganizing departmental staff, the implementation of new products or services, or the reconfiguration of existing library space. Within the library profession, however, the concept of consultant is applied more broadly. A number of library and information science publications include various forms of the word in their titles. Jastram and Zawistoski, for instance, define information consulting as “dedicated uninterrupted time to work collaboratively with a patron.” LaBaugh focuses on the historical and current advisory role of reference librarians, noting that like consultants, they function as counselors who help “clients define basic problems and establish strategies for dealing with those problems.”

Many articles discuss consulting within the context of library instruction. Cheney uses the term loosely while describing librarians’ involvement in the structure and design of coursework using problem-based learning teaching methods. Kraemer and Yi both use the term to describe dedicated one-on-one instruction to assist patrons with developing strategies for locating information for a specific project. Debons et al. and Whitlatch use the concept of knowledge counselors, or individuals ready to diagnose and offer solutions for a consumer’s information need, particularly for those questions with no definitive correct answer. Whitlatch in particular notes that for such
questions, “Librarians cannot do all the research for all outside inquirers and fax them the results. Readers themselves must still conduct most of the research into records of our civilization within the walls of real libraries.”

Perhaps the concept of consulting introduced by Frank et al. relates most to the chapters and reasoning of the author of this book. Arguing that librarians must become effective consultants to remain relevant on their campuses, Frank and his colleagues advocate proactive engagement with faculty and students on campus through the provision of value-added services supported by client-centered marketing campaigns. This requires “understanding the client’s needs, shaping solutions around a client’s actual needs rather than what the consultant thinks the client requires, and communicating clearly with clients . . . in the academic setting.”

Reference librarians must embrace their role as library and information consultants, by first recognizing their traditional advisory role for matching consumers’ information needs with the resources available to satisfy those needs, and then adapting the business model and practices of consultants working outside of the library and information science profession. In an information environment crowded with distractions and competitors for library consumers’ attention, librarians must reposition themselves to maintain their effectiveness, visibility, and value to the clients they serve.

The terms client, consumer, and customer rather than library patron or user are deliberately used throughout this book. The author prefers these terms, especially because the word user, when unqualified, has acquired negative connotations in the North American vernacular. Most industries refer to the individuals who purchase their goods and services as consumers or customers. The author believes the library community would benefit from using these terms, which are universally understood both within and outside of library organizations. Further, by referring to our library patron groups as consumers or customers, we are recognizing that individuals choose to use a library’s resources and services, just as they choose to use another information commodity, such as a bookstore or website, to seek an answer to their questions or information to resolve their problems.

To reposition librarians as library and information consultants, each chapter of this book introduces many tools and concepts covered during the course of a traditional MBA program. Chapter 1 focuses on defining consulting and why it is important for libraries and reference librarians in
particular. It addresses some myths and concerns librarians have for adopting business practices and frames the potential utility for library and information consultants in the Google Age. It also discusses the skills and characteristics of successful consultants that can be applied to library practice.

Chapter 2 addresses the most significant discipline for a consultant practice: building and maintaining client relationships. Consultants understand they will have no business if they have no clients. This means they devote a significant amount of time, energy, and resources to develop and maintain a client base. This chapter introduces factors to consider when designing or redesigning a service process. The Voice of the Customer concept is introduced with a discussion centered on its importance and its value for designing and maintaining quality services. Because service failure will occur regardless of how well a service process is designed, the concept of service recovery is also covered, encouraging library and information consultants to build plans for service recovery into their service processes.

Chapter 3 introduces services marketing, focusing on the tools and concepts required to cultivate the library and information consultant’s brand identity and the brand identity of service products in general. The value of both developing and understanding a ServiceScape is discussed, as the environment in which a customer uses a service influences his opinion of that service. The service blueprint is introduced as a valuable tool for detailing and visualizing the service process. Advice is then provided for developing and implementing a marketing plan and an integrated marketing communications strategy.

Chapter 4 focuses on managing employee service roles and customer demand. The Integrated Gaps Model of Service Quality is introduced to provide a framework to discuss the activities required and skills needed to close the gaps between customer expectations and the actual service provided. Employee roles in the delivery of library and information consulting services are detailed. The chapter discusses managing fluctuations in customer demand with consultant supply and concludes by offering a brief introduction to managing financial and capital resources using impact evaluation.

