

Public Relations

by Cheryl Gritton

New Realities, Old Budgets

Change, change, change, faster, faster, faster. This is the new reality of libraries, and librarians. We are expected to have the latest new thing, the fastest delivery systems, and be completely knowledgeable about something that was invented yesterday. And, amazingly enough, we do it! The Internet is old hat now, CD-ROMs have come and gone, and just what were *fiche*?

The one area that has remained hidebound and out of touch with the new reality is the budget process. This is true of the federal courts, and probably also true in academia, law firms, and state court systems. We are remiss if we don't use our public relations skills to inform, enlighten, and educate our bureaucracies as to what we need in the budget process to make the new world a reality in our libraries.

In the federal court budget, we have two accounts, one for books and one for automation. This system has been obsolete for years. A decade ago, the question arose as to which account should be used for microfiche. They are definitely not books, and they aren't computer hardware or software, the prescribed uses for automation money. "Special money" was budgeted to allow for purchase of *fiche*, but only for those sets that were complete.

Different money would be necessary for continuing subscriptions. Of course, getting "special money" takes years. The next new thing were CD-ROMs. These are not books, nor hardware or software. "Special money" was again created to purchase these. And now we have the Internet, with online subscriptions available. Years from now we may be able to purchase subscriptions to Internet products. But in the meantime, as in the past with new technology, we are unable to provide our users with the information and services they want and need. The library looks, and is, out of date.

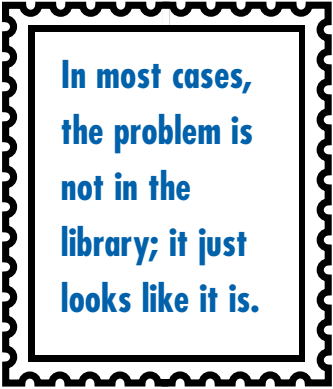
The solution is to use our energy to change the budget process. An "information budget" would be the ideal solution. We need to be able to purchase information, regardless of format. And we need to tell people that! Do our users know they can't access online subscriptions? Of course they do. But do they know they can't access them because of how the budget is set up? No, they don't.

Attempting to change a system is never easy, and is sometimes very risky. Changing the federal government is a very slow process. However, some law firms

and universities have been able to make the change to more flexible budgets. We in the public sector could take lessons from our colleagues in the private sector on how to change the budget. The first step is to educate everyone, tell everyone, where the problem is. In most cases, it is not in the library; it just looks like it is. Our deans, partners, and judges do not want

obsolete libraries. They want state-of-the-art, or at least the "last new thing." It is our responsibility to tell them what we need in order to achieve their, and our, goals. Once they see the budget process is hurting our ability to provide information—our bottom line—the changes will be easier to make. And once the budget process is changed, we can respond to our users' needs faster, faster, faster.

Cheryl Gritton (ceg@iasb.uscourts.gov) is Branch Librarian at the U.S. Court Library in Des Moines, Iowa.



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