

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

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ABSTRACT

Special libraries are a dynamic environment in which to work, but like many library sectors, special libraries are struggling to find their place, to establish their territory, and define their services in the new information world.

Special libraries have moved from the collection era, to an environment where they are now attempting to link the library user with the right information at the right time. Rather than being gatekeepers to knowledge they are endeavouring to empower users and provide them with the information edge. However, one of the dangers special libraries face is reduced visibility of library services and reduced contact with clients. The reality for many people is that their only contact with the library is reading a current awareness alert or accessing a resource from the Intranet.

The next step for special libraries is to re-invent themselves again to become closer aligned to the industry/businesses they are operating in, and to develop effective partnerships, rather than just being a service.

This paper discusses the 3 streams that Blake Dawson is currently focussing on to develop their library service.

1. Being Proactive
2. Learning Culture
3. The Trusted Advisor

The goal of being a trusted advisor to our clients is discussed. The starting point to this is building relationships, which is fundamental to increasing the value of the library to organisations.

1. INTRODUCTION

In 1998 David Bender, the then executive director of the Special Libraries Association (SLA), spoke at an IFLA conference about the evolution of special libraries through the following stages:

1. Just in Case - the collection era.
2. 'Just in Time' information delivery. Where special librarians became information consultants and information employers -- they listened to the clientele describe what they needed, and then provided it 'just in time'.
3. 'Just for You' where information professionals analyse, interpret, customize and provide information to each individual and their needs.

Bender argued that one of the challenges facing special libraries was to advance the provision of information services to the next level:

4. 'Just With You' where special librarians are being bought in on the strategic -planning level of business. Bender talks about special librarians sitting next to the decision-makers at the senior-level to provide critical information in areas of crisis management, competitive business strategy and bottom-line driven decision making.¹

Since this paper was delivered in 1998, there have been significant changes to special library collections. There have been changes to the way that technology is harnessed and information is delivered. The expectations of our clients have changed. The new information era has led to more techno-savvy clients. Increasingly our clients are more readily able and willing to search for themselves. This has changed client expectations of library services and the role of the librarian. Despite all of these changes to the environment libraries operate in, it can be argued that over the last 12 years the development of special libraries has stalled. Special libraries to date have been largely unsuccessful at making the transition to a relationship where the library moves beyond being just a service to become a partner with their clients. In many cases libraries are in a vulnerable position because they have not been able to align themselves to the industry/business in which they are operating. The result of this is the increasing invisibility of special libraries within their organisations. In order to demonstrate value libraries need to focus on linking their goals and operations to the wider business. The starting point to this is to focus on building relationships within the organisation.

2. LAW FIRM LIBRARIES

This paper outlines the approach taken by the Blake Dawson Library & Research Services team to address the challenges facing special libraries, and what we are doing to respond to changes in user needs and expectations.

Blake Dawson is a law firm library with offices in Australia, China, Singapore, PNG, Indonesia, and Japan. Law firm libraries are essentially in the business of managing risk. Law librarians assist the lawyers in their research, and ensure they have access to the most authoritative, accurate and current resources in order for lawyers to best advise their clients. There is also a significant emphasis on information literacy; with the aim of ensuring that lawyers are aware of relevant online and hardcopy resources, and how to search and navigate these tools effectively.

2.1 Challenges facing law firm libraries

Invisible to decision makers

The hierarchical structure of the legal profession means that research tasks are usually delegated to juniors. In a law firm setting a Partner will be responsible for a matter, a senior associate may be acting on the matter, there will be lawyers and below that a graduate who is expected to undertake research, and who comes to the library for assistance. Invariably it is the junior employees of the law firm who become the main customers/clients of the library. With libraries conducting most of their work for the juniors, there is a danger that the library's work is going unnoticed by senior bodies in the organization, or those that control the 'purse strings', or who are responsible for decision making.

Failure to build relationships with lateral recruits

Libraries are often the lifeline and haven for inexperienced nervous graduates. One advantage of the hierarchical structure is that if you've assisted a junior in their first years they will more readily be your advocate as they are promoted in the firm and reach more senior positions.

One of the issues now facing law firms is that graduates often don't stay to become Partners. Like most workplaces staff are no longer one firm/company employees. Lateral recruitment has increased significantly in the law sector. This means that lawyers are joining the firm at more senior levels, and it is more difficult for libraries to develop the same relationship with these senior lawyers.

Invisible to users

Like other library sectors, law firms are still grappling with the transition to online resources. For many people their only contact with the library is through the Library intranet, the weekly newsletter or a current awareness bulletin. They may email the library or call for assistance, but the days of a queue at the reference desk are long past. As libraries become more invisible it becomes harder for them to justify their existence and demonstrate their value to the organisation. No longer can libraries expect users to come to them, nor to understand what services they can provide. Instead libraries need to ensure that they go to their clients, that they integrate their services into the broader business of the organisation and that they are providing the assistance that their clients now need. Some law libraries have sort to address this challenge by embedding staff in the legal teams. Although this model does have some advantages, many libraries don't have the staff required to resource such a team structure.

