

## **The Digital 'Sizzle'**

**By Terence K. Huwe**

When *Computers in Libraries* editor Kathy Dempsey offered me the job of writing the Building Digital Libraries column, I had two immediate concerns. First, I'm a Web administrator and developer, but not a programmer. I'm not really into writing Perl tutorials and JavaScripts. Second, I'm more interested in how people stumble around with new technology platforms than I am in new products. When asked if these biases were issues, Kathy's reply was, "Go for it!" But the fact of the matter was that I had inwardly said "Yes" the moment the offer arrived. Pass up a soapbox? Me? Members of the San Francisco Bay Region chapter of the Special Libraries Association would beg to differ. What's more, funding and collections, the theme of this issue, is a good topic to take up by way of introduction.

Attendees of the Internet Librarian and Internet Librarian International conferences have often heard me talk about "strategic thinking," whether the subject of my presentation was portals, hosting digital collections, or multi-disciplinary searching. I have strong feelings about the library profession's successes and failures in proving its relevance, and my own career path is an interesting case study in getting (and keeping) money. Rather than focusing on nuts and bolts of grantmaking or fundraising, I'm going to explore what attributes distinguish effective fiscal managers, as well as some valuable tools at our disposal. I'm also going to explore some of the fundraising "sizzle" that lies beneath the digital library paradigm, and throw in a few strategic successes (and flops) of my own.

### **Exploit Past Experience**

A lot of librarians are second-career professionals, and I'm no exception. I was in business before joining the profession. My first career, nonprofit bookselling, was a good foundation for librarianship. Businesses require balance sheets, profit/loss statements, presentations to trustees, analyses of industry trends, and sales patterns. Bookselling as a profession has faced continuous change, including many rumors of its imminent demise (at least in the shadow of national chains). Hmmm: continuous change... sound familiar? How odd to think that launching a library career brought me once again to that familiar ground of constant change and creative crises of professional identity.

But there's one huge difference between what I recall from bookselling and what I've seen at work in libraries. Digital librarians have done remarkably well in facing continuous change. Our most vocal champions can trounce competing ideologues in open debate, and wonder of wonders, library construction at colleges and universities is booming. That goes for digital library construction, too.

While the details of our fiscal lives vary depending on our environments, I think it's possible to make a few conclusions about what works and what doesn't in funding cycles. Moreover, I believe it's possible to improve our funding prospects by focusing on strategy, whether "funding" means state budgets, corporate budgets, or fundraising. That means making use of your entire career experience with organizations and politics when forming a budget strategy.

### **Three Traits That Really Make a Difference**

Digital library development is at its heart an entrepreneurial (or intrapreneurial) challenge. I've found that effective entrepreneurs share three traits, regardless of whether they have to deal with civic leaders, deans, or executives. First, they have a bias for action, instead of waiting for things to just happen. Second, they study both industries and trends, at the local and "big picture" levels. No matter how odd or obscure the forces, they find patterns and form response strategies, forming alliances for mutual benefit as they go. Third, they're not afraid to step forward with a vision and make the case.

The good news is that there are many librarians who have these traits. They're the ones we think of when we talk about "moving up the value chain," "reinventing the profession," and so on. What's less obvious, though, is the fact that most of us practice these three traits more than we realize. It takes brains to do reference, content development, and information architecture; what you have to do is apply the same brainpower to organizational politics and the funding process, whatever that may be at the local level of your workplace.

What applies to the library as a whole is doubly true for digital libraries. The digital libraries we build have become our most visible outward faces. And in order to build them, the leaders in their development have learned that "You gotta have friends." Collaboration and coalition building are all-important, and the technologies we use require serious partnerships with several kinds of colleagues. Fortunately, we're more adept at relationship management than many other professionals, and relationship management forms the basis of gaining and keeping the funding you need.

### **Tell a Sizzling Story**

If you don't have friends, you can make them by "telling the story" of your library's mission. It may take a while, but it's well worth the effort. Digital libraries depend on steady funding and strong partners. In order to engage stakeholders, you need to interest them in what you do. Fortunately, most library schools have a high-tech, cutting-edge course that explores the latest innovation in human and machine interaction: storytelling class.

For fundraising and for budget battles, digital librarians need to tell a story that engages everyone. Indeed, professional fundraisers know the value of storytelling, which is more an art than a science. Years ago, I volunteered to help a friend raise funds for the Maui Arts and Cultural Center, a \$35 million project. My role was to handle prospect research on some major Hawaii-based corporations that had not yet stepped up to the plate. As we were preparing for a major "Ask"—that's a direct request for a seven-figure gift in this case—one of the trustees said, "Remember, you sell the 'sizzle,' not the steak."

Engaging the audience is a lesson every librarian learned in storytelling class. It's a "killer app" for digital librarians who know how to transfer storytelling skills to where they're needed the most—the funding process. The digital "sizzle" is a tremendously exciting vehicle to engage cynical or disinterested leaders in the tale of the digital library's evolution. It's not dull, it's not boring, but all too often we miss the storytelling mark trying to tell someone what the Dublin Core Metadata standard is. Library collections touch hearts and minds, over and over again. They are also expensive, and they depend on the kindness of both friends and strangers.

### **Online Snake Oil**

Sometimes the most mundane aspects of our jobs yield jewels of political advantage. I've been a librarian for 16 years now, and it's hard to keep track of all the golden opportunities that digital librarianship has created (even before we called it that). Here's one from the Stone Age that illustrates how strategy can bring a budget boost.

