



THE PORTAL BUSINESS: CONCEPTION, PRODUCTION & MARKETING

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ABSTRACT: Five years ago the title for this talk might have been "Creating the Virtual Library and Developing a Program of Bibliographic Instruction", but today such terminology seems oddly antiquated. As libraries have evolved, librarians have adopted business models to compete and survive. As we create unique information products, design efficient information delivery systems, negotiate licensing fees and promote our information resources to patrons, we have adopted practices developed in the world of business.

All truly great companies are adaptive to the marketplace, and the same holds true for successful libraries. It is no longer possible to define today's library activities on the basis of past practices. Challenged with providing information to a diverse and extremely dispersed staff, the Zoological Society of San Diego Library established a Zoo and Conservation Web Portal to anchor our services. Today's consumer wants convenient, one-stop shopping. And a niche web portal that anticipates needed resources by providing quality pre-evaluated links to both international and local sources was a fundamental first step. And because it is considered good business practice to have multiple revenue streams, inventing new ones and creatively developing existing ones, our Library regularly adds unique information products tailored to our patron's specific needs. Products include a historical time line of Society events; a zoo and conservation news service; a customized journal page; standardized and annotated animal fact sheets; web tutorials; indexes to Zoonooz and staff articles, and a Society archives finding aid. Our marketing campaign consists of yearly keeper training classes for new employees, and a yearly information update for all employees, focusing on information literacy, new web and technology developments and new library acquisitions. Four, 1-hour information modules are also available "on demand" to various departments. In this era of technological change and near-instant communication, adaptiveness like this is necessary for libraries to compete and survive. As Darwin noted, "It's not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent, but rather the one that is most adaptable to change."

It is no longer possible to define today's library activities on the basis of past practices. All truly great companies are adaptive to the marketplace, and the same holds true for successful libraries. In March 1999, Steve Coffman, the Director of the LA Public Library's paid information service proposed that libraries provide the same accessibility, convenience and personalized service that Amazon was providing.¹ He argued that 24/7 availability, scanned table of contents, full-text book reviews, e-mailing clients about new books in a specific area, and quick reliable delivery was what consumers wanted AND, he claimed this was the recipe for future success in libraries.

A number of articles subsequently appeared challenging or affirming Steve's vision but it was his original article with its audacious, revolutionary proposal that gave me, and I'm sure many other

librarians, unwritten permission to reinvent and revitalize our libraries. The fact that there could be better ways to assist our patrons and that we might borrow and adapt creative business models to suit our purposes was inspiring and invigorating. By creating unique information products, designing efficient information

delivery systems, integrating varied resources, negotiating fair licensing fees and promoting our information resources to patrons, we have become a new breed of librarian.

Challenged with providing information to a diverse and extremely dispersed staff, the Zoological Society of San Diego Library established a web portal to anchor our services. Today's consumer does want convenient, one-stop shopping, and our niche portal serves as a gateway to Zoo and Conservation Information. We continually evaluate new online resources and only the most pertinent and stable are included in the Portal's series of menus. The web-based system allows us the ease and flexibility of adding new material and establishing hyperlinks wherever they are appropriate. It has allowed us to cut many non-critical print resources and invest in more resources important to our mission. Our portal is uncomplicated, simplistic and jargon free... like Google (another great business model). It is user-focused instead of library-centric with four main subject categories: Animals, Plants, Conservation, & Zoos. Four support categories are also offered: News, Reference, and once again, Books & Videos and Journals & Databases.

Sub-categories reduce the user's need to know specific resources, and there are ample cross-references. Even though books and journals are key links from the home page they are also the first items under each subject heading. Within each sub-category, links are presented alphabetically by site name. The name of the sponsor and perhaps a very brief instruction or annotation are provided.

¹ Coffman, Steve, "Building Earth's Largest Library: driving into the future, Searcher v7 #3, March 1999

It is considered good business practice to have multiple revenue streams, and the best companies are capable of inventing new ones and creatively developing existing ones. Our Library regularly adds unique information products tailored to our staff's specific needs, and our product line is integrated throughout the site. The following, is a brief synopsis of the various resources or "products" we provide. It includes the philosophy or - guidelines behind the product's development and the marketing points that are used to "sell" the product to staff:

Pre-Evaluated links

Product Development Guidelines

- Scout Report - U of Wisconsin
- Science Magazine's NetWatch
- News Articles - NY Times & Eurekalert
- Staff Recommendations

Marketing Points

- Search engines can only index static web pages. Portals and Directories are necessary to locate the hidden 84%.
- Saves time
- A good place to start

