Knowledge belongs to humanity and is the torch which illuminates the world. – Louis Pasteur

Introduction

Kenneth E. Dowlin (1995) presents the following conundrum: the library of today must change to meet the demands of individuals who expect the latest technological equipment and services. At the same time, libraries must remain appealing to supporters who are motivated by nostalgic memories of libraries as they existed in the past. Much of the future success of libraries, Dowlin asserts, depends upon the library’s ability to satisfy both poles.

When marketing organizations want to reinvent a product or service, they speak of changing its “look and feel.” I believe the key to solving the challenge Dowlin presents is this: It will be necessary to change the “look” of libraries. Indeed, the look of many libraries already has changed substantially over the past years. Gone are the Carnegie book warehouses of the past. Library materials— instruments of information and knowledge—have changed significantly. The library no longer simply houses books; information is available in multiple formats. Audio and video tapes, CDs, DVDs, and electronic materials augment the monograph collection. The card catalog in most institutions already has been replaced by an electronic catalog. Newly designed libraries may look more like information centers than traditional libraries. These centers likely will house computer clusters or labs and provide an abundance of space for community meetings and events. However, through this change, the “feel” of the library can and should remain relatively constant. People know, trust, and find comfort and a sense of community in their local libraries. As library professionals bring in the new, we must strive to maintain in our users these feelings of trust and comfort. This sentiment is an asset we cannot afford to take for granted.

Evolution

Current authors in library science literature assert that libraries in today’s information environment are facing an unprecedented level of change (see, for example, Dowlin, 1995, 1997, 1999; Johnson, 1999; Nunberg, 1998). Indeed, libraries and the information environment are rapidly changing. However, the state of information and knowledge has never remained static, and libraries are not new to change. Libraries change, but at the same time they remain the same.
Today, and in the foreseeable future, libraries are and will be what they have been for many years—knowledge centers; institutions for access to information, learning, and research; and community hubs (see Dowlin, 1999). Libraries will remain essential institutions for social progress. Similarly, those who are called to librarianship will remain individuals committed to providing information, knowledge, as sense of cohesiveness to the communities they serve.

Though the specifics of change are important, more important is the way we, as library professionals, perceive and handle this change. Johnson (1997) maintains that change is constant, ongoing, and inevitable. Accommodating change, she asserts, does not necessarily mean losing power. Individuals must take responsibility for their personal responses to change. Change, if viewed in a positive light, provides an opportunity for growth. I believe a better word for change is “evolution.” As library professionals, we must adapt to and capitalize on change. In turn, we will more successfully function—even thrive—in the changing environment.

Dowlin (1995) affirms. The new age of electronification of information and knowledge, he asserts, requires rethinking on the part of library professionals and provides opportunity for libraries to take a more proactive leadership role in their communities. “The library that successfully adapts its systems for collection, preservation, organization, and distribution of information and knowledge to… new technology will become a much more central institution to the community served” (Dowlin, 1995, p. 409).

**Core Values**

In order to evolve, we must first know who we are as library professionals. We must be grounded in our values and understand the responsibility and importance that libraries and librarians serve in society. Though libraries may look different now and in the future than they have in the past, the core values of our profession will remain fundamentally the same. Values are the “bridge between the past and the future…the cement that binds us together” (Sager, 2001, p. 153).

In March of 2000, the American Library Association (ALA) Core Values Task Force published its 4th draft of Core Values for the library profession. The Task Force named the following eight values that librarians and library professionals hold in common:
connection of people to ideas; assurance of equitable access to recorded knowledge, information, and creative works; commitment to literacy and learning; respect for the individuality and diversity of all people; freedom for all people to form, hold, and express their own beliefs; preservation of the human record; excellence in professional service to our communities; and formation of partnerships to advance these values.

To ensure that these values are achieved, the task force maintained, libraries have refined their services over time to meet the changing needs of the users and communities they serve. Weimers (1999) discusses this phenomenon. “The information needs of the user drive the content of the (library’s information support) system,” he asserts. “The common professional requirement is commitment to users” (p. [electronic] 4).

