

# Let Them Know What

*Show management that reference librarians don't just "look things up," and technical services librarians don't just "put cards in books"*

by Lori Tarpinian

**D**uring a recent conversation with a member of my firm's management, I explained some of the responsibilities of my staff and described the roles they play in supporting our attorneys' and the firm's strategic missions. As part of that discussion I heard what I have often suspected was true—the management team had no idea just how many varied and complex tasks our librarians handle.

Certain administrative folks who use the library regularly (marketing and business development staff) had some idea of what we do, but those who don't work with us directly really did not know. Most were unaware of the activities that take place every day to keep this 475-attorney, 1,100-employee, 7-office library running smoothly and add value to the firm. Books get on the shelves and new electronic products are introduced, but management doesn't have a sense of what it takes to make those tools available.

In spite of that lack of knowledge on the upper levels, the library staff members receive high marks, appreciation, and accolades from individual attorneys for service, expertise, approachability, and resourcefulness. The department runs smoothly, and we always find ways to stay ahead of the technological and operational curve. But we don't generally get a lot of management attention.

Don't get me wrong; we embrace our autonomy and could not imagine operating any other way. But one negative aspect of that autonomy may be that firm management has a limited understanding of what we do and how that makes our department a useful resource.

That conversation made me wonder—if firm management had a better understanding of what our librarians do, could we put ourselves in a better position with respect to firm resources or with respect to salaries? I decided to aim for that understanding, and I invited various people from the administrative and

management areas of the firm to a one-hour session with the stated goal of introducing them to the Library and Research Services Department.

## Preliminary Research

As I began to organize my thoughts, I recalled that fortunately about a year ago my team and I conducted an analysis of how we spend our time when we aren't engaged in direct attorney support. For six weeks we tracked all of our non-billable and non-research activities and ultimately created a pie chart that showed all of our functions and the time spent on each. The chart shows quite clearly the variety of administrative tasks for which we are responsible, and it was a great tool to refer to as a starting point for my presentation.

In some ways, the chart even surprised me. Last year when we created the chart, I was focused on staff ratios and balancing workloads; now I looked at the data through a different lens and was impressed with all that we do. Our staff size has been the same since 2000, even through the addition of three offices, many more laws, and much more responsibility: orientations, product evaluations, contract review, collection development and evaluation, locating missing items, shelf reading, cataloging, processing mail and books, interlibrary loans, placing and tracking orders, working with vendors, consolidating accounts, intranet development and maintenance, writing procedural documentation, generating and deleting passwords, Web page development and maintenance, creating portals, creating newsletters, reconciling invoices, setting up case and news alerts, structuring searches for alerts, routing, shelving, scanning, training, comparing and introducing new products, and troubleshooting technical problems.

Have I missed anything? Perhaps I have, but what's more important to note is that any one of these tasks could take you down a path that requires hours of unanticipated work, and I was

determined to get that point across. But how could I show it all? I wanted the presentation to be as comprehensive as it could be in 60 minutes, and I wanted to give a complete picture of both the research/reference and technical service areas, explaining the fun and the challenges of each.

## Painting a Picture

Ultimately, I started with describing our primary area of responsibility from a 5,000-foot view: supporting our attorneys and business people with current, accurate, comprehensive, easy to use, and cost-effective information and a commitment to excellent customer service. That statement covers a lot of ground, but it provided a basis for me to discuss the details behind achieving these primary responsibilities. Certain examples stood out and made a significant impact on the group.

For instance, I explained that we manage more than 3,000 passwords for 250 different products. Each and every vendor has its own policies and procedures surrounding passwords and access, and we have a 20-page document outlining the instructions for ordering and deleting them. The group had sympathetic expressions on their faces as I fully explained this password/license holder monster and demonstrated our password database.

Then there are the vendor contracts. I find contracts fun and challenging to work on. I love to pull out the data, twist it around, and try to project the research habits and preferences of our users a couple of years out. However, the big contracts are a lot of work with many factors to be considered, and decisions about the terms of the contract have an impact on our collection as a whole. I explained the need to control costs among the many choices we have in how to provide information, balanced by our wish to accommodate (within reason) user preferences, and heads began to nod as the complexities of running a law firm library became more apparent.

# You Do



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## Tales from the Trenches

Then I moved on to the most visible aspect of our job—research. We regularly receive requests for information that require the team to skillfully search multiple databases. The range of requests is wide, and the resources we use span legal, business, and scientific texts and databases. We don't have specialists like some libraries do, so each reference librarian needs to be familiar with all of our products and have some knowledge of the needs of all of the firm's practice areas. I presented 10 very different research requests that we had received the prior week and was able to show the way the staff pulls information from all these different sources. Presenting the questions showed how creative the staff needs to be in its approach to providing a satisfactory answer.