Animal Fact Sheets

Product Developmental Guidelines

- Charismatic megavertebrates
- Society conservation projects are highlighted when possible
- Developed in conjunction with new exhibit openings
- Representatives from each class of animals
- Curatorial or CRES review

Marketing Points

- Saves time and effort
- Authoritative – Each section is referenced and linked to a selected bibliography
- Single page information summary is easy to print out
- Comprehensive
- Standardized
- Hyperlinked for quick look-up - perfect for telephone reference.
- Provides Referrals to key web sites

News

Product Development Guidelines:

- Newsworthy events concerning zoos, and conservation
- International in scope
- Resources used:
 - Google News: Zoos,
 - Yahoo: Endangered Species
 - Eurekalert
 - USFWS, APHIS, JAVMA
 - National Geographic,
 - Nature, Science
 - NYTimes
 - ENN

- SciDevNet
- Chicago Tribunes "Wild World"
- Modified headline of relevant "keywords" always includes name of zoo
- Date and author/journalist if available
- Truncated hyperlink to the publisher (News sources are quickly archived)
- Abstracts contain dates, organization names, names of individuals, location and any web sites referenced
- Organized into yearly batches.
- Federal Register
 - Endangered Species Permit Requests from USFWS
 - Rules regarding Endangered Species

Marketing Points

- Latest estimates of various species
- New zoo exhibits, conservation projects, educational programs &
- Zoo promotional events
- Zoo leadership
- Trends in zoos and animal husbandry
- Conservation organizations in the news
- Conservation research projects & findings
- Pertinent scientific discoveries
- Emerging disease and epidemiologic studies
- Captive wildlife health problems
- Local and national government announcements
- Innovative museum news
- Competitive intelligence: Disney, SeaWorld, Legoland, WCS
- Recent zoo/conservation meetings highlights
- All one page allows for Ctrl "find" searching

Historical time line of important events

Product Development Guidelines:

- Society 'Firsts' - First births, first bus tour
- Important animal events: Death of Ken Allen
- New Directors - tenure dates
- Awards received and given
- New Exhibit openings

Marketing Points

- Quick one-stop shopping
- All one page allows for Ctrl "find" searching

Regulations and Guidelines

Product Development Guidelines

- Includes all major regulatory agencies
- Information from respected institutions

Marketing Points

- Provides easy protocol comparison
- International perspective

Animal training, enrichment and husbandry

Product Development Guidelines

- Reputable information from Zoos, Animal Trainers, Government

Marketing Points

- Identifies experts in the field
- Provides international perspective
- Broad scope allows for easy comparison
- One-stop shopping saves time and effort

Best practices

Librarians have adapted amazingly well to the challenges of an Internet-enabled, web-dominated world. It would be great if we could simply rest on our laurels after creating the portals, databases and finding aids, but selling these products and services, as well as promoting the Library is a full time job. Relating to the people in your organization on a personal level; surveying user needs to let them know you're interested in solving their information problems and that you welcome their input is essential. Successful librarianship is a combination of developing interpersonal relationships, offering professional expertise, and providing useful information resources.

One of the most important aspects of the job is teaching science information literacy; making sure that users have the ability to access scientific information and analyze it critically. This includes tool literacy - the ability to use and understand the strengths and limitations of computers, web browsers and search engines. It also involves knowledge of the differences between research articles, review articles, conference proceedings, and technical reports. And in dealing with the zoological sciences it requires a basic knowledge of subject terminology, scientific nomenclature and geography.

I offer a hierarchy of workshops. A general yearly information update on what's new in the information world, and more specific workshops: keeper training for new keepers, and specialized departmental. Individual coaching sessions in person or via the telephone are always available.

To be successful, workshops should be personalized, not generic, relevant, not just a rehash of tired principles and FUN. This year I began my workshops with a spoof on David Letterman's top-10 list. Google is always a part of my training workshops, and just as important, the hazards of keyword searching, the importance of taxonomy and geography and the important warning that more than 80% of web-based information is "invisible" to Google's robots. I provide a portal tour customized to my audience and remind them that the only librarian they will find online costs \$8.95 (and of course everyone knows "you get what you pay for").

Librarians need to integrate themselves into the virtual library environment as information experts, entrepreneurs, coaches and advisors. They need to provide their users with personalized one-stop shopping, 24/7. By creating portals to in-house catalogs, outside resources and value-added products they can use their business acumen to compete and survive in today's information marketplace. As Charles Darwin pointed out "It's not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent, but rather the one that is most adaptable to change."