Chapter 5 begins by examining the costs of quality, and then provides an overview of three quality improvement frameworks or disciplines that provide an infrastructure for ensuring the library and information consultant is delivering the service promised to their customers: Lean, Six Sigma, and
the Baldrige National Quality Program. Each has a demonstrated utility for improving customer service and fostering a learning organization.

Armed with an understanding of the tools and concepts driving consultants’ model of practice, reference librarians may better engage library consumers by assuming their role as library and information consultants.

Notes

9. Ibid., 27.
11. Ibid., 94.
The Library and Information Consultant
Almost every management book on consulting starts with a definition of consulting and states how you can profit by marketing your skills and advice to others. But like librarianship, consulting as a profession is ill-defined. While physicians must graduate from medical school, spend years in internships and residencies, and maintain licensure to practice, consultants have no such requirements. Yet numerous for-profit and not-for-profit firms hire consultants to facilitate change, acquire knowledge, or influence others. Businesses recognize consultants’ value because consultants consistently deliver results while communicating their value to the constituents they serve. This discipline is imperative for consultants’ survival, and librarians can learn from their example.

This chapter focuses on defining consulting and identifying the similarities and parallels that currently exist between successful consultants and successful reference librarians. It argues that reference librarians in essence are already functioning as consultants, sharing their expertise surrounding the structure and function of information and the library organization itself. It presents the reasons why a consumer may be interested in using a library and information consultant’s services while discussing her value in the Age of Google. It follows by identifying the talents and characteristics of successful consultants, which also apply to a successful library and information consultant. It concludes with a discussion of the myths and realities surrounding the adoption of business practices in libraries and other nonprofit organizations to show that repositioning reference librarians as library and information consultants will not detract from the library profession itself.
Consulting Defined

Few individuals outside of the library profession truly understand a reference librarian’s skills or appreciate the years of education and work experience required to become an effective, proficient purveyor of information. While one Oxford English Dictionary definition for a consultant begins with “a person qualified to give professional advice or services,” it ends with “a private detective.” Another definition in the same dictionary entry refers to a consultant as “(an oracle).” Any reference librarian, whether in a public or academic library setting, functions both as a private detective and an oracle, yet these terms are not used to describe her work or profession.

Consultants focus on results, helping clients to define their needs, acquire the competencies and skills to address these needs, and take action. In the process, the consultant leads the client from a state of unconscious incompetency to unconscious competency.1 As advisors, consultants rely on the information and knowledge they’ve acquired over their careers to identify solutions and guide their employers in implementing them. They have many roles. Some are hired for their knowledge of and experience with a particular product or process, such as retail design consultants, who focus on helping stores maximize aesthetics and layout to stimulate sales. Others are hired for their ability to affect change, helping an organization to realize its strategic plan, or successfully redesign services following the implementation of new technology.

Parallels between the Competencies of Successful Consultants and the Competencies of Successful Reference Librarians

Table 1.1 outlines the competencies of a successful consultant that parallel those of a successful reference librarian, as defined by the American Library Association’s “Guidelines for the Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers.”2 Like librarians, consultants must have the ability to actively listen to a client’s information need and translate that need into a workable solution. Consultants spend considerable time assisting clients with defining their problem, just as reference librarians assist consumers.
with developing their information query. Consultants interview their clients to clarify the problem discussed, using open and closed questions and other techniques to determine the scope and parameters of their assignment. In some instances, the client may be well aware that something is wrong, but unable to define what that something is. The consultant may assist the client by paraphrasing what he has heard so far, using the client’s own words. The consultant may also seek raw data, investigate industry trends, or interview individual company employees to reach a shared definition for the problem.

