JUSTIFYING YOUR EXISTENCE DURING THE ECONOMIC DOWNTURN*

*By Anh Huynh***

Sommaire

Pour surmonter le marasme économique, les bibliothèques de droit doivent penser et agir plus comme une unité commerciale. En plus de la chasse aux coûts, les bibliothèques doivent chercher les opportunités leur permettant de contribuer au total des dépenses de leur organisation en alignant les objectifs de la bibliothèque aux objectifs prioritaires du cabinet d'avocats. Cet article présente une approche en sept étapes afin de justifier l'existence de la bibliothèque en devenant un membre actif et important dans les équipes stratégiques du cabinet d'avocats.

The current global economic crisis has had a dramatic impact on businesses of all shapes and sizes. While most of the media attention has been focused on layoffs and job losses in the automotive and other manufacturing industries, information professionals are slowly starting to notice some forms of retrenchment. In March 2009, for example, the Toronto District School Board slashed 186 classroom jobs including 36 teacher-librarians.[1] The downturn, it appears, has reached the world of librarianship in Canada, and law librarians are starting to question if (or when) they might suffer the same fate.

Statistics on job losses of our U.S. counterparts are astounding. Between January 2008 and the end of March 2009, approximately 10,000[2] legal jobs were cut (4,000 lawyers and 6,000 staff). While the Canadian lawyer/legal market has not experienced anything close to this devastation, an article in the *Financial Post* warned that Canadian law firms expected revenue drops of 10-25% in 2009.[3] The article further suggested that unless the economy got better soon, Canadian law firms would start cutting after the first quarter of 2009. Indeed, by April 2009, about a half-dozen Canadian law firms had issued pink slips to an estimated 150 lawyers and support staff,[4] and McCarthy Tétrault LLP was reviewing its Ottawa office to determine whether it should be closed. Stories were circulated about librarians' positions which disappeared after retirement, maternity leave, sick leave, or permanent leave. In other words, no one new was hired.

As cost centres, libraries are often the first place management looks to in order to make cuts during an economic slump. Unless we can "justify our existence" (my manager's mantra of late), our jobs could be on the line. Before my life as a librarian, I used to work as a BPI (business processes improvement) consultant/project manager doing contract work in the corporate and business sectors. Justifying my existence was the critical factor in finding new contracts or having old ones renewed. After many years of perpetual contract work, it became second nature.

Given these troubling times, I thought it would be fitting to share my experience with my fellow librarians. Cost cutting may be essential but it does not justify your existence. Even if you say to management, "I cost less than I did before," management thinks, "Yes, but you still cost me." In other words, cutbacks in collections, operations, and other expenses are only short-term measures. What we need to do instead is to take this opportunity to plan and cultivate long-term gains and vision. According to a number of experts, "this is not the time to be simply flying below the radar. This is the time for proactive responses."[5] As such, this paper explores the non-traditional opportunities and associated benefits available to legal librarians at Canadian law firms during the economic downturn.

Identify Potential Clients

The first step in exploiting non-traditional opportunities is to identify potential clients. In addition to supporting the traditional clients (lawyers), think about the other groups which your library could target during this recession. Who, for example, plays a critical role and needs a great deal of information services? Your most likely answer would be Client Development ("CD") or Sales. This is the time when they

** Anh Huynh has Masters' degrees in Information Studies (Library Science) and Business Administration. She worked as a BPI (business process improvement) consultant/project manager for over 10 years in the corporate and business sectors before returning to school for a second career in librarianship. She is currently working as a competitive intelligence specialist/reference librarian at Osler, Hoskin, & Harcourt LLP.

1 "Toronto school board slashes 186 classroom jobs" CBC News (12 March 2009), online: CBCnews.ca <www.cbc.ca/canada/toronto/story/2009/03/12/to-school-board-cuts.html>.

2 "Layoff Tracker," online: Law Shucks <http://lawshucks.com/layoff-tracker/ >; "The Layoff List" *American Lawyer.Com*, online: American Lawyer <http://www.law.com/jsp/tal/PubArticleTAL.jsp?id=1202425647706>.

