Trends in Reference and Public Services Librarianship and the Role of RUSA

Part Two

In the last issue, I explored some recent trends in reference and public services librarianship. In this column, I will discuss factors driving change, strategies for predicting future trends, and the role of the Reference & User Services Association (RUSA).

Factors Driving Change

I have identified four broad factors driving change. Some of these factors intersect. All of them challenge libraries to rethink the delivery of services.

Shrinking Budgets

Academic and public libraries across the country are being forced to explore new staffing models because of budget reductions. Libraries have taken numerous approaches in order to save money in their public services budget. These cost-cutting measures have included the following strategies: trimming hours, merging departments, consolidating service points, hiring freezes, the use of fixed-term appointments, and hiring entry-level rather than experienced librarians. Most worrisome is an observation by Francine Fialkoff, editor of Library Journal, who noted in a recent editorial that there is anecdotal evidence that librarians are responding differently to the latest fiscal shortfalls. A decade ago, librarians cut collection budgets in response to reduced funding. Fialkoff noted that “[n]ow, libraries are cutting hours and/or staff, replacing MLS librarians with those without degrees, or outsourcing more ‘processing’ so that they can still provide current materials.”¹ Her concern was that these strategies do not restore public support for libraries. She argued that “to get public support restored it is more effective to show the public how valuable their libraries are” and that the message should be “[I]f only my library were open more hours, then I could get to all that good stuff more often.”²

The Millennials

Demographics are another factor driving change. While many librarians (especially administrators) are members of that huge, post-World War II Baby Boom generation, Millennials are the generation grabbing headlines. Millennials (those born after 1981) are also known as the Echo Boom, Generation Y, and the Game Boy Generation. I am very familiar with this group as my son was born in 1988. This generation has embraced instant messaging, cell phones, mp3 players, and multitasking. I would venture that many Millennials view chat reference software as too stodgy. Librarians who want to better understand Millennials should read one of the following provocative works on this generation and generational differences: When Generations Collide; Serving the Millennial Generation; Adolescents and Literacies in a Digital World; Millennials Rising; and Millennials Go to College.³ There have been some fascinating studies on the cultural influences shaping this


generation. According to Millennials expert Michael Coomes, events that shaped these individuals are school shootings, the O. J. Simpson trial, and the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal. Given the large number of college-age Millennials, it is not surprising that academic librarians are trying to figure out the best way to reach these users. One of the contributed papers at the 2005 Association of College and Research Libraries National Conference focused on marketing to Millennials. Patricia Duck, library director at the University of Pittsburgh at Greensburgh, characterized Millennials as “visually oriented,” “easily bored,” “very demanding,” and “used to having the best of everything,” and noted that they “want cutting-edge facilities.” She reported on a 2003 survey (there were 202 participants) that asked students at her institution about their library experiences. Eighty percent of respondents were Millennials and 20 percent were members of Generation X (the generation preceding Millennials). While Duck didn’t find many differences between the two groups, she found that Millennials were more concerned with comforts (such as refreshments in the library), were knowledgeable about using Google but not necessarily knowledgeable about using library databases, and approximately half found library databases difficult to search. As a result of these findings, Duck’s library has made some changes (such as installing a very popular soda machine in the library lobby) and has changed its instructional program to incorporate more active learning and team activities—approaches favored by Millennials. Hopefully more librarians will report on their outreach efforts to this generation of users.

Technology

Another factor, one closely related to the growing importance of the Millennials, is technology. Librarians are worried about their ability to convey the relevance of libraries and librarians to this techno-savvy generation. We all know librarians who complain that patrons, especially students, think it’s all in Google.