Reference librarians also interview consumers with information needs to clarify terminology, seek additional information that is relevant to their

### Parallel Competencies of Successful Consultants and Successful Reference Librarians

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COMPETENCIES OF SUCCESSFUL CONSULTANTS</th>
<th>COMPETENCIES OF SUCCESSFUL REFERENCE LIBRARIANS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Listening</strong></td>
<td>Approachability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>■ actively hears and clarifies client’s needs, as stated in client’s own words</td>
<td>■ welcomes patron with verbal and nonverbal behaviors that put patron at ease</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Investigative</strong></td>
<td>■ provides assistance at patron’s point of need</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>■ systematically seeks data or information</td>
<td><strong>Interest</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Analytical</strong></td>
<td>■ confirms understanding of patron’s information needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>■ examines the data collected to identify sources of variation, solutions, and/or opportunities for improvement</td>
<td><strong>Listening/Inquiring</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Action</strong></td>
<td>■ allows patron to state information need in own words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>■ implements solutions</td>
<td>■ rephrases or clarifies patron request</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>■ manages change</td>
<td><strong>Searching</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>■ formulates an effective search strategy with patron</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Follow-up</strong></td>
<td><strong>Follow-up</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>■ asks patron if her question was answered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>■ encourages patron to return for assistance</td>
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</table>

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research, understand the overarching objective or goal driving the consumer’s research, and discover what information the consumer has already located to avoid duplicate effort. While the consultant will formulate and execute a data collection plan to research the client’s problem, the reference librarian will work with the consumer to construct a search strategy. The consultant will seek to identify the root cause of his client’s problem. The librarian will look for information in a format desired by the consumer that has the potential to satisfy the consumer’s information need. Both the consultant and librarian will adjust their activities to reflect the depth of detail desired by the client or consumer. This means the reference librarian will limit her search to peer-reviewed articles if she’s assisting a researcher applying for a scientific grant, or images for an artist designing a community mural. The consultant may conduct a complex statistical analysis but repackage the results in a narrative with executive summary.

The consultant will apply his expertise while investigating the client’s problem, and the reference librarian will apply hers during the search. The reference librarian’s expertise lies in her understanding of the structure and function of information and her broad knowledge of sources to guide the consumer’s search. In large public libraries, she may be assigned to a specific subject area, such as business, social sciences, or readers’ advisory. In academic settings, a general reference librarian may specialize in one or more subjects. To answer a patron’s question, she may need to collaborate with a local library colleague with understanding of a foreign language or culture, or a librarian in another country to provide assistance to the consumer.

Following the interviews and collection of data, the librarian and the consultant each work to make sense of the information gathered. The consultant will attempt to identify discrepancies between the client’s desired outcomes and actual outcomes using statistics and other analytical tools as required. He will seek the root cause of the client’s problem in an effort to formulate recommendations for improvement. The consultant will then brainstorm, prioritize, and review all possible solutions to identify those that will best address the problem. The librarian will work with the consumer to evaluate the results of the search, the quality and quantity of information retrieved, and whether the information answered the consumer’s question or satisfied his need. The librarian will encourage the consumer to approach her again if he has additional questions, or if the initial information discovered did not result in a workable solution to his problem.
Throughout all stages of the process, the librarian will be pushing the consumer to refine his information need as presented. Additional information may be required to clarify the consumer’s information need and improve the recall or specificity of the search. The librarian may encourage the consumer to consider the scope of his query more broadly or focus his search using specific keywords. The consultant will be engaged in similar work, pushing his client to refine the scope of the project and his objectives for conducting the investigation. Such questioning continues as the investigative and analytical stages of the consultation process, until a workable solution is achieved or the desired information is located.

Why Hire a Consultant?
The Value of the Library and Information Consultant in the Age of Google

Why should a reference librarian function as a library and information consultant? Consumers have a financial incentive to act on a consultant’s advice. In purchasing a consultant’s services, they have invested a considerable amount of time, staff resources, and money. They expect the advice they receive will be of value and result in a measurable return on their investment. Consumers also invest in library services when seeking an answer to a question. Although their incentives for seeking advice may differ, their motivations usually involve saving time, minimizing frustration, and maximizing understanding. This is especially true in the Age of Google, where tidbits of information can be retrieved at any time, in any location.

