

# Telling Our Story To Resource Allocators

**T**hank you for the honor of joining you today. I have deep ties to this lovely state....memories, friends and family. I am thrilled to be here with all of you.

I deeply appreciate my colleagues, Mary Boone and Kevin Cherry's confidence in me and hope to share thoughts and observations with you - possibly with a variety of results. Some of you may be interested or bemused, or even appalled, all of which is fine - just as long as I do not put you to sleep.

However you may respond to my thoughts today, I ask you only to listen because I must have gotten some things right. My experience has stretched across three continents, through five cultures and I have presented internationally several times.

## Libraries, the Stories and Resource Allocators

Part of telling a story is knowing your audience. Many of the resource allocators, policy makers, and public decision makers who will, hopefully, be listening to your story may have had experiences with libraries during a particular time period; so I will review how I summarize the last 40 years quickly. Be aware that our concept of a library may have evolved faster or differently than your audiences.

In the early 70s when I became a librarian, we were following what I call the "just in case" model. We carefully built collections and services for the times that they were needed. We tried to be ready "just in case" someone needed some information. Remember, this was well before the Internet and even before online data bases. Computers were big clunky things with tons of punch cards. We had books, journals, newspapers and loose-leaf services. Nonetheless, we tried to be ready for anything. Even the smallest public library sought to have a reference collection.

Then technology developed and the budget cuts started. We no longer had the resources to build general collections in case they were needed. So we learned to use the new technology and lease access to material. I call this the "just in time" model. We gave our clients a wide variety of new tools to use in the library...we were early adapters. I remember closing our major research library's card catalog and traveling to New York City to be trained on the New York Times database. It was an exciting time. However, our "just in time" model changed when we realized that what we did not own we could neither preserve nor assure continued access to.

The next time period gave birth to needs assessments, and focus groups, and advisory councils. I call this the "just for you" model. We accepted the brutal fact that we could not be all things to all people. But we had realized the down side of only renting information. Thus we came to believe that if we understood our communities, we could build collections tailored to the needs of our communities...we would be successful, save money and serve our users.

Unfortunately as this model developed, we realized that our clients, our communities, did not always know what they might need... even in the moment, let alone for the future.

That led to the next step in our evolving approach to collections, which, I call the "just because" model. We came to understand that we must blend the strong points from all the earlier attempts to cope with the enormity of our clients' expectations. But we also needed to bring our training and our expertise to bear on the challenge. So we built collections that combined some leased materials, but we also purchased materials we believed might be really important to our communities...despite the lack of identification through needs assessments. Because we believed we knew how to tailor our collections and services to our clients, we had the courage to try to prepare our libraries to meet expectations not yet articulated.



Meanwhile the world was changing....very quickly...the Internet and the "amazoogle" revolutionized expectations and assumptions. I believe the model the world has now given us can be called "just why." Communities and policy makers are asking "just why" do we need libraries? This has led to different types of studies such as Libraries for the Future's "Worth their Weight", The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation advocacy funding, the ALA's "ilovelibraries.org" website, and so forth. Because our continued employment is not a good reason to keep libraries open, I suggest we need to take this question very seriously. Somehow we need to be a helpful part of the virtual universes all around us - and yet earn a respected physical "place at the table" in our communities. We especially need to listen to the stories other people tell or do not tell about libraries - so we know their perspective. Think about your university President's last public address, did he/she mention the value of the library on campus? Did your Mayor thank the library for the content in a recent presentation? Some of the comments/stories you hear may be positive, some may not. How many of you read the Garrison Keillor interview in September's *American Libraries*? In a mixed review, he said "Libraries are struggling for a rationale". He went on to suggest "...you are grateful for people who can save you time and that's what librarians do - they save you enormous amounts of time."

In *Information Outlook*, July 2007, as an SLA conference keynote, former Vice President Gore noted to his audience of special librarians...“And of course, it’s no secret that in this day and time you face a challenge not only in keeping up with the incredible explosion of information on every topic relevant to the organizations that you serve – but also a challenge in describing to some people who ought to know better who you are and what you do and why it’s increasingly important to everyone.”

What about the comments from cartoonist Scott Adams in the May 31, 2007 Dilbert Blog? “Recently a friend joked about going to the library to help with his son’s school project. He said it felt like going back in time to pre-Internet days. I wonder if libraries have an expiration date on them. I’m guessing yes.”

This is a sampling of the **here and now** of libraries and library stories from a few other perspectives. Telling our real story is important – how we try to do that is critically significant.

The rest of this paper addresses story telling, advocacy, and the practicality of explaining our beloved institutions to the unconvinced and to the policy makers who make the final decisions.

In her article “What’s a Library Worth? Piecing Together the Structure of Value” (*Information Outlook*, September 2007, p.59) Eleanor Jo Rodger, Joey to most of us, talks about four truths that are essential to understand as you frame your story.

**Libraries exist as parts of larger systems.** Public libraries are part of cities, towns, and counties; school media centers are part of a school system; academic libraries are part of colleges and universities; special libraries are part of organizations, institutions, or corporation.

**Libraries need host systems more than host systems need libraries.** Our shared passion and sense of purpose and importance often lead us to ignore this fundamental fact. Our host systems determine the rationale for libraries being a part of them, the legitimacy of our claims of belonging to them, and the constituencies we serve on their behalf. Perhaps most critically, they bestow (and therefore can recall) the resources we need to stay in business.

