

Back Talk — Profession Confusion

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It seems to me that we seem to be having another attack of profession confusion at just the wrong time. I was recently at an international meeting of librarians all of whom share an organizational affiliation that had the dreaded L word in it: Librarians. The outcome was to change the name of the organization to be an "Information Services Group." While in North America I visited a major university and looked over the plans for its wonderful new library addition but which would be called a "Learning Centre." Coming home to Hong Kong I had a stack of journals to go through and right at the top was the November 1, 2003 issue of *Library Journal* (volume 128, issue 18) with two articles by **John Berry III** about the need for the MLS: "Protect Professionalism," and "It's a great idea to put humanities Ph.D.s to work in libraries. . . But Don't Call 'em 'Librarians.'"

I don't bring these examples up to condemn the people associated with these actions. Actually, I understand the kiss of death that the L word can mean to some projects where the decision makers want to distance themselves from the expenditures' black hole that *ies represent. It seems administrators are willing to give money to a new black hole but not the old one. And, of course, it is not hip to be a *arian when we mainly spend our time with digital everything. As the president of the **Hong Kong Library Association**, an organization that denies membership to non-graduate library science graduates unless they serve a probationary sentence in the library of their choice, I can't help but feel a bit guilty myself for worrying about such things. Of course, I have also hired a few non MLS'er librarians so I am obviously professionally confused as well.

My concern is that we are once again beating ourselves in public over issues of small consequence compared to the enormity of the problems that are very large on our horizons. In the November/December issue of *Online*, an interesting article is entitled "The Information Industry Revolution: Implications for Librarians." The author, **George R. Plosker**, reports on an experience he had at the **Special Librarians Association** meeting talking about the roles of libraries and librarians. Regarding the need for libraries to market themselves to their publics, he noted

With the pervasiveness of Open Web search engines and super bookstores, the profession is simply not adequately or effectively communicating the value of libraries, library resources, and the librarian. (p. 18)

I suppose the ongoing desire of many to go to war with publishers is a conscious or unconscious attempt to communicate our value. We object to having library budgets used to pay for tenure and grant recruitment (our teachers publish and get research grants on the basis of publication in the journals whose publishers we hate) and so we support library friendly publishers and try to organize boycotts of other publishers. But I have an idea that the message will be lost on most university administrators.

Others among us become **Google'arians**, seeking to help students become superior Web searchers. Others go in the other direction and declare that everything on the Web is of low quality and that only the full text databases from the publishers we hate are of value.

So what do I think we should be doing? I agree with **Plosker** — let's work directly on communicating to those who matter the value of libraries and librarians. I will now use the B world: branding. Universities in North America, as discussed in a January 3, 2003 *Chronicle of Higher Education* article entitled "The Wannabes," have discovered a self-evident truth: "If you want to improve research and need private money to do it . . . then you have to go national" (statement made by **Diane D. Craig**, research director at the Center for Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences at the **University of Florida**). And to go national means getting your brand out there. In another *Chronicle* article, "Romancing the Brand," the author **John L. Pulley**, discusses the experiences of the **University of Maryland** which, after some very aggressive branding work, showed significant progress in getting their message out there. The GPA of incoming students increased from 3.01 to 3.75, SAT scores for incoming freshmen increased from 1173 to 1246, and applications for these students increased by 24.7 percent at **Maryland** since they began their efforts to improve and promote their brand name recognition.

Saying what should be done is easier than doing it. Recently, some of my staff and I spent a couple of hours with a member of our Friends organization, who is both a lawyer and a marketing specialist, talking about what we can do to increase the amount of funds we raise and how to get the attention of University administrators so that we can slow down budget cuts and speed up the planning for a new library. His message to us was the need to get brand name recognition which he said was shorthand for getting them to understand our value using a few simple words. He noted that **Nike** didn't need to provide long reports on the value of their

shoes in order to get customer support. Customers recognize the value and so they support Nike with their wallets. He suggested that we needed to take whatever actions needed to enable patrons and university administrators to agree with the following three statements upon hearing the word "library" (or learning center or information resource service): This is a good thing. I want to support it. I believe in it.

He suggested that we first needed to make sure that we understood what they wanted so that we could meet these needs. To do this he suggested we need to analyze their aspirations and fears and then figure out how we can help them achieve these aspirations and to help them destroy the forces which oppose them. When that happens, he suggested, we have an ally who will say "this is a good thing, I want to support it, and I believe in it" when they think about libraries. At that point we can also bring to their attention the other things that we do which might not have occurred to them immediately as important when we sought to understand their needs. Library programs, after all, have evolved over time to meet the needs of disparate groups of users, but we and our users may have lost track of why things like authority control are important. Brands, he suggested, usually also have slogans or tag words, like The Real Thing, We Try Harder, etc., associated with brand name. To get these one needs to think about the adjectives we wish our patrons and decisions makers might ascribe to us, e.g., digital, user friendly, responsive, etc., and then, of course, take actions to make these qualities a reality.

So that is where we are here on the banks of the South China Sea. We are busy working on the above two tasks. I'll let you know in the future how we are doing. But in the meantime we'll do less talking about who can or cannot be a librarian, the evils of this or that publisher, and we'll devote even more energy to understanding and meeting user needs. In the end, I believe, this will define what a librarian is and we won't have to feel embarrassed to be one. 