It is of interest to examine librarians’ value to consumers by evaluating the strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities of the profession, and the library as a cultural entity itself. This is especially true as libraries struggle to adapt in an era of rapid, transformative change. As Google, eBay, Craigslist, and other services have revealed the Internet’s remarkable potential for serving the diverse interests of the general public, such an evaluation may enlighten, inform, and provide the impetus for reference librarians to perceive themselves differently. Demand for library materials in this environment, for example, has transformed, as services such as Google Books have demonstrated their utility by serving both broad and niche interest groups. Web 2.0 technologies have also demonstrated their utility, enabling individuals to
maintain contact with family and friends and interact with a broader realm of individuals holding similar interests, regardless of whether they live in distant cities or countries.

But although technology reveals exciting opportunities, it doesn’t replace human interaction. Yes, the Internet has fundamentally changed reference librarians’ work; it hasn’t supplanted their value. Today if a consumer needs to translate a sentence from an unfamiliar language to English, he will use Babelfish or another freely available translation website, rather than locate a library’s bilingual dictionaries. Further, why should a consumer visit the library to use a directory when phone numbers and addresses for organizations are freely available online? If a consumer needs to know the amount of soybeans produced by Ohio farmers during the last year, he’ll seek this fact himself, as statistics which were once only found in libraries’ print government documents collections are now almost exclusively online. As long as the consumer can verify the authenticity and quality of the information located, the Internet is a remarkable tool for straightforward, time-sensitive, factually driven information.

But librarians understand the Internet can also seductively entice a consumer to remain trapped in a void of miscellaneous blurbs, some correct, some incorrect. With everyone as a potential author, consumers must learn to utilize the information found online with caution, and resist the temptation to rely on immediate, instantly gratifying text which can be purposefully misleading or grossly out of context. Many consumers haven’t acquired this skill, getting frustrated, terrified, and confused when their serendipitous online wandering fails to satisfy their needs. They realize the Internet is a huge amoeba and find their way back to libraries, seeking the in-depth information that library collections provide. This is particularly true when consumers need to learn a new skill or understand a complex issue. The in-depth collections libraries construct are a strength, along with libraries’ ability to organize information.

Still, many of us take our access to the Internet for granted, failing to remember some of our neighbors lack the financial resources to purchase a computer and support monthly connectivity charges. Libraries bridge the technology gap and much more. As a cultural institution, libraries were “created to hold and preserve objects and texts, to expand the boundaries of public knowledge associated with those artifacts and words, and to open the
possibilities of learning in the contexts of everyday life.” Learning is a social activity and libraries, museums, zoological gardens, and parks all work to inform their constituencies and stimulate personal reflection. Libraries provide an environment where consumers can slow down, locate information either in a physical or digital form, and assimilate it with their own ideas and values. Libraries contribute to a community’s social capital, generating wealth and value by supporting consumers’ need for personal and professional growth, providing referral to community agencies and organizations, empowering consumers to make informed decisions, supporting cultural awareness and diversity, and making spaces available for individuals to meet.

Google cannot and will not replace library services. Yes, consumers can obtain some factual information on their own, without library mediation. The sheer amount of information retrieved via Internet searches, however, often intimidates, rather than empowers the consumer. The reference librarian who both functions as and promotes herself as a library and information consultant is better positioned to communicate her skills as an experienced expert who can seamlessly navigate both the Internet and the library, saving the consumer time and energy by matching him with the desired information regardless of format. Funding instead may be the library’s greatest threat for future survival, as funding enables libraries to sustain the innovative services and programs, collections, and facilities that consumers value. In such an environment, libraries must become more consumer-focused, defining customer needs in customer terms to develop and customize services and market new and existing products. An additional challenge is overcoming our preference for forcing consumers to seek our assistance only after exhausting Internet search options. As noted by Michael Baldwin, “We must stop being enablers for garbage information and become tough-love interveners with real information.” In this role, “We need to see our jobs as actually informing people rather than as simply making information available.”