Library staff skills

Another challenge facing law firm libraries is the shortage of experienced law librarians in the sector, and the difficulty of attracting quality candidates to positions. Law libraries need to focus on encouraging new graduates to the sector and putting in place training and mentoring programs to develop their knowledge and expertise.

Rising costs and Legal Process Outsourcing

For the bean counters, libraries are a significant cost centre for organisations. The cost of library services continues to rise. The perception is that moving online reduces costs, when in actual fact the opposite is often true. Law firms are now turning to LPOs or Legal Process Outsourcing to reduce overhead costs. One of the areas that LPO offer services in is legal research. At the time of writing this paper none of the Australian firms have engaged LPOs to provide legal research services, but there have been a number of mid-tier English law firms that have recently outsourced their library & information services.

3. BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

These challenges highlight the need for libraries to evolve and adapt to the current environment. In response to changing needs Blake Dawson has identified 3 streams which we hope will re-energise our team and services. The core of which revolves around the need to build effective relationships and promote the value of the library within the firm.

3.1 Being Proactive

Libraries have traditionally been a reactive service. Historically librarians were gatekeepers to information. They waited for clients to contact them about their information needs, and then provided advice, direction and assistance. The reality is that libraries no longer have a monopoly on information. Libraries are not at the fore-front of people's minds when they are starting a research query or looking for information. Clients are most likely to start the search for information from the resources at their fingertips – i.e. their computer. The physical library is becoming the place of last resort; the place that people go when they have exhausted all other options or to double-check that they have searched all the available resources. Despite this change to our client's searching behaviour, many libraries have persisted with the traditional library model where a librarian staffs a research desk, mans the phones or checks emails for requests. There is still the place for this model, but libraries need to be doing more. To prevent libraries from becoming redundant and invisible within their organisation, libraries need to ensure that they move beyond being a reactive service to proactive approaches, especially in regard to partnering with clients.

Library teams need to build a proactive culture into their customer service principles. It involves increasing engagement across the organisation. As mentioned previously the days of queues at the reference desk have long since past. In today's increasingly demanding business environment, libraries cannot expect their clients to come to them. Libraries should go to their clients. The challenge for libraries is to immerse themselves in the wider business and to place themselves and their services where their clients are. The goal for special libraries should be to once again be at the fore-front of their client's minds when they require information support and research assistance. Libraries need to identify opportunities for building relationships; not just with their regular library users, but they also need to identify potential users. They need to target those who do not use their services, and look at how they can proactively and professionally offer assistance to this group of non-users.

3.2 Developing a Learning Culture

The second stream focuses on the library staff skills and competencies required to operate in libraries of the future.

A number of library bodies and associations have drafted competencies for working in special libraries. A selection of these include:

- Special Library Association, Competencies for Information Professionals of the 21st Century.²
- Federal Library and Information Center Committee (FLICC), Federal Librarian Competencies.³
- The American Association of Law Libraries, Competencies of Law Librarianship.⁴
- Australian Law Librarians' Association, Competencies - Law reference librarians.⁵

There have also been a number of studies into the skills that librarians and information professionals of the 21st century need to possess. Too often these studies have focussed on proficiency with technology and web 2.0 developments. This is only one part of the equation. There is no doubt that how libraries choose to embrace and utilise new tools will help them deliver services in new and exciting ways. However I would argue that in order to increase the value libraries provide to parent organisations and address the challenge of library invisibility it is more important for staff to develop the following attributes:

1. Knowledge of your business
2. Partnership with your clients⁶

Professional development initiatives need to be wider than just the library and information sector. It is also crucial for library staff to stay abreast of developments in the business or sector in which their parent organisation operates. So in a law firm setting, staff need to not only be across developments in libraries and the information profession, they also need to be attending legal CLE (Continuing Legal Education) sessions. They need to be aware of recently introduced legislation, proposed legal reform, and recent leading cases. They need to understand what their lawyers are working on, and what challenges are facing the wider legal profession. It is only with this knowledge of the business that library staff can truly begin to partner with their clients and provide additional value to the organisation.

3.3 The Trusted Advisor

The final stream is 'The Trusted Advisor'. This idea is based on a book by Maister, Green and Galford⁷ that is well respected in professional service firms.

The trusted advisor is the "just with you" relationship outlined in the introduction to this paper. In a law firm setting it is where the library is fore-front in the minds of the Partners or senior lawyers acting on a matter. It is where library staff are asked to be involved in the research at the very start of matters. It is where the library ceases to be a place of last resort.

Maister lists some of the benefits of a trust based relationship.⁸ Many of these benefits are particularly relevant to libraries, and something that libraries have been striving for.

The more clients trust you, the more they will:

- Reach for your advice
- Be inclined to accept and act on your recommendations
- Bring you in on more advanced, complex matters
- Respect you
- Share more information that helps you to help them – thereby improving the quality of service you provide
- Refer your services to other colleagues
- Protect you when you need it
- Involve you early on, rather than later in the process

Becoming a trusted advisor is not something that happens overnight. It requires time and effort to earn trust. Credibility and reliability are important, as is a more in-depth understanding of the client and their pressures.

