



67th IFLA Council and General Conference

August 16-25, 2001

Code Number: 182-195(WS)-E
Division Number: II
Professional Group: Government Libraries Workshop
Joint Meeting with: -
Meeting Number: 195
Simultaneous Interpretation: -

Strategies for recognition - how to promote government libraries and services

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Abstract:

It is a challenge to promote library services. When developing a public relations plan four questions to ask are: 1) what are you promoting and can staff articulate it?; 2) do you have a mission and can everyone articulate it?; 3) who funds the library services and who can influence those funders?; and 4) who do you serve and how do you tell them about your services? This paper tells the story of how the Trial Court Law Libraries (TCLLs) in Massachusetts have answered these questions.

Library services such as saving materials for future generations, upholding intellectual freedom or helping someone through the reference interview are often difficult to explain to the general public. Government library services as a special service are harder to explain.

So how do you promote government library services? Although each situation is different, this is one story and hopefully, you can use some of our ideas to promote your library.

Who are the TCLLs? The 17 law libraries located in counties in the state trace their origins to an 1842 law allowing lawyers to establish law libraries which, also by law, were and still are open to the public. The TCLLs mission is still to serve the bench, attorneys and the public. 70% of library users are from the legal community and 30% are from the public. The public includes students, businesses and people trying

to represent themselves in court. The mission statement can be found on the TCLL web site: www.lawlib.state.ma.us.

The first question to ask is what are you promoting and can staff articulate it. In 1978, the former county law libraries became part of a statewide court system. During the early 1980's, as new staff were hired, the decision was made to hire professional

law librarians who had good customer service skills. In turn, these law librarians hired support staff with strong customer service skills. All staff had to be able to promote law library services to the bench, attorneys and the public.

The second question is do you have a mission and can everyone articulate it. The message needs to be uniform. The TCLL staff developed a mission statement and guidelines for reference service, circulation and inter-library loan. With these in place, staff was trained to provide consistent service from all 17 libraries.

The third question is who funds the library and who can influence those funders. Key to the survival of libraries and their continuation or expansion is having the resources to fulfill the library's mission.

The TCLLs are funded through the state Legislature. The best lobbying group for the TCLLs is public librarians. They understand the Legislative process and can speak of the need for the services the TCLLs can bring to their communities.

Recognizing the need to serve the public in cooperation with public libraries, the TCLL had the chance through two grants to develop pilot projects to better serve the public. The first grant, Legal Information for All, initiated a toll free number so all public libraries could reach a Trial Court Law Librarian. In addition, workshops were conducted to train public librarians on how to use legal resources. The second grant project, On the Road with Legal Information, included visits by law library staff to 128 public libraries to help them assess their legal collections. The outcome of both grants was improved service and higher visibility to public librarians that the TCLLs were a valuable service. The American Association of Law Libraries recognized the TCLLs when they received the first Public Relations Award in 1995. In the early 1990's, when the TCLLs faced a severe funding shortfall, the public librarians lobbied with the Legislature and one million dollars was returned to the budget.

Today, there are six multi-type regions and the TCLLs receive funding from the state library agency to provide telephone service beyond court hours with a toll free phone number, workshops to train librarians in using legal resources and a web site on legal resources. One library receives funding for extended hours (evenings and Sat. morning when court is not open).

The fourth question is who do you serve. Given that you may serve a variety of groups, you need to develop different messages for each groups.

When trying to tell attorneys about the TCLLs, librarians have used different ways such as speaking at Bar Association meetings, interviews on cable/local television programs and articles in newspapers. No matter where a librarian delivers the message, the basic message is the same - the TCLLs are open to public, a person can find what they need and the TCLLs can be contacted by phone, fax, e-mail or come in person.

Outreach to court personnel happens daily by providing professional, quality reference. Court personnel, like so many people, do not inherently understand what libraries can do for them. In the current planning process, TCLL staff will go to the courts with brochures to tell people what services are available to them, and, just as important to answer any questions they have about TCLL services. Also, all staff will be

expected to have TCLL brochures and business cards when attending a meeting/conference, each one being a chance for staff to promote the TCLLs. In March 2001, 20 TCLL staff attended the court sponsored Conference on Unrepresented Litigants. An exhibit about the TCLLs was developed. To make sure as many contacts were made as possible, staff were asked to sit at different tables, attend different workshops and to speak up so that participants knew that the TCLLs were part of this conference and their mission was an important part of serving unrepresented litigants.

The TCLL staff also teach computer-assisted legal research to judges which is another opportunity to let judges know the variety of library services and skills available to them. A potential project under discussion is for TCLL staff to teach court interpreters the basic tools of legal research to help them in their jobs.

Outreach to the public continues through public libraries and web sites. E-mail reference is growing and plans are underway to initiate e-mail reference in real time this year.

In addition to these activities, TCLL library staff belong to a number of professional organizations which also increases their visibility and opportunities to promote services.

The TCLLs are member of a library consortium (NELLCO - New England Law Library Consortium). NELLCO is currently working with the Gale Group, a library vendor. Gale Group has offered its marketing department to assist in developing sample brochures for NELLCO members to use to publicize their services. It is interesting to work with professional public relations people who ask questions about libraries and what they do. In responding, we became more articulate about what law librarians are able to do and how to communicate that information to others. Eventually, their work products will be available for all at http://www.galgroup.com/library/lib_advo/index.htm.

In summary, there are three groups you need to target. (1) who is important to your library's survival and how to influence them; (2) who do you serve regularly and how to communicate to them; (3) who needs you only for a short time and how can they find you. Although the three groups need to be addressed a little differently, in the end you need a uniform message that can be said over and over and over in new ways.