The audience was amused by this one: *I need a general treatise on "automobile law" and am interested in the regulation of cars with regards to safety standards, importing, and manufacturing. I also need import laws/customs duties and tariffs on importing cars or lithium batteries.*

This sample request better my audience lost: *I need three examples of split-off agreements where the parties had particularly adversarial relationships with extensive terms in the agreement.* I think they began to develop a new respect for the library team when I confirmed that my entire staff does in fact know what a split-off agreement is.

After discussing research, I moved on to talk about how we also make our knowledge available to attorneys through pathfinders and customized practice group research pages on our intranet. This can ease our workload by helping attorneys and staff learn to perform simple tasks themselves, but it takes significant time to create and update these resources. Showing the research pages on the intranet and copies of some of our documentation provided an impressive look at the variety of our resources and the pricing and content intricacies we keep track of. The librarians need to know the strengths and shortcomings of all the products we use.

The physical upkeep of the library is another area I mentioned that should not be overlooked. End users see books on the shelves but don't think about the process needed to get them there; collection evaluation to make sure we have the most up-to-date and relevant materials; purchasing, tracking orders, and cataloging items so that attorneys can find what they need; and processing and paying bills.

## Staff Initiatives

I also wanted to talk about the way the

team and the library work as a whole. The majority of my staff is cross trained and enjoys the creative and dynamic nature of their positions. My researchers are happy to do some technical services, and my technical services staff covers the reference desk after normal business hours. Like so many libraries, we are understaffed but are able to minimize backlogs by successfully prioritizing and placing primary importance on keeping our users happy. Much of what makes this department successful is the staff longevity and the traditional characteristics of the people who enter the field of information management. Additionally, we are extremely focused on efficiency and workflow. We regularly look at our processes to make sure that they are still bringing value.

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For instance, a few years ago we stopped processing periodicals (putting in checkout cards or creating binders), figuring that if they went missing, we would deal with them as they came up. We discovered that this process, which was very time consuming, wasn't missed at all, and stopping it made no difference. Last year we took it a step further and decided that there was no longer any value to us in shelving the majority of our periodicals, so now we simply put *discard* at the end of most of our routing lists.

This year we decided that our department's Web page (while very impressive in showing all our available resources) was not structured in the most practical way for the attorneys, especially laterals. Now we have completely shifted gears and are creating a library section on each practice group page so that attorneys only have to see what is most pertinent to their practices. None of these changes is a drastically novel idea; even though we had been committed to one scenario, we realized that we needed to change and have made aggressive plans to do so.

Another change we made is to stop asking attorneys for their preferred

method of information delivery. Instead we are streamlining delivery of periodicals and current awareness so we can make decisions about the delivery that's best for us to manage, rather than each individual attorney's ideal way to receive the information. Obviously we weigh many factors in determining how something will be delivered, but most practicing attorneys have grown accustomed to things changing constantly, so they are more than capable of handling a table of contents by e-mail instead of in hard copy.

All of this helped to demonstrate our overarching philosophy: Nothing is done just because that's the way it was done before. If we determine that a process is no longer crucial, we shift gears and put our energy elsewhere.

## The Big Picture

These are just a few of the elements that I mentioned in my presentation. By the end, I was satisfied that I had created a deeper understanding among the group about what the library staff contributes to the firm. Not only had I given my listeners some important specific data, I had also gotten them to see the big picture—that librarians are patient people and creative problem solvers and that there is more to our department than meets the eye.

Reference and research librarians don't just "look things up"; they are skilled researchers who can use hundreds of electronic products cost effectively and with ease and can deliver a result to an attorney with the appropriate level of detail.

Technical services librarians don't just "put cards in books"; they build catalogs and finding devices, and they maintain the quality of the materials that are essential to an attorney's work.

I quickly saw concrete results come out of this presentation; several department heads commented that they wanted to conduct the same type of session to demonstrate their departments, and management told me that this session was informative and enlightening. I feel confident that by continuing to make library operations more transparent we will be better positioned when developing budgets, persuading management to approve new staff, presenting evaluations of the staff to human resources, and increasing salaries. In the long run, sharing this information will benefit the library, the firm, and our community as a whole. ■

*Lori Tarpinian (ltarpinian@mintz.com) is library director at Mintz, Levin, Cohn, Ferris, Glowsky and Popeo, PC, in Boston.*