3 Jim Middlemiss, "Law firms again jockey for talent" *The Financial Post* (4 March 2009) FP6.

4 Jacquie McNish, "The axeman cometh?" *The Globe and Mail* (8 April 2009) B7.

5 Debbie Schachter, "Surviving the downturn by becoming more business-minded" (2008) 12:12 Information Outlook 36 at 36.

must be most vigilant in terms of making more calls, visiting more clients, examining new client types who are not the "usual suspects," and keeping old business while competing for new business. These extra activities dramatically increase their information needs. Why not take this opportunity to offer, promote, or renew your library's services to CD? Why not align yourself with the firm's profit centre? What better way to justify your existence than to be part of a team that brings home the bacon?

Develop Relationships with Client Development

If you're looking for the "perfect moment" to develop or renew relationships with CD, there is no better time than the present. Don't wait for them to come to you. Be proactive about approaching them in order to offer your services/products. Librarians are generally not natural salespeople; indeed our nature is closer to that of counsellors due to the desire to help others. So use the approach that you're comfortable with such as counselling, consulting, or relationship building when pitching your services.[6] Ask CD for a meeting, and make sure to do your homework and come with an open mind. Show CD that legal librarians can be savvy business researchers who can speak their language and understand their business development processes, issues, and challenges.

My manager is one of those visionary library managers who saw beyond the legal boundaries for her legal librarians. Even before the economic downturn, she offered the library's services to CD and she was instrumental in setting up the initial meetings to formally introduce me to the top people. These meetings served several crucial purposes: (i) to formalize and renew the library's commitment to assist CD; (ii) to strengthen the library and CD relationship; and (iii) to provide me with the opportunity to conduct interviews with the top decision makers.

Understand Clients' Needs

In general, I find CD's preferences for information are very different from those of lawyers. The content of sought-after information is obviously different, but so is the *way* in which it must be presented. While lawyers can and will digest a staggering amount of information, CD does not tolerate large volumes of material. While lawyers would often ask me to give them *everything* I could find on a given subject, the CD people want just the *essentials*.

Experience will tell you that everything is generally quicker (and safer) to provide than just the essentials. "Essentials" means that it is your responsibility to make critical decisions about weeding information, and some librarians are not comfortable with this approach. For the most part, librarians prefer to err on the side of caution. In other words, it's better to give more than to miss the important stuff.

Of course, providing everything on a topic is a safe approach, but is it necessarily the best? Information overload will impede your clients' performance because they become bogged down with unimportant details. Too much information can put CD off, and over time they will stop asking for your services. Remember, CD folks are business people and business people live by the 80-20 rule: giving them twenty percent of the information found will assist them with eighty percent of their business. Anything more than twenty percent is counterproductive; anything less is a missed opportunity.

In addition, it is important to know that business decisions in a firm are often made in a more uncertain climate than legal decisions. You should seek to determine the "good enough" point when providing business reports. While more important decisions require a higher confidence level because more is at stake, top decision makers will accept some uncertainties due to the cost involved in additional collection and analyses that would provide higher levels of confidence.[7]

Meet Clients' Needs

So how do you achieve the 80-20 ratio? The answer is simpler than you think: focus on the big picture. This is not a natural thing for librarians to do since one of our inherent skills is our extraordinary ability to hone in on the details. It's time for us to step out of our comfort zone and think about the objectives. Focus on the "why" before the "what" or the "how." If the why is clear, you will have a good foundation to figure out the what, where, when, who, and how.

Even in situations where clients come to you with a specific request (e.g., a company's background report), you should work to understand the reason behind it (why they want it). Is it to respond to a Request for Proposal, to visit a client, to support your client's client, for competitive reasons, or something else? Any of these reasons will require a different search strategy, criteria, media, timeframe, and information package.

I have had situations when clients asked for one thing but actually needed something else. These situations happen quite often because clients are not aware of the information available (that's our job, not theirs), so they ask for the things that they know about, unaware that better products are available to meet their needs.