Remember when "online" meant LexisNexis, Dialog, Orbit, and STN? I was a private law librarian at the time. When I joined the law offices of Epstein, Becker, Stromberg and Green in San Francisco, I discovered that the firm had not been charging its clients for online searching. I started billing clients for my research, and three things happened. The firm started billing my time at the same rate as first-year attorneys, \$115 per hour in 1989. Second, my library budget tripled, and they tacked on professional travel funding. Third, I started attending the attorney meetings, where I learned firsthand about the firm's practice. In short, they took me seriously. The crux of what happened was that I told the firm a story: "Hey! You gotta research problem? I can help, and we can bill the

client." The story matched the audience, the "hook" was new billing income, and the online library came to life.

Fast forward to the "first wave" of really big library Web development, which I define as 1995-96. We were all getting used to the Web, especially in academic libraries like those here at the University of California, Berkeley. Web traffic was growing fast, "real" content like licensed databases ruled on campus, and people were, as usual, two steps behind the library profession in recognizing the potential. The Institute of Industrial Relations Library (where I worked then and still do) had assumed oversight of the Web because no other staff had learned how to code HTML. But even more interesting: No one had yet realized that the Web could be a vehicle for advancing the academic work of our institute. We needed to define high-quality content, and no one else was going to do it, so we did it ourselves.

We knew we could do three things right away. We could point to labor resources on the Internet; we could tell people how to find literature by topic, type, and location; and we could start publishing the faculty's research online. We knew we could develop site searching, interactive forms, and Web-based datasets—we just weren't ready yet. By 1996, our daily traffic exceeded 10,000 hits per day, and when we posted faculty papers, downloads sometimes exceeded 2,000 in the first hour, depending on the topic. In fall 2002, a Google search on the string "labor research" listed our Center for Labor Research and Education first, and we were named an Internet Scout Site for library content. The labor to achieve this was obvious, even mundane; but the political support we've gained from this strategic labor has limitless value.

OK, so those of you who've done all this and more know the truth of it: It's sizzle, not steak. But the sizzle works as an attention-getter, and new opportunities often follow in the wake of the sizzle. In our case, the Institute of Industrial Relations Library has enjoyed greater fiscal support. In the early 1990s era of budget downsizing, we held our own. When new funding followed California's boom in the late '90s, we doubled our staff. Most important of all, we advanced our values and mission into the mainstream at the Institute of Industrial Relations. That set the stage for our eventually overseeing statewide Web services for some related programs, and for getting stronger buy-in from our power players, the faculty. While there's no guarantee we'll stay in this enviable position forever, it beats being on the outside looking in.

### **Using the 80/20 Rule**

These old and new examples of well-timed service upgrades can build financial support. But collections themselves offer tremendous opportunities to make digital libraries relevant for non-librarian power players. The trick is to communicate the value

without getting lost in a recitation of volume counts, digital files managed, or even hit rates on the Web. We've all heard of the 80/20 Rule on work: 20 percent of effort yields all the benefit, while the other 80 just keeps you busy. Collections operate in the same way in the life of an organization or community. If your collection mission encompasses interesting, unique materials, keep track of how they link to the interests of your funders.

For example, my collection has extensive materials on the maritime industries. In fall 2002, when the West Coast dockworkers and shipping companies were at an impasse, our print collection was pretty darn popular with the press and the faculty who needed to "bone up" on the historical issues. The sudden relevance of some very old vertical files, which weren't "shortlisted" to be digitized, opened doors for the real issue on our minds just then. As it happens, we were ready to explore the logistics of scanning our unique materials—like those about labor and the maritime industry.

The 80/20 Rule for using the collection strategically is pretty simple. Exploit the promotional value of whatever 20 percent of it happens to be in high use, and keep track of what's in repose.

### **Adjust the Jargon and Play the Political Angle**

Digital librarians often find themselves in the interesting situation of having to make the case for expensive technology to non-technical managers. Recently, our library sought funding for an interactive map project that would cover California's labor history. We got very technical in our grant narrative, but we also needed other campus partners who didn't care too much about the back end. That dialogue was more about the visual thrill of interactive searching of historical events, geography, social evolution, and the potential benefits for labor scholars. We didn't get the grant, but we made some new friends on campus and in state government. It's worth mentioning that because many funding agencies need to get to know you, and the skills learned in this funding cycle may lead to success later on. Moreover, it may take time to gain a deeper understanding of what a funding agency is really looking for. So we can learn from our funding flops.

Experienced fundraisers and budget shepherds know that securing individual, corporate, and foundation support depends on relationships. It really is who you know and how you manage the relationship. In civic and academic politics, it's all about relationships, too. In private law libraries, I found that firm politics operated by a complex array of mutual back-scratching, and it paid to know how it worked. Digital librarians can improve their program budgets if they can understand whatever subtle politics drive the organization, the funding agency, or the governing bodies they are

supported by. This may seem obvious, but as any mid-career librarian will tell you, politics is never obvious. The good news is that the digital revolution, as made tangible in our well-organized and engaging collections, has dealt us a sustained opportunity to harness the value in our collections and services, and make them pay. Call it sizzle, call it snake oil, call it storytelling, but just do it, and keep it up for the long term. In the end, the sizzle will get the funds, so you can dig into the steak.