My perception is that the highly publicized launch of Google Scholar, Google’s new search engine focusing on scholarly materials, has intensified fears that libraries and librarians will become marginalized. Anecdotally, many librarians wonder how the professional community was blindsided by this latest development. Some libraries have opted to link to Google Scholar on their library Web pages, acknowledging that patrons are using this search engine. Additionally, some libraries with link resolvers are participating in a pilot that enables libraries to create links to their institution’s holdings in Google Scholar. It is probably premature to attempt to measure the impact of Google Scholar, and it is important to remember that Google Scholar is in beta mode. A balanced review of Google Scholar’s capabilities and limitations can be found in Laura Cohen’s bibliographic essay on search tools and Web technologies for locating scholarly content.

Google Scholar is not the only example of technology impacting reference and public services librarianship. High-speed wireless access to the Internet has enabled librarians to become untethered from the physical reference desk. As noted in part one of this column, lightweight, wireless-equipped laptops have made it easier for libraries to experiment with roving reference. As related in an article in The New York Times, some libraries are circulating (for both in-library and in-home use) laptops with wireless technology, and libraries are integrating this technology into designs for new or renovated facilities. Some libraries are experimenting with personal digital assistants (PDAs) to provide access to the online catalog, databases, reference sources, course reserve readings, and e-books. More information about PDAs in libraries can be found in Sue Searing’s excellent compilation and digest of articles on this topic. One of the newest areas for library experimentation with electronic devices involves iPods. In a recent supplement to Library Journal, Michael Stephens reported on various library pilots using iPods, with projects as diverse as course reserves for music classes to a hip form of audiobooks for high school students.
place. Shill and Tonner found that “the great majority of new and improved libraries have experienced sustained increases in usage of the physical facility following project completion” and their study “provides clear, empirical evidence that students can and will use a comfortable, well-equipped library even with remote access to many electronic databases and the Internet available.”13 Essentially, the library building still matters in an electronic age.

Predicting Future Trends

How can libraries identify factors and predict trends that will drive change? One strategy to employ is environmental scanning. This technique (sometimes referred to as external assessment) is commonly used in business. It is a strategy taught throughout the business curriculum in strategic planning and management courses. However, it is not simply an academic exercise. In the real world, managers are always scanning the environment. A good manager examines economic, social, demographic, political, and legal changes and shifts in order to determine future trends. Why are trends so important? Trends are useful to project the demand and shifts in order to determine future trends. Why are trends so important? Trends are useful to project the demand for new products or services.

The American Library Association (ALA) used environmental scanning as a technique to plan the future of the organization. The ALA Council recently approved “Ahead to 2010,” the strategic plan that will guide ALA over the next decade. Gwen Arthur and I (as well as other members of the RUSA Executive Committee) were able to participate in discussions of the draft plan at the fall 2004 ALA Division Leadership Program. Additionally, there were other opportunities for broad membership input. The environmental scanning process that ALA used provides an excellent model for external analysis. The ALA Web site links to materials that ALA studied in the planning process (www.al.org/ala/ourassociation/governingdocs/aheadto2010/environmentscanning.htm). Many of these resources are excellent sources of trend data. This environmental scanning document is particularly interesting because it reflects the wide view that ALA took in this planning process. ALA reviewed resources on early childhood development, local governance, the social impact of the Internet, consumer privacy, philanthropy, digital culture, reading, scholarly communication, and more.

One of the most important documents that ALA reviewed in its strategic planning process was the 2003 OCLC Environmental Scan: Pattern Recognition Report, the report produced by OCLC’s worldwide membership on trends impacting OCLC, libraries, museums, archives, and other organizations. This huge report is available on the Web (www.oclc.org/membership/scan/default.htm). It documents the external assessment that OCLC conducted, and it identifies the social, economic, technological, research, and learning changes that have major implications for libraries. These are just a few of the important trends identified in this report:

- People want to be self-sufficient; they have embraced self-service from banking to research.
- The lines between work and home have blurred, and there are no longer separate spheres of information. Technology is seamlessly integrated into work and leisure activities.
- The worldwide economy is slowing, and there will not be enough money for schools and libraries.
- There will be increased scrutiny of how tax dollars are spent, meaning that universities and libraries will be held more accountable.
- There is a movement to bring order to digital content, a recognition of the need to bring structure to chaos.
- There is support for the development of open source software.
- New notions of intellectual property will emerge.
- E-learning will explode in both educational and corporate settings.

