Public
Relations

by Martha Thomas

2001 SEAALL Annual Meeting Presents Food for PR Thought

Marketing seems to be big these days. Generally we think of expensive campaigns, glossy brochures and flashing slogans. In fact, a service organization markets itself every day by the simplest actions. As law librarians, we strive to market ourselves by providing services in a professional manner. The question "Is that enough?" has long been on the minds of librarians. The answer, we have found, is a resounding "NO." Issues commonly surrounding law librarianship in both the academic and private environments are salary, respect and staffing.

At this year's annual meeting of the Southeastern Chapter of AALL, we discussed how marketing approaches, primarily focused on the firm, can serve as guidelines for law librarians in any organization.

Marketing, in the traditional sense, can be very time-consuming and costly, giving it a negative connotation as a necessary evil — an effort for which we just do not have time. We, as a profession, can begin within our organizations, taking simple steps to make the library staff more visible and valuable. These measures are simple, but librarians must make a conscious effort to market the library staff internally. Several suggestions can help librarians to change their position and role within the law school, firm or corporation.

Increasing the Value of the Library

Salary was a dominant topic during an informal roundtable discussion. Several ways to raise the value of the library staff were mentioned. The bottom line is that we have to educate the firm's administration about hiring and salary trends and create ways to record our worth to the firm — which commonly translates to billable hours. First and foremost, we, as a profession, should complete the AALL Salary Survey. This can be used as a comparison for specific firm sizes and geographic areas. In recent years, the survey was incomplete because there were not enough responses from members in various states or regions. The information can be invaluable to us as a profession. It is worth the extra effort to respond.

"Billable hours" is a common issue for law-firm librarians. Several librarians mentioned that they bill all their time, but most participants noted that they perform a large amount of non-billable work. Getting practice-specific firm numbers would allow library staff members to track who they are working for. Even if our hours are non-billable, those hours free the time of others for billable work. Another non-billable, yet important, area of work is practice development. Attorneys are under increasing pressure to bring in new clients. Librarians can contribute much toward that cause; tracking those efforts can greatly enhance their staff's value. If the firm does not have such administrative or non-billable numbers, push to obtain practice-specific and client development-matter numbers.

A closely related issue is time-keeping. Do we shortchange ourselves by writing off or limiting the amount of time billed? Only a few participants logged 100 percent of their day on a billing program, such as Elite. The majority logged time only when billable. However, including all our work allows our non-billable time to be traced. Also we should not reduce the amount of time that we actually work on a project. Let the attorney write off that time if necessary. Noting the correct time paints an accurate picture of the staff's efforts for the attorneys and administration.

Reporting back to practice group leaders or firm administrators is a good method of enhancing our value within the organization. Keeping statistics from billing or otherwise is helpful. Firm librarians also play a role in client contact. Several participants noted that they deal directly with clients. All mentioned that this contact was generally through attorneys, but at times a client will approach the library staff directly. Informing attorneys and firm administrators that you are dealing with clients is important. This can be done during administrative meetings or the evaluation process.

Optimizing Relationships with Technology Staff

A program on "Developing and Maintaining the Optimal Relationship with Technology Professionals" addressed the frequently mentioned issue of the relationship between the library and technology. The panel of four library staff members represented different organizational structures in academic and firm environments. Don Adamick, director of library services at Womble Carlyle Sandridge and Rice, spoke from the vantage point of a large firm with a merged library and technology organization. I presented the perspective of a large firm with two distinct library and technology departments. Shaun Esposito, head of public services at the law library of the University of Arizona James E. Rogers College of Law, reviewed the structure of his academic institution and discussed aspects of the relationship, which involves separate departments. Sally Irvin, associate director of educational technology at Wake Forest University School of Law, discussed her law-school experience with a newly merged library and technology department.

All panelists reviewed their relationships based upon their own working environments. All agreed that it is essential to keep lines of communication open. Being viewed as a valuable resource for the computer professionals in your organization is one way to market the library staff within the organization. The library and computer staff can better achieve their common goal of providing optimal services to all users by working

(continued on page 36)

together. This, of course, is easier in an organization with combined departments and more difficult where there are distinct departments under different leadership. Irvin, Esposito and I encouraged efforts to bridge that gap. Regular meetings are one tactic, Adamick suggested. Adamick and I added that another good way to create a better working relationship is to hold meetings outside the work environment, such as retreats or joint lunches.

Both Wake Forest Professional Center Library and the University of Arizona have staff members who act as liaisons between the library and technology group. Irvin and Esposito recommended this as a successful way to communicate with knowledge and authority, thus enhancing the library's credibility in technical issues. This fosters communications and the working relationship in the many areas where the library staff relies upon the technology staff to get things up and running — now most common in creating an Internet or intranet page. Both Womble Carlyle Sandridge and Rice and Wake Forest not only have library staff that provide input on content but also code it as well. This practice gives the library more freedom and generally means the Web site can be updated faster.

Results of a survey I posted on the AALL and SEAALL listservs indicated a need for educating new computer staff members about library or research applications. An overwhelming number of entry-level technology staff are hired with less than a year of legal experience. Entry-level positions include support analysts and help-desk staff. Law librarians should play a role in educating newly hired staff in the technology department. Being aware of new staff, their experience levels and their duties can greatly help librarians in taking the initiative to become valuable resources for the computer group rather than just another demand on their time. Educating newly hired computer professionals can take many forms — e.g., orienting new hires, providing documents with descriptions and trouble-shooting tips for library and research applications, and offering training for all computer professionals on new services. Efforts to make the computer staff's jobs easier will go a long way to creating an effective working relationship between the two groups.

Marketing Comes From Within

The first step to marketing the library and its staff is within the organization. Although our time is limited, it is well worth the time and effort to look at our daily operations and see how developing and maintaining new relationships within the organization can greatly enhance how others perceive our value. Logging our work loads, reporting our efforts to key firm administration, looking for ways to get out of the typical "librarian" working patterns and finding ways to become valuable to the organization as a whole are great steps for changing perceptions and moving toward a better working environment.

Discussions and presentations at this spring's SEAALL meeting provided good insights into alternative ways to boost ourselves within the organization. We hope it will generate discussion to further our ability not only to change our role but also to change the perceptions of others.

Martha Thomas *(mthomas@kilstock.com) is a law librarian at Kilpatrick Stockton LLP in Winston-Salem, N.C.*