**Fundamental Functions**

To achieve these values and its commitment to users, libraries today must perform at least three fundamental functions: provide users with the most recent advances in information technology, be committed to user education, and expand their roles as community centers. The current information environment provides an opportunity for libraries to strengthen each of these functions. In turn, libraries have the potential to become even more integral to the individuals and communities they serve than have been in the past.

*Libraries Must Provide to Users the Most Recent Advances in Information Technology*

We must make it a priority to provide users with the most current materials, knowledge, and information technology tools. Only with these materials and tools are all individuals—the “haves” and the “have-nots”—afforded access to the wealth of information and knowledge available.

Further, library professionals must take on the responsibility of knowing our collection and the information tools and we provide. This presents a tremendous challenge, as technology will continue to evolve. Tomorrow’s software and hardware will be different from today’s. Librarians must be committed to their cause, and to continual learning.
Libraries Must be Committed to Educating Users with the Goal of Information Literacy for All

In 1989, the ALA released the Final Report of its Presidential Committee on Information Literacy. In this Report, the Committee described an information literate individual as one who recognizes he needs information, knows how to locate information, is able to evaluate the quality and validity of information, and can effectively organize and use information gained. Information literacy, the Committee asserted, is a means of personal empowerment. One who is information literate is equipped with the skills needed to protect his or her personal liberties, think independently, recognize opportunities, and effectively solve problems.

The current information environment offers the potential of addressing and ameliorating many long-standing social and economic inequities that have existed in our society. Not only must libraries provide the most current technological equipment, library professionals must also make user education a key library focus. The flood of information available in the current environment and availability of current tools does not guarantee individuals access to information. Library professionals must be committed to educating users in the use of tools and evaluation of information.

LaRue (2000) urges library professionals to grasp the power of this educational perspective. Libraries build lifelong learners, augment formal education, and are conduits to essential professional knowledge, he asserts. The library’s educational mission is public good. This mission, he contends, is one of the surest guarantees of long term public support.

Libraries Must Expand Their Roles as Community Centers

Gardner (199?) contends that humans need communities. Communities, he asserts, confer upon their members a sense of identity and security. In today’s fragmented and individualistic culture, Gardner maintains, communities have disintegrated, and society as a whole has suffered.

Many library professionals have asserted that libraries should take on the role of community center, and librarians the role of community leaders. Dowlin (1995) urges that the library must undertake the responsibility for community communications. LaRue (2000) writes that successful librarians make their libraries “the seed that grows a community around it” (p. 15).
For many years, the library’s goal has been a vision, shared with supporters, to provide reasonable and diverse access to its information and knowledge. Today, the library is one of the most trusted institutions in communities (Dowlin, 1995).

Libraries today should take advantage of this trusted position and current technology to expand their community focus and role as community centers. In addition to providing the most recent technology tools and information literacy education to its users, libraries should build community through additional on-site programs and the Internet environment. A library’s Web site, for example, could provide community news and activities information, foster discussion of community issues, recruit volunteers, and assist a community in discovering its shared values.

Individuals who feel they belong to and are served by a community will want to give back to that greater good (Gardner, 199?). If the result of a library’s efforts to build community is a more cohesive community with the library at its center, libraries will reap benefits many times greater than the efforts they have sown.

Conclusion

Librarians have spent a large amount of time in recent years discussing changing the roles of libraries and librarianship and the image libraries and librarians should portray in the future. Although this discussion is important, library professionals must at some point rise above this discussion and realize the invaluable higher purpose we serve. We must bravely and professionally move forward to face and capitalize upon change. As managers—leaders in our profession—we must to promulgate and foster an attitude of competence and professionalism. If we respect ourselves and our purpose as a profession, and focus on meeting the needs of our users, we in turn will be respected by, and become indispensable to, the communities we serve.
References


