

by Rachel Singer Gordon

Relevant Yesterday, Relevant Tomorrow—

But How to Stay Relevant Today?

Here are some suggestions and examples of how you can retain relevance by becoming a true part of the online community.

Whenever I check my e-mail and find a message from my college-sophomore brother, it's a good bet that he will be asking for help with one of his research papers. Unfortunately, as a public librarian in a smaller suburban institution, I lack access to the academic databases he often needs to search—and face the additional difficulty of long-distance, asynchronous communication with someone who tends to be unclear in his initial queries.

If I suggest that he instead ask a reference librarian at his school for assistance, he always has the same response: "But I *know* you!"

UCLA associate professor of information studies Phil Agre has pointed out that "electronic communication is wasted unless we use it to seek out, cultivate, and nurture relationships with other human beings."¹ While the literature, philosophies, and technologies underlying librarianship provide an important foundation, the heart of our profession has always boiled down to our interactions with people: How do we connect our patrons (customers and clients) with the information that they need?

This information connection inevitably takes place in a relationship with our patrons. What is missing in many of our current online exchanges is the element of "I *know* you!"—the sense of developing a relationship with another human being. When we fall into the trap of depersonalizing our online interactions with our patrons, we lose the soul of librarianship—and thereby risk losing our relevance in an electronic age. Surveys and studies consistently show that people prefer to ask someone they know for information, even if that person is not the "best" source.

Think back to the feel-good-about-our-libraries articles that have appeared in the general press in recent years: How many start with a story? We have read about writers' childhood librarians who instilled in them a lifelong love of reading; about young, tattooed professionals bringing the joy of poetry to urban teens;

about the news librarian who worked tirelessly to find a journalist one perfect, buried nugget of information. While clichéd, these accounts bring home the truth that librarianship is at its heart about the connections between people. Connections give us context, enabling us to provide the right bit of information for each specific individual. Otherwise, we might as well abdicate our role to search engines.

As far back as 1988, Howard Rheingold talked about the ways in which the online community allows us to "serve as information hunters and gatherers for each other."² Given the fact that information hunting and gathering is among our basic activities, we are every day missing opportunities to establish ourselves as experts and prove our relevance. While this is as true offline as it is online, the electronic environment provides unique opportunities to get our profession and ourselves onto the public's radar. We librarians need to become more proactive in promoting both our own and the profession's expertise in a variety of online communities, by establishing ongoing connections and becoming as integral a part of community life online as we have traditionally been in the "real world."

Realizing this, whether consciously or unconsciously, some of us have been promoting ourselves online—both as individuals and as a profession—helping to prove our relevance in the electronic era. Following are five broad suggestions and examples of how our colleagues are retaining relevance largely by becoming active in and a true part of the online community.

Participate in Discussions with the Online Community

Public discourse now takes place in a number of electronic "locations," in many cases obviating the need for a physical space. As online interaction becomes integrated into people's daily lives, we need to become involved in these conversations, or we risk being left out entirely.

While more institutions have come to recognize the importance of online professional development activities, these are in many cases only encouraged in relationship to librarianship—joining library lists, publishing in online library journals, reading library blogs. Activity within the profession is important, yet establishing ourselves as subject experts also requires encouraging participation in online communities (lists, forums, and blogs) outside of the field, positioning ourselves in nonlibrary environments as both librarians and experts.

It is probably no coincidence that Amazon.com's top reviewer is a degreed librarian (with over 4,900 reviews and counting). Whatever you might think of Harriet Klausner's reviews, which are overwhelmingly positive, her prolific posting on Amazon and elsewhere helps to remind readers that librarians still possess some expertise when it comes to books. Librarians can offer to participate in initiatives like *Woman's Day's* new online book club (<http://www.womansday.com>), which, through a partnership with ALA, uses librarian-recommended titles and discussion questions. We can also join in the discussions on forums such as Readerville (<http://www.readerville.com>).

Ann Sparanese's spearheading of a librarian e-mail campaign to protest the cancellation of Michael Moore's *Stupid White Men* has also recently highlighted our activities. Not only was the book published, it went on to become a bestseller; the campaign resulted in Moore's donating money to ALA's Spectrum Initiative and publicly lauding librarians in a number of interviews.

Beyond books, we have a multitude of other opportunities to participate and become involved in the online arena. Subject specialists can consider joining e-mail lists and following blogs in their areas of expertise—participating and posting in their capacity as librarians. Systems librarians can participate in tech forums; chemistry librarians can lend their expertise when research questions arise on relevant lists;

medical librarians can publish in online health newsletters. In all of these cases, we can participate *as* librarians, demonstrating our relevance to every field and every community.

Disseminate Your News Online

One of our priorities in becoming full participants in online communities has to be that of making ourselves part of our users'—or potential users'—informational background. Libraries have spent years putting information online, but have often relied solely on traditional PR methods such as newsletter and newspaper announcements to get the word out. We need to work instead to make our resources a natural part of users' daily online experiences.

