



## Public Law Libraries' Outreach Equals Survival

by Donna Bausch

After all these years, nothing provides me greater satisfaction than dazzling the judge, the partner, the paralegal or the citizen with that perfect morsel of information. During my first few years as a law librarian, that simple thrill kept me coming back to find more ways to serve my colleagues and customers every day.

After two decades in the profession, however, the practical aspects of law librarianship dominate my daily concerns as a public law library manager. Every year the challenges of meeting the budget increase, while prospects for new income streams diminish. Why, after all this time, do I still believe that the concept of quality service is still key to what law librarians do and why they do it?

Why do many public law libraries, in particular, reach out to their communities in various ways? What factors motivate these libraries to go beyond the clientele with whom they have a formal relationship? And, with notoriously limited resources, why do public law libraries make the effort? Their very existence depends upon it. Enlightened self-interest has proved time and time again that quality service increases demand and creates a perception of indispensability. The jobs and livelihoods of public law librarians depend on that perception.

More than any other type of library, the success of public law libraries depends on the good will and support of the local legal community. Although a private law firm library can make a significant difference to a law firm, it cannot make or break the firm.

A stellar private law firm library staff can neither shore up a disintegrating law firm nor can a less-than-competent library staff put a law firm out of business single handedly. Likewise, a law school cannot maintain accreditation without a law library that meets or exceeds American Bar Association standards, but successful academic law libraries extend various degrees of services and outreach to the local legal community.

However, one judge, bar president or board member dissatisfied with a public law library wields the power to end its existence. Law librarians have no way of knowing who will be in those powerful roles when they first meet those future leaders as summer associates or new attorneys. This means public law librarians need to give all users the level of service appropriate for judges, senior partners and political leaders, setting a dauntingly high overall standard of service. In other words, treat all customers as you would treat those with the greatest power over you, because, in effect, if they don't have that power today, they might well wield it tomorrow.

Unlike their counterparts in other law libraries, public law libraries must view each citizen in the region served as a primary stakeholder. In addition, because public law librarians are permitted to offer the widest range of services to practicing attorneys without concerns about the unauthorized practice of law that constrain other types of law libraries, public law librarians have the opportunity each summer and fall to expand their cadre of allies and supporters. They forego that opportunity at their own peril.

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If public law libraries commit themselves to meet and get to know new practitioners in their areas; serve them in ways that make the library indispensable to new practitioners' success; train them in resources, methods and services; and conduct paid research for which they do not have the time or inclination to do themselves, those users will remember the

library fondly when they become judges, mayors, legislators and senior partners who hold the reins of power and the purse strings.

Someone might counter that such an effort requires a commitment over many years, but what about now? Those deep ties are the product of time and personal attention to service. But public law libraries can't allow the prolonged timeline to deter them. Goodwill towards one law library translates to all to a certain degree. The old saying that "a rising tide raises all ships" is applicable to law libraries, too. The point is to get started now down the road to indispensability.

At the Norfolk Law Library, the librarians contact area legal administrators early each spring to remind them of the orientations the library offers to both summer associates and new attorneys. When funds permit, the library uses the tried-and-true training method of "feed them and they will come," with weekly showings of the "Commando Legal Research" videos and free box lunches during the summer. Because the Norfolk Law Library orientation provides the only venue for informal networking among summer associates, they get the chance to compare notes about their experiences at local firms away from the eyes and ears of their employers. The orientation has laid the groundwork for a good relationship with these lawyers in subsequent years.

The law librarians at the Norfolk Law Library emphasize that the law library is the perfect place to begin their research because no one on staff has any impact on their evaluations at their firms. The summer associates need not fear asking silly questions or admitting they forgot research methods that they learned months ago at their law schools. The law library is safe harbor where the associates can get the assistance they need and look like superstars back at the firm. The summer associates from my first years at the Norfolk Law Library have become partners, bar leaders and even judges, and they have fond recollections of their summer experiences at the law library.

Due to budget constraints in the last few years, the Norfolk Law Library has been unable to provide food incentives for the training sessions. Yet the library continues to prepare packets of useful legal research information for summer associates and new attorneys and offer detailed in-person

orientations for those who attend. For the users who prefer to pick up the packets and return at a later date with real-life research assignments, the librarians are happy to train at the "point of need." Regardless of the method by which the library hooks the new customer, it continues to strive to do just that.

Like many other public and membership law libraries around the country, Norfolk sends broadcast e-mails to local bar members about upcoming training opportunities and contributes a column in each issue of the local bar newsletter. By staying visible and pushing information to current and potential customers' desks, the Norfolk Law Library remains relevant in an era where practitioners increasingly

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suspect that everything they need is free on the Internet. In fact, the library's "Bar Bulletin" column often focuses on the invisible Web, fugitive information not found on the Web, and useful Web sites. The column also reminds readers that the library offers fee-based research at a reasonable hourly rate for those practitioners who want to concentrate on what they do best: practice law.

Many public law libraries participate in continuing legal education sponsored by the local or state bars. The imprimatur of the bar is beneficial. It legitimizes the mission and work of law libraries in ways they cannot accomplish on their own.

Having had the privilege of serving the same community for a decade, I can attest to the benefits of consistently providing diverse library services to local attorneys when they need them. In fact, in addition to holding my position as law librarian at the Norfolk Law Library, last year I was appointed executive director of the Norfolk & Portsmouth Bar Association, a local bar association of 900 members. Why? I would like to think that local attorneys have come to believe that they can count on the law library to provide services responsive to their needs, and they wanted that same

level of service in their professional association.

Consider local public law libraries as potential partners in teaching and training. There are many ways to build these partnerships with academic and private law libraries.

Law librarians in private law firms can help public law libraries provide more services to the practitioner community. Bring public law librarians in to speak to the firm's new attorneys during their orientations. Encourage these new lawyers to register for the training sessions offered at local public law libraries. Make it clear that public law libraries serve everyone and that attorneys can seek reference and research assistance without fear of judgment.

Academic law librarians should include public law libraries in their legal research classes. For example, in advanced legal research classes, public law librarians can describe real-life research and what judges expect from law clerks. Legal research classes also provide an opportunity for public law librarians to talk about their resources and services and how research methods will differ upon graduation to the limited-usage online legal research world. Include public law librarians in "Bridge the Gap" sessions for students about to embark upon summer clerkships or graduation.

Teaching and training are increasingly a part of all law librarians' repertoire of skills. Public and membership law libraries play a significant, albeit somewhat unsung, role in this process. Together law libraries can increase the visibility of these services and institutions to the benefit of the profession as a whole.

Most of all, remember to view public law libraries as a resource at the disposal of the entire law library and legal communities. The future financial viability of public law libraries depends upon alliances with the entire legal community.

The service ethic springs not from altruism but self-interest. The best public relations plan starts with quality service.

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