The following diagram is a visual representation by Maister et al of the professional-client relationship.⁹ The first and second boxes relating to subject matter experts is traditionally the level that libraries have operated at. The diagram shows that an increase in relationships with clients leads to better understanding of the business and the transition to a trust based relationship.

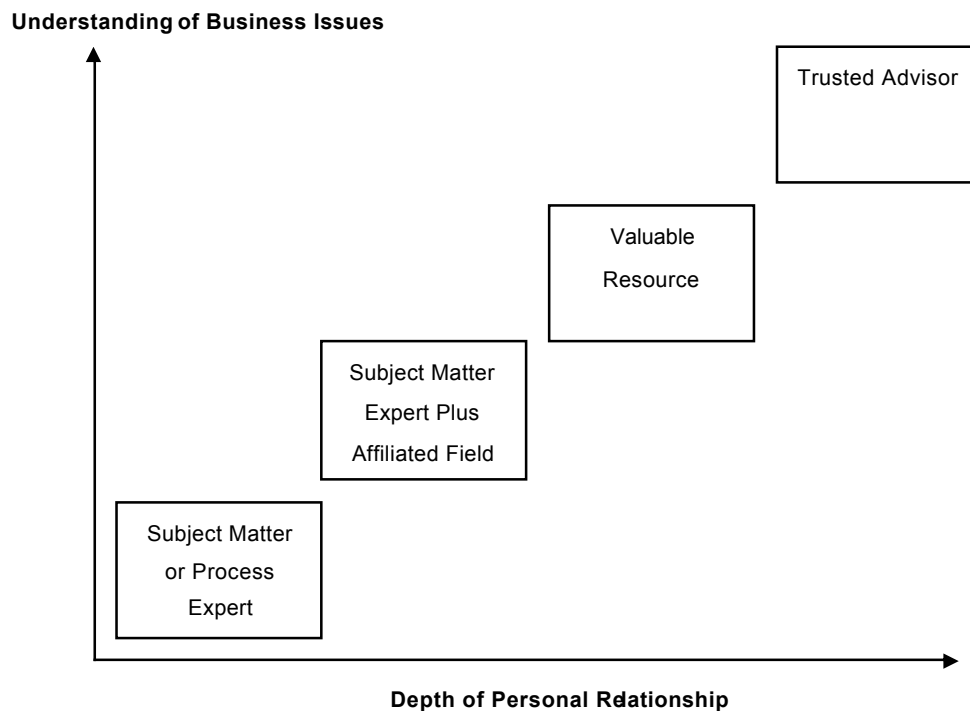


Figure 1 : The Evolution of a Client -Advisor Relationship (Maister et al)

4. BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

So how do Special Libraries build relationships? Every interaction that a librarian has with their clients is an opportunity to develop relationships. Building a relationship with a new customer does not end after an introductory session about library services. The reality is that libraries have to earn trust and this takes time. It is imperative that libraries also focus on building credibility through providing excellent advice and customer service. Staff need to be prepared to venture beyond the library reference desk and the physical library. They need to be client focussed, have good listening skills, a solid understanding of the business, and finally they need to demonstrate a passion, enthusiasm and interest in the work of the organisation.

The Special Libraries Association (SLA) conducted a research project on embedded librarianship. This project identified that embedded librarians are placing a strong focus on building and strengthening relationships with their customer groups. They regularly interact with groups to understand their work, place a significance on learning the subject area, and recognise the importance of informal networking with colleagues outside the library. The project identified the following activities that assist embedded librarians build effective relationships:

- Provide training on information resources or information management tools away from the library
- Attend a meeting, class or conference devoted to the customers' area of expertise (not oriented to librarians)
- Meet (in person or virtually) senior members of the customer group to discuss information-related needs and services
- Attend customer group meetings to learn about their work and information needs
- Meet with regular customers to discuss information needs and present results to them
- Collaborate on or contribute to customer group's work
- Collaborate on or contribute to customer group's electronic communications and/or collaborative workspaces, including email, wikis, blogs and other web based workspaces
- Lunch with members of the customer group
- Attend social events of customer group¹⁰

Not all libraries have the staff for an embedded model of librarianship, but these activities can also be applied by libraries with a central staffing model.

5. CONCLUSION

The era of special libraries solely being collection-based has ended. Libraries now seek to link the library user with the right information at the right time, delivering not just what the user wants, but what they need. Progressive libraries are providing extra value to their users by analysing, customising and repackaging information to suit the user's needs. The challenge facing special libraries is the evolution from purely a service based model to developing true partnerships with their clients. The holy grail for special libraries is to be a "trusted advisor". The fundamental building block to achieving this is focusing on building relationships; failure to do so will only lead to further invisibility within the organisation and it will become even harder for special libraries to demonstrate their value.

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