More libraries, for example, are starting to experiment with Web logs and other alternative ways of disseminating information online. But few are taking the time to:

- create RSS feeds for their blogs, enabling patrons to make them a part of their daily news-reading landscape by incorporating them into news aggregators, importing them to their PDAs, and so on. (See <http://www.sls.lib.il.us> for an example of one library system's syndication.)
- sign the entries so that readers can see which librarian is posting and commenting, and can follow their favorites
- allow patrons to post or comment to blogs, giving them a sense of ownership and connection and a reason to come back. (Roselle Library's online preteen book discussion group is a nice start along these lines: <http://bloggerbookclub.blogspot.com>.)
- provide librarians' perspectives and information on current issues affecting the library and community

Most libraries use Web logs mainly as a calendar of coming events, duplicating information found in a print newsletter or elsewhere on their Web sites. While this is a step forward in getting timely information in front of visitors, we need to provide more to give people a reason to keep reading.

Institutions can also set up e-mail alerts, notifying faculty or employees or patrons when new material is added in their area(s) of interest. (See Morton Grove Public Library's MatchBook service for an example: <http://www.webrary.org/rs/matchbook.about.html>.) Doing a one-city, one-book program? Why not create an RSS feed that drops daily facts or biographical information into subscribers' aggregators, helping to remind them to keep reading and piquing their interest about upcoming discussions?

Invite Others to Promote You

We especially need to encourage non-librarians to talk us up. Here, we can take a page from what nonlibrary resources are doing. For example:

- Has someone at your institution created a general or subject-specific online resource that would be widely useful, such as a pathfinder or book-review database? Add an "e-mail a friend" button and invite visitors to share their finds. Sign your creations, reminding visitors that the added value they are experiencing has been created by a particular librarian.
- Do you publish an e-mail newsletter? Invite readers to forward it, and invite nonsubscribers to join. Make it easy! Provide quick access to an online registration form.
- Think about your Google ranking. We know that our Google PageRank depends largely on the number of incoming links from other Web sites—especially from other highly ranked Web sites—so, think about how you can go about getting these links. Why not ask other subject Web sites to link to your pathfinder and subject collection pages? Why not join a Web ring? When Internet users search for information on which you are an expert, you want them to find you.

We also want to impress Internet-active individuals with librarians' contributions, especially those likely to share their enthusiasm with others. We want to garner appreciative comments such as those from *PC Magazine* columnist John Dvorak, for example, who says nice things about the Michigan Electronic Library (<http://mel.org>): "During the Internet age,

we've forgotten that professional librarians know how to find information better than anyone—especially better than computer programmers."³ Publishing maven Patricia Holt similarly praises *Library Juice* (<http://www.lib.org/juice>), saying: "I don't know how he does it, but librarian Rory Litwin somehow pulls together dozens of engrossing stories from librarians and publications around the country to provide an at-a-glimpse record of all the insider stuff we patrons never see." She then goes on to urge support for librarians in an age of government censorship.⁴

Our efforts should go toward getting our online activities noticed by those with the ability to influence others, such as regular columnists or popular bloggers. If those who are already recognized as experts within various online communities promote librarians and librarianship, their influence and comments will help make librarians' contributions part of others' electronic informational background.

Why do creations like Michigan Electronic Library and *Library Juice* garner attention? Partially because they provide something useful and seemingly unique, but largely because they have come to the attention of the right people. Instead of just sending press releases about our resources to the local paper or publishing information in a company newsletter, we can think about announcing our activities by contacting those with the ability to influence others in various online communities. If an online columnist, for instance, has written on an issue of interest to librarians or about online resources on a subject, drop her a friendly e-mail to share what you or your institution has been up to. She might mention it in an upcoming column.

Create Spaces Where All Are Welcome to Contribute

The library can be a place to encourage online discourse. I've already mentioned the notion of adding a commenting capability to library blogs. We can also consider creating opportunities for online interaction through forums on our libraries' sites, through facilitating discussion (such as book club chats), through hosting online ask-an-expert events, and so on. Even something as simple as an

(continued on page 47)

(continued from page 12)

online poll on local issues can get people talking. (See <http://sebastianlibrary.com>.)

With all our talk about knowledge communities, we need to go back to our roots and provide an egalitarian space where both patrons and librarians can contribute. When others are truly able to participate in the discussions and communities we facilitate, then they begin to feel as if they have a stake in our institutions' success. When we only put up resources and don't allow users the opportunity to join in or comment, it is not true communication.

We can hold online forums on issues such as intellectual freedom, privacy, and other hot-button topics that mesh well with libraries' missions. Why not invite local officials or company vice presidents to weigh in on and facilitate presentations and discussions, providing space and moderation for an online town meeting? Does your academic institution use WebCT for online coursework? Offer professors the option of having a subject librarian participate in the forums for their classes and create a topic to help students with research-related questions. Does your company use knowledge management software to facilitate the sharing of ideas on its intranet? Get the library, and librarians, involved.