Finally, how do you determine how much is "good enough?" Some patrons will tell you up front while others won't or don't know what to tell you. In these situations, use your judgment—this should be based on your knowledge of your clients' objectives—but make sure you communicate how you arrive at a given confidence level.

Go Beyond Clients' Expectations

a) Provide Executive Summaries

Another thing to keep in mind is that the higher the position of the information seeker, the bigger the picture that is required. Twenty percent of a strategic picture can be quite overwhelming, so be prepared to review and summar-

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6 Martha Singer, "We are all in sales" online: (2009) 12:2 Competitive Intelligence Magazine.

7 Rick Hauser, "The cost of confidence" online: (2009) 1:12 SCIP.Online <http://www.eletra.com/scip2/e_article000076912.cfm>.

ize because the Director or Chief Marketing Officer (CMO) does not have the time to read all you find. Since your job is to make their job easy, take the time to provide them with executive summaries.

b) Provide Analysis

A growing trend in the U.K. and other European countries shows that librarians and information professionals have morphed into a diverse range of roles, often as business analysts, when their libraries shut down.[8] We can learn from the European experience by being proactive in developing additional skills with a focus on the business areas (because that's where the jobs are). Start thinking of offering CD and other business areas analysis reports or competitive intelligence (CI) reports to assist with strategic decision making.

Before you shrug off this idea, note that CI is a growing area of responsibility in our profession. The CI role made its appearance in the Special Libraries Association (SLA) 2008 Annual Salary Survey & Workplace Study.[9] Nearly twenty percent of the respondents from SLA Europe and North America reported having a CI role—a global trend that continues to grow.

c) Project Works

Unlike lawyers who might have their own internal research lawyers to do in-depth research and analysis, CD has often relied on external research firms for their large projects. Since the economic downturn, CD no longer has the budget for these costly reports and may turn to the library for help. You will quickly notice that most of CD's requests tend to be project-oriented. A request timeline can range from a few days to weeks or months, so be open to project work and overtime, and be willing to do more with less—in other words, justify your existence.

d) Standardization

You will eventually find out that eighty percent of CD's requests will be of a similar nature (there's no telling how far the 80-20 rule can go). So plan ahead, develop and propose standard reports or processes to the decision-makers, and obtain their agreement before tackling a request. Remember, we don't "plan to fail but fail to plan." How many times have you wasted hours of research because a client didn't think something through before sending you down a rabbit hole? Asking clients to sign off on a set of standards will force them to think things through and, hence, will save all concerned a lot of time and unnecessary headaches.

In addition, standards remove the library's dependency on an individual (my colleagues can take over when I'm on vacation) and improve clients' productivity (clients know exactly what to expect, when and how to receive it, and where everything is—this in turn can help them plan their workloads). It is definitely a win-win situation.

Maintain Relationships

Maintaining relationships takes as much work as building them. Try to get feedback from your clients for the services you provided. Legal librarians know how difficult it is to get feedback from their lawyers (unless they're unhappy with your work). Unfortunately, it doesn't get better with CD. The most you can get out of them is often quite generic, "excellent" or "great." Be patient, keep asking, continue to tweak and improve your work as you discover new things. If you can't get the Directors or CMOs to give you the necessary feedback, then work your way down to their managers and assistants.

Continue to be proactive and try to attend CD's monthly meetings. This will allow you to be part of their team, understand their challenges and issues, provide and receive different perspectives, cut down communication time between departments, and have the ability to anticipate and plan for solutions before requests can be formalized.

Conclusion

One of the keys to survival during an economic slump is your ability to show that you can do more with less. Cost cutting is essential, but also look for opportunities to contribute to the bottom line. Identify key business areas and profit centres in your organization and solicit their business. Approaching CD for business is one of the many things that you can do to justify your existence. Be recognized for the fact that your work is one of the reasons for your organization's successes.

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8 Sue Hill, "Survival Strategies in a Cost-Cutting Environment" (2008) 12:12 Information Outlook 16.

9 John Latham, "SLA's New Salary Survey Includes CI Compensation" (2008) 12:12 Information Outlook 39.