Talents and Characteristics of a Successful Consultant

As “tough-love interveners” the ideal library and information consultant should share some of the talents and characteristics that contribute to a
consultant’s success. Such traits go beyond professional competencies which can be acquired through training and experience, and include

- in-depth knowledge of industry or expertise in a specific skill or management technique
- appreciation for risk
- self-confidence
- self-mastery
- ability to work hard
- comfort communicating with individuals in a variety of settings and levels within an organization
- ability to self-promote and prospect clients
- self-discipline
- ability to empower client(s) and understand client as a problem-solving partner
- flexibility/adaptability
- facilitation/motivation skills
- leadership skills
- detail orientation
- tolerance for routine
- analytical skills
- honesty/integrity
- objectivity
- accountability for actions and results

Most notably, like librarians, whose expertise lies in the organization of information and libraries, consultants usually have an in-depth knowledge of a particular industry, such as oil or health care, or a competency in a specific discipline such as Lean Six Sigma or database design. Beyond expertise, however, the consulting profession tends to attract individuals who appreciate risk, possess self-confidence and mastery, are willing to work hard to achieve success, and are able to take a broad view of an industry or organization. Successful consultants are comfortable speaking with individuals in a variety of settings and levels within an organization, communicate well with others, and enjoy selling themselves. They remain aware of both their personal limitations and their limitations in knowledge so that they may reject
projects beyond their ability to assist or outside the scope of their business strategy and refer those projects to others. Successful consultants exercise extreme self-discipline and hold themselves accountable for remaining current in their area of expertise. They understand this is crucial because their livelihood depends on their knowledge. Those who have mastered their craft shift from functioning as “a savior and problem-solver to being an empowering partner.” Such a skill is necessary to reach a mutual understanding of the client’s problem and identify a workable solution.

To succeed as a consultant, one must learn to prospect clients in addition to selling oneself. Further, one has to remain flexible to adapt to the client’s environment, seek multiple and creative solutions to the clients’ identified problem, and motivate both oneself and the client to create change and implement solutions which address the root cause of the problem. Consultants must be skilled with facilitating meetings and training others. In some instances they are hired to facilitate conflict resolution for a group; in others, to teach a team a new skill. Consultants must possess leadership skills and have the ability to wear multiple hats. With an entrepreneurial mindset, they understand a positive attitude is required to weather the challenges presented. Frustration may be inevitable, but can be managed. The successful consultant must believe that he can influence results. Further, he must use his knowledge of the industry or organization, and have the ability to identify valuable relationships that may have previously been discounted or overlooked. Orientation to detail and a tolerance for routine tasks are also required to effectively analyze collected data and project results.

Successful consultants possess integrity and are both willing and able to dispense the honest truth to their clients, even if telling the truth risks their dismissal and subsequent loss of income. They confront problems directly, often providing a client or organization much-needed objectivity. They develop a network of colleagues to both consult and refer clients to when appropriate. The successful consultant also demonstrates a certain resourcefulness for locating the tools and expertise needed to get the job done. Like librarians, he protects his clients’ right to privacy or confidentiality. Although consultants aren’t required to subscribe to the Association of Professional Consultant’s “Code of Ethics,” successful consultants adhere to similar standards. They are accountable for their actions or inactions, understanding that they affect results. Humble, consultants are able to say,
“I don’t know” when appropriate, and either work with the client to figure out the issue or refer the client to someone with the appropriate expertise. Honest, they refuse to promise more than they can deliver. Successful consultants also ask satisfied clients for referrals. This proactive marketing technique is a simple way to identify new clients and make them aware of the services you offer.

Many successful reference librarians already exhibit the talents and characteristics of successful consultants. Given the freedom to reconceptualize their library skills and background, they can function as consultants if they are not doing so already. By marketing ourselves as library and information consultants, librarians have a greater opportunity to showcase the talents our communities rely on, using a language and discipline to which our communities can relate.

**Why Adopt Business Practices in Libraries and Other Nonprofit Organizations**

It is true that libraries are not a business and cannot function exclusively like one. Like a great business, however, a well-managed, respected library requires disciplined planning, personnel, governance, and allocation of resources to succeed. Libraries can successfully adapt a number of business principles, tools, and concepts to learn about their organizations and forward their missions. The way consultants conceptualize, organize, and market their practices offers much utility to librarians, if librarians are receptive to considering themselves and their profession differently. This requires setting aside preconceptions about the traditional role of the librarian and the activities that contribute to the success of a library’s reference service.