We can also create opportunities for people to help out our institutions. Although it is something of a sad commentary when public libraries are compelled to create wish lists on Amazon.com and other online stores because they lack the

funding to buy books, such activities give patrons an easy and tangible way to contribute and can help raise awareness of the issues facing today's libraries. This works well with the ideas under "Invite"—for example, when popular Web diarist Pamela Ribon (<http://www.pamie.com>) posted a call in May 2003 for her readers to purchase books from the Oakland Public Library's wish list, the library was immediately inundated with hundreds of donations.

Establish Your Expertise

We need to set ourselves up as information experts in the Information Age—and that means setting ourselves up as individual experts. This in part means overcoming a reluctance to self-promote: Instead of generic "ask-a-librarian" virtual reference services, for example, why not let people know who they are talking to and her fields of expertise, taking the opportunity to establish a personal, albeit virtual, connection? When we pretend that in all circumstances any librarian is as good as any other, we cheapen the value of subject expertise and unnecessarily make the process anonymous.

Practitioners in other professions seem to have less difficulty when it comes to promoting themselves as individuals. Medical and legal advice online, for example, is always signed. But library subject-specific pathfinders and other resources are almost always anonymous. Establishing expertise involves building on our offline strengths. We have no problem sending patrons to a subject expert when they come to the ref-

erence desk with a complicated question; we need also to do so online.

In my library, we have an expert on the town's history. When patrons come in with local history questions, we direct them to him. If he is not in, we of course do our best to provide information but often end up suggesting that patrons come back or call when the expert is working. He now has "regulars" who come in and ask for him by name or who e-mail or phone him personally, because he is their connection to their local history.

One step toward establishing personal connections at a virtual reference desk can be to categorize incoming questions, as at <http://www.mywebrarian.com>. Why not also post the names of experts in various subject areas and the hours they will be available to chat?

While many academic libraries do list subject experts in their online directories, we can do more. Online, especially, we will be receiving more complex and subject-specific queries, as many users can easily locate basic factual information on their own. We need to move away from a customer service model in which any representative is as good as any other, or we risk lumping ourselves in with "virtual reps" and other anonymous and impersonal processes. If we want to be viewed as professionals, we need to act as professionals, touting and answering questions in our areas of expertise.

There are many small ways of setting ourselves up as experts, which together help create a unified impression of expertise. These range from creating a good

tagline for our e-mail messages and Web sites to participating and publishing in other fields or talking to community groups about our online expertise. While a science librarian, for example, might not be doing original research, she can certainly contribute a literature review to an appropriate journal—especially to a freely available online publication that can be more widely read and cited. As I mentioned earlier, reader’s advisory librarians can share their expertise on Amazon or on any of the thousands of genre sites also posting reviews. Any librarian can create a Web site that combines his organizational and research skills as a librarian with his acquired knowledge as a subject expert. (See, for example, Margaret F. Dikel’s famous Riley Guide to online employment opportunities and job resources: <http://www.rileyguide.com>.)

Online, sources and resources become trustworthy because those posting have

spent time building up their reputations—let’s work on ours!

Every library and librarian can find a home in one or more of the various online communities. If we each seize specific opportunities to become involved, we as a group and as a profession will reach the members of various groups and become part of the virtual information background. Thinking about our relevance in the Electronic Age in terms of human interaction can help keep us from mistaking our tools for our profession, and help keep us relevant in the information present—as well as the information tomorrow.

As for my brother? Well, after I sent him a couple of citations and a firm request to visit his home library to look up the articles, he finally took the plunge and talked to a reference librarian at his school. So now, he knows *her*!

Rachel Singer Gordon is the former head of computer services and current part-time librarian at the Franklin Park (Ill.) Library. She holds an M.L.I.S. from Dominican University in River Forest, Ill. Rachel is Webmaster of Lisjobs.com, author of The Accidental Systems Librarian (Information Today, Inc., 2003), and co-author of The Information Professional’s Guide to Career Development Online (Information Today, Inc., 2002). Her e-mail address is rachel@lisjobs.com.

References

1. Phil Agre, “Networking on the Network: A Guide to Professional Skills for PhD Students,” August 18, 2002. <http://dliis.gseis.ucla.edu/people/pagre/network.html> 10 May 2003.
2. Howard Rheingold, “Virtual Communities,” *Whole Earth Review*, 61 (Winter 1988): 14.
3. John Dvorak, “Straw Poll Dept.,” *PC Magazine*, Sept. 24, 2002. <http://www.pcmag.com/article2/0,4149,543424,00.asp>. 17 May 2003.
4. Patricia Holt, “Holt Uncensored,” no. 364 (April 10, 2003). <http://www.holtuncensored.com/members/column364.html>. 19 May 2003.