Libraries will assume new roles in scholarly publishing, moving from being service providers to collaborators.

All of these trends will profoundly impact the library profession. The OCLC Environmental Scan is important reading for all libraries. Because this document is so significant, it guided my institution’s recent strategic planning process. However, its relevance extends beyond academic and research libraries. Coincidentally, I just received the latest issue of Public Libraries and found that Dan Walters, president of the Public Library Association (PLA), referenced the Environmental Scan in his president’s column. He wrote that this document “can also be read as a synthesis of many topics of PLA-sponsored discussions, articles and programs of the past few years.”14 I believe that the same could be said for RUSA-sponsored activities.

The Role of RUSA

One thing is clear: change is constant in librarianship and it’s hard to keep up. Many of the trends identified in the OCLC report are very complex. How do librarians keep abreast of these changes? One way is by joining and actively participating in ALA, and the divisions that make up ALA. If you have not been active in RUSA, this is the time to take another look at it. RUSA is a vibrant and diverse division. Its membership includes reference and user services librarians, librarians who do readers’ advisory, interlibrary loan professionals, librarians who select materials, publishers, history and genealogy librarians, and business librarians. It includes academic, public, and even some school and special librarians. RUSA welcomes the participation of library support staff.

What does RUSA do? To learn more about its activities, consult RUSA’s Web site (www.al.org/rusa) or read the American Libraries article written by Cathleen Bourdon on
RUSA's role in recharging librarians. Cathleen is the executive director of RUSA, and she keeps the association running on a daily basis with the help of her capable staff. Here is a brief list of some of the benefits that RUSA membership provides:

- Professional development and continuing education for reference and user services librarians and library staff
- Programs at the ALA Annual Conferences
- Preconferences and institutes at both ALA Midwinter Meetings and Annual Conferences
- Web continuing education courses. Last year, RUSA offered its first course, David Tyckoson's module on the reference interview. Based on this success, other RUSA online courses are being developed
- Finally, RUSA sponsors Reference and User Services Quarterly (RUSQ), and members receive a free subscription. It was rewarding to learn that RUSQ fared very well in terms of prestige in the recent Nisonger and Davis study (which replicated the 1985 Kohl-Davis study) ranking the perception of library and information science journals by LIS education deans and Association of Research Libraries library directors.

Why become active in RUSA? It allows you to network with other professionals. There are opportunities to actively participate in RUSA activities through service on committees. RUSA has more than 150 committees, and for some committees, service is virtual. Those new to the profession might be interested in becoming active in the Reference Services Section (RSS), RUSA's newest section for front-line librarians and support staff engaged in all aspects of reference and information services. There are a half-dozen discussion groups within RSS including one on “Hot Topics in Frontline Reference,” and more than a dozen RSS committees, with interests ranging from the management of reference to library services to the Spanish-speaking. Finally, RUSA can be a great place to find a mentor. It also provides a forum for experienced librarians to mentor others.

In conclusion, I want to note that RUSA leaders and staff are cognizant of how factors driving change in the profession are also driving change in the association. RUSA is employing technology (the Web) to deliver news about the association. RUSA Update, the quarterly newsletter, migrated to an online format, and e-mail alerts let members know when the recent issue has been posted. The Web has also enabled RUSA to deliver continuing education. New technological developments offer promise for additional communication and interaction among members. For example, RUSA has been involved in the testing of a new software application, ALA Online Communities. Because generational differences are real, the first meeting of the RUSA Board of Directors at the 2006 Midwinter Meeting, will be a brainstorming session on recruiting, retaining, and engaging all generations of members.

References and Notes

2. Ibid.
13. Ibid., 149.