Nonprofits in general have a tendency to attract individuals who are passionate about their organization’s mission and the services it provides. The library profession is no exception. Individuals are attracted to professional librarianship for a variety of reasons. Some value free access to information and understand its importance for a democratic society. Others may be passionate readers or enjoy the thrill of tracking down an elusive answer to a patron’s question. Some love the public institution of the library, while others are attracted to public service in general. Regardless of the reasoning driving
a librarian’s decision to enter the profession, it is dangerous for anyone to fail to appreciate and recognize that libraries have a business component, which must be managed effectively. Adopting business practices to the operation and delivery of library services is not necessarily evil or out of sync with a library’s mission. Further, skill in marketing, operations, training, education, and management is necessary for a library or library service operation to thrive and succeed.

Pamela Wilcox highlights the many myths and misconceptions circulating among staff and the public regarding libraries and other nonprofit organizations in her book *Exposing the Elephants: Creating Exceptional Nonprofits*. She notes a number of myths, including the idea that nonprofits exist only to further the public good.9 Like the for-profit sector, financial resources are required to advance the nonprofit’s mission. Unlike the commercial sector, however, profit resulting from revenue minus costs is expressed in different terms. Money does not equate success in the library and nonprofit sectors, but rather influences the outcomes of the financial investment in relation to the organization’s mission. Reliant on the communities they serve for financial resources, and on friends, donors, and grant-making agencies to supplement these resources, libraries must be good stewards of the resources bestowed upon them by spending their funds in the most efficient and effective manner possible.

It is also a myth that success cannot be measured quantitatively in the library and nonprofit sector. Although it is true that libraries are extremely proficient at counting outputs such as the number of circulation transactions, the number of individuals served at a reference desk, the number of books in their collections, or the number of instructional sessions given, the plethora of library assessment conferences and publications in recent years indicates that libraries and librarians still struggle with measuring and communicating outcomes.10 Libraries, and reference librarians in particular, must master this skill, especially because they are competing for the limited resources both within their organization and with others seeking financial support within their communities. Governments, universities, granting organizations, donors, and other providers of financial resources will invest funds elsewhere if they do not see a demonstrated return on their investment. Therefore libraries cannot afford to waste their productivity, talent, and time on ineffective services and programs.
Perhaps the largest myth, however, is the idea that libraries and other nonprofit sector organizations already operate well, especially considering staffing and funding resource limitations, the conflicts between professional managers and volunteer boards, mission creep, and other factors. Wilcox argues that many nonprofit organizations get trapped in a pattern of calm and crisis, resulting from failure to develop and implement a long-term strategy for success.

The reality is that great libraries and nonprofit organizations have much in common with great businesses. They are able to deliver superior performance year after year, with more complex governance systems, financial constraints, staffing limitations, and other factors than their for-profit brethren. With discipline, focus, and a strategy for sustained results, libraries and other nonprofit organizations can and do achieve greatness, advancing their mission for the constituents they serve. Libraries and librarians cannot shy away from business principles and practices, sheltering themselves by relying on research and lessons learned within the library sector itself. There is much to be learned by observing and adapting competencies and tools of other professionals, particularly those in the consulting profession.

Summary

Reference librarians already share a number of competencies and talents with successful consultants. By appreciating these similarities and capitalizing on the differences, reference librarians may strengthen their ability to communicate their value by repositioning themselves as library and information consultants. By approaching reference work from the perspective of a consultant, librarians can better help consumers to recognize the value the reference librarian brings to their quest for information.

The reference librarian’s role has transformed in the Age of Google. The Internet cannot and will not replace human interaction. Consumers will continue to seek libraries and the individuals who work within them for reasoned advice on locating quality information both efficiently and effectively. The library and information consultant must proactively seek clients, rather than focusing almost exclusively on making information available in case it is needed in the future. Because great libraries have much in common with...
great businesses, there should be no apprehension with repositioning reference librarians as library and information consultants. With strategic competitive planning, along with the disciplined allocation of financial, human, and capital resources, a great library will deliver superior performance that is reflected by measured outcomes, year after year. By thinking and acting as library and information consultants, reference librarians will be better positioned to deliver superior results to the communities they serve.

Notes

4. David Carr, The Promise of Cultural Institutions (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2003), xii.
11. Exposing the Elephants.
12. Good to Great.
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