**Libraries receive resources and continuing legitimacy from host systems in return for creating value for them.** “Value” does not exist abstractly in the host systems. It exists in the desires and perceptions of individuals in the systems, be they suppliers of resources or consumers of services.

**Value is not about the library but about its host system.** At conferences and meetings, we gather about the campfire of librarianship and sing our songs and tell our stories about how wonderful we are and how unappreciated, but that’s not the world we live in.

Joey goes on to explain the real world we live in is that of our host system. We must constantly evaluate the context within which we define our role, do our work or tell our story.

Librarians care. We care about our institutions, our services, our patrons, about our society. It frustrates us that those feelings are not always returned. In Joey Rodgers’ terms, we often forget that we do not and cannot assign our value. We are so certain that what we do matters, we assume that “they” - our host system stakeholders - do not know or do not understand; therefore, we turn to advocacy or telling our story as the answer. We charge off to rectify the situation - knowing that we understand and we can explain...and all will be well. Wrong.

The following are some principles I have learned the hard way. The first rule of advocacy or story telling is that you cannot do it for yourself or for your own institution. As Robert Martin, former director of the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), explained in a WHCLIST Pre-conference presentation in April 2003, if we trace the word advocacy to its source, it means ‘one who pleads the cause of another.’ We often forget that we have a vested interest in our own success, and in the success of our institutions. We may forget that, or discuss it as irrelevant, but the policy makers, decision makers and resource allocators will not. We can explain, describe, answer questions artfully, but we cannot advocate. It is always best to find someone who understands the importance of what we do to speak for us, to speak about us and our work....it *will* carry much more weight.

To again quote Joey Rodger, “A college president whose doctoral research was abundantly and cheerfully supported by a university library years ago is more likely to support the college library now. A city councilman whose constituents are vocal about how much the public library contributes to the pre-reading skills of their children is likely to look favorably on the library’s request for an early-childhood specialist.”

If you are not blessed with advocates – it is your job to find, coach and support the ones who will be needed. For example, if you are a teacher librarian you might have a principal who believes that science is the answer to all of society’s problems. Start by talking with him/her and supplying new, super, phenomenal information about the role of science in building society. Later, when you need that principal’s support, he/she might remember you were caring and conscientious about his/her interest...and be willing to listen and perhaps help.

Next, know your history. Whatever your issue, whatever story needs to be understood and embraced by current resource allocators, it probably has a past in your community. (I use the word community to refer to a town, a school, a legislature, whatever the context, we all serve a community.) Know what that past is all about. Know where the past efforts failed and, if possible, know why. Research the details, rehearse the plausible scenarios, and think about the opinions that stopped your issue from being successful in the past. Never dismiss past obstacles. The past has a way of tripping up the present.

Another over arching consideration is the study of your context. In Joey Rodgers’ terms, “your host system”. Know the environment that surrounds your work. For example, it will be fruitless, and perhaps harmful, to ask for more funding in a time of serious retrenchment. As a part of knowing your context, study the decision and policy makers - the resource allocators as Robert Martin terms them. Basically, know as much as you can about the

people who make the critical decisions about your work. Above all be aware that in our society, those individuals define the social good. Again as Robert Martin stated, "Politics serves as the final biter of public value." However we might struggle to educate explain to those elected or appointed to public service or to other positions of authority, they, not we, are the final decision makers. What they care about, what reality they see, and how they perceive our work is critical to their support - and thus to the determination of resources. Resources you may need for your institution. Remember the fourth point from Joey Rodger: value relates to the host system.

An example from Joey, "The Chicago Public Library is about the success of Chicago, the Fairbanks Elementary School Media Center is about the success of the Fairbanks Elementary School, the University of California at Los Angeles Library is about the success of UCLA students and faculty, and so on. It's always about them, not about us. We are honored to contribute to their success."

Next, build connections BEFORE you need them. Think of your contacts as a savings account. Determine well in advance of your need:

- who might be willing to help you,
- who can stop you and
- what each of them might want that you could supply.

Find partners to share the load and to give your issue broader appeal. Partners are more defined and more interactive than contacts. Connections start with contacts and build toward partnerships. BUT always try to understand why someone partners with you in any cause--try to know what is in it for them. Few partnerships are simply altruistic...most find a common cause and work for goals that somehow benefit both. That is not a bad thing, it is what is. Be aware of the reality and work within that frame of reference.

Understand the weak spots of your issue. Even if you cannot fix them (for example, you need tons of money and very little is available), know those weak spots, and plan ahead how you will address the questions that will come. It is not enough to care about important things - important things are ignored unless they are presented in a compelling manner, with realistic goals, with committed partners and in terms the resource allocators or the host system can understand and with which they identify.

In summary, we all have three choices in life:

1. put up or shut up,
2. go somewhere else, or
3. seek to change the situation within the context and by the rules we are given.

No one should be able to do the latter better than librarians.

Finally, be flexible, sometimes all that can be accomplished is a discussion on the public record.

No matter what happens, remember you

- may outlast your non-partners - quietly, with elegance and accurate information;
- believe and trust that there is always another day;
- be smart enough not to win battles and lose wars;
- can be secure that retreat with dignity is almost always an option.

*Learn from your experience...especially the future. If you don't succeed, take heart and try again. Best of luck!!*

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