

## Northern California Association of Law Librarians

# Librarians... Your Guide at an Information Crossroads

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If you think that your firm has gone beyond the need for a librarian because everything is available on the Internet, think again. Many firms see the Internet as a free resource for all its information and research needs, thus eliminating the need for librarians. However, nothing could be further from the truth. The ever-expanding Internet actually creates a greater need for a reference professional. Information overload and identifying reliable sources in an online world increasingly filled with wikis makes librarians all the more essential. Librarians can navigate new technologies and combine them with traditional resources in a cost-effective and efficient manner. They also can act as conduits in a firm, connecting various departments and practice groups. Firms need the best information at the lowest possible price and they need it fast.

Ideally, the process works as illustrated in the following example. Recently we received a call to prepare a pitch binder for ABC Company. While the Internet is a valuable tool that most professionals use daily, a librarian can broaden your horizons and help you use all of the tools available to minimize costs while retrieving accurate and authoritative information. The librarian asked a series of questions to find out

when the attorneys are meeting with the potential client, what type of work are they pitching, with whom they are meeting, and any other information that might help produce the most targeted and useful result.

After providing the librarian with complete information, the attorney was able to shift from information gathering to analyzing information that had already been retrieved. The variety of available online and traditional sources is greater than ever before, and an experienced librarian will use many aids. In this particular context, research checklists pointed to a variety of web sources and subscription-based online sources, as well as print materials. By providing a systematic approach to solving the information problem, librarians can provide a faster and more thorough response. All of these skills: the reference interview, the ability to extract the exact nature of the information need from the requestor, and the systematic approach have been mastered by the librarian in on-the-job experience and formal education.

Librarians are also skilled administrators who take their responsibility for managing the firm's resources seriously. They seek ways to maximize value while controlling costs, a distinct challenge in today's climate. Currently in the legal publishing industry, 85% of the market share is owned by the "big three" publishers Thomson, Reed Elsevier and Wolters Kluwer. Costs continue to climb. Librarians must constantly review purchasing and renewal de-

isions to ensure that the firm's print and online resources match up with the firm's core practices and long-term goals, providing the firm's clients with the best value for their research dollar.

In our example, the librarian included in the pitch binder a detailed company report from a new service offered by one of the firm's research vendors. Thus the pitch request gave the librarian an opportunity to test out a new product while delivering a high-quality information source to the attorney, who also happens to be on the firm management committee. He will be among the decision-makers if the librarian recommends its purchase. This isn't by accident; it is a strategic move on the librarian's part to maximize a free product trial by using it to solve a real information need.

New materials are no use if attorneys don't know about them. Librarians perform a vital function to the firm when they publicize recently purchased print materials. But promoting the firm's resources requires more than sending out a list. By providing new materials to those with questions or by taking them to a practice group meeting for hands-on review, the librarian is helping to solve a client's problem.

The hidden side of providing new materials is making sure that duplicates aren't unintentionally ordered and that new materials can be found on the shelf. For print there is nothing worse than getting people excited about a new title that cannot be

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found. Worse still is paying to borrow or download materials the firm already owns. In library-speak “tech services” is the process of keeping track of materials. Tech services includes ordering, routing, cataloging, and circulating new materials as well as managing the IT aspects of library systems. Since it is most visible, many people may regard reference as the most important aspect of a library. The truth is that the less visible organization provided by tech services allows all the other functions of the library to operate smoothly.

Librarians are experts at finding opportunities for training. Every interaction can be a opportunity to make attorneys into better, more efficient library users, which in turn helps them provide better services to clients. Some everyday services that librarians provide:

- setting up training with outside vendors
- providing one-on-one or formal training sessions
- brainstorming on administrative issues such as cost recovery

Firm managers may see the library as an easy target for budget cuts. Librarians know that they must fight for their piece of the pie, and are prepared to use information to bolster their case. Benchmarking is a commonplace activity for professional librarians. Librarians also use business plans to demonstrate their progress toward long-term goals as well as to prepare an annual library report for management. Library annual reports can provide information on what services the library offers and

detailed information on how the library impacts the firm’s bottom line. Librarians are no longer mousy figures wearing buns and sensible shoes. They are smart business-people armed with information and have the skills to use it to serve their firms.

Marketing and business development departments in law firms have grown larger and taken on new roles, including helping attorneys prepare client pitches. Pitches often involve a distinctly research-oriented element. Librarians have created a specialty specifically for this area: the competitive intelligence librarian. This is merely a new name for what librarians have been doing for years. Marketing and the library now work together to produce sleek, informative, and accurate pitches. Partnering with marketing also gives the librarian information about the firm’s practice areas, which aids in strategically directing resources in that direction. For example, librarian-managed alerts can notify stakeholders of news articles, regulation changes, and other important developments.

Back to our example, while compiling the pitch binder the librarian learned from the attorney’s secretary that the attorney would be travelling up until the day before the potential client meeting, so he wanted the binder available online. After a quick call to the firm’s marketing and IT departments, the librarian was able to convert a paper binder into an online resource using technology already available through the firm’s intranet. The librarian’s good working relationships within the firm allowed

effective collaboration with other departments.

Technology is at the core of the changes libraries have endured over the past fifteen years, making partnering with the firm’s IT department absolutely essential. Many IT departments recognize and respect the technical knowledge of the librarian. Librarians and IT often partner on negotiating contracts for eDiscovery, the development of taxonomies for document management systems, and aspects of firm intranets. More and more IT departments are suggesting that library staff lead the way with new technologies. As a result, many libraries use wikis, blogs, and other Web 2.0 technologies to disseminate information. One firm uses a blog to gather and disseminate all the latest information on eDiscovery. Librarians are quick to adopt new technologies and are thus in a good position to advise on the practical uses of a technology as well as any pitfalls they have discovered.

Not yet convinced that you need a librarian? The attorney from the our example stopped by the other day after the pitch meeting to report that he was able to authoritatively answer the potential client’s questions and even anticipate some of the legal issues the client was facing. The attorney got the business, the library got the new business intelligence resource, marketing and IT got kudos for their quick collaboration on the online pitch binder, and the firm has started making that tool available firmwide.

Stuck at an information crossroads? Talk to your librarian!