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Business Community Outreach: Exploration of a New Service Role in an Academic Environment

Patrick Griffis and Sidney Lowe

Overview

Literature describing libraries that support community economic development indicates that the majority of business community outreach initiatives are developed by public libraries. Academic libraries should also expand their roles by reaching out to businesspeople in their surrounding communities to build key partnerships and to illustrate the value of a research university by marketing their services and resources. Recently, the Dean of Libraries at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) made it a priority to build upon relationships with local business groups by making presentations at meetings and luncheons. The libraries' Business Librarian became involved by creating resources for business research, providing reference consultations, conducting workshops, and working with community agencies on business plans and start-ups. This chapter discusses many benefits and challenges of business community outreach for academic libraries, describes common business information needs, and offers best practices for business reference and referrals. This new collaborative service role can potentially increase an academic library's value to its community.

Background

The role for libraries in supporting economic development in their communities has been well documented over the past few decades. It was inevitable that a collective work would emerge documenting business community outreach initiatives and best practices. Such a book was published by Bleiweis (1997). The majority of initiatives documented were from public libraries, with very few coming from academic libraries (Bleiweis, 1997). A decade later, a survey of business community outreach initiatives and best practices building upon the work of Bleiweis' book was published in a report by Sharpe and Stierman (2007) of Western Illinois University Libraries that reveals that the majority of business community initiatives documented are still being developed by public libraries with relatively little representation from academic libraries (Sharpe & Stierman, 2007). This finding is not surprising, considering the focus of public libraries on community outreach, but for some academic libraries it is becoming more important to reach out to their surrounding communities to connect with people and to market library services and resources.

A special issue of the *Journal of Business & Finance Librarianship* focusing on business librarianship and entrepreneurship includes many case studies detailing entrepreneurship

outreach initiatives from academic libraries. In the introductory article MacDonald (2010) outlines entrepreneurial outreach initiatives in the issue, stating that they “describe three very different approaches libraries have taken to align themselves with a key mission of the university—economic development” (p. 159). This chapter elaborates on the previous work in describing the exploration of a new role in business community outreach as a whole, which includes, but is not limited to, entrepreneurship outreach.

The University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) has played a vital role in the local community for more than 50 years. It offers a variety of civic and cultural opportunities and events for its students, faculty, and staff, and also for the Southern Nevada community (<http://communityrelations.unlv.edu/>). UNLV’s on-campus libraries comprise a main library and three branch libraries. Lied Library is the 300,000 square-foot main campus library at UNLV. It opened in January 2001, and replaced an outdated building which was no longer big enough for the university community’s increasing population of students and faculty. It is an attractive, spacious, and comfortable learning space, providing information resources and services in person or by web access.

Research assistance is provided by a 25-person reference service pool largely comprised of librarians, paraprofessionals, and student interns. The skills and experiences of these individuals vary widely, but training is ongoing. Subject liaison librarians are trained in the basic resources of subject areas under other liaisons, but referrals are typically made to subject experts in cases of in-depth research questions. For example, business reference queries are often referred to the Business Librarian, who also provides basic training in the area of his subject expertise for other liaisons. The Business Librarian is the first point of contact for business-related research, but also among the library faculty is a Hospitality Librarian who specializes in tourism and hospitality resources.

Outreach to the Business Community

In addition to responding to business reference questions, in the past year, Lied Library has been motivated to reach out to the business community of Southern Nevada to initiate and participate in business events and activities, and to develop key community partnerships. The recent decline in the housing industry and in overall employment in Las Vegas has resulted in an increase in the number of local residents who are seeking to start their own business ventures. Local community agencies are focusing their efforts more on business start-ups, as small businesses tend to have a significant impact on employment. Small business development and exporting of goods and services from Las Vegas and Nevada have been identified as the solutions toward economic recovery. The Las Vegas-Clark County Library District provides resources and services for job seekers and maintains limited business resources, but does not have staff specialists focusing on business, or services tailored specifically for the business community. The public libraries focus on contributing to economic development through their Southern Nevada Non-Profit Information Center and Patent and Trademarks Collection. As such, members of the business community with needs beyond the resources and staff expertise of the public libraries in Southern Nevada are commonly referred to the UNLV Libraries for assistance.

In 2008, the University administration and other higher education system administrators began communicating with local community members about the value of a

research university. Their message emphasized economic diversification and development as a key benefit to the business community. UNLV's Dean of Libraries advanced the message further by demonstrating the value of a research library to professionals in the community through meetings and presentations. With the support and collaborative efforts of the UNLV Libraries' Advisory Board, the Dean made it a priority to build upon relationships with local business groups. She was invited to speak at CEO group luncheons, Rotary Club and Chamber of Commerce meetings, and at an Executive Conference to discuss how the libraries can assist professionals with business and other areas of research (Iannuzzi, 2009). The Business Librarian became involved and created business resource handouts and research guides, and provided individual reference consultations for business community members. He also increased outreach efforts with community agencies supporting business start-ups, such as the Nevada Small Business Development Center, which offers courses for launching new businesses to local community members. He gave presentations on business research for developing business plans and provided training on the library resources to assist with research.

Common Information Needs and Requests

The most common request is for information that is required to develop a business plan that will be used to obtain financing for a new business venture or an expansion of a current business venture (new product, service, or new geographic location to provide existing product or service). Library users need information about the industry their venture will operate within, as well as information about the market for their product or service, to demonstrate the viability of their business venture to financiers. Consequently, they need industry reports and market research reports. They also need information on competitors and often request lists of similar companies to their venture in a specific geographic area. Business library users tend to need detailed financial information on potential competitors.

Their needs also include consumer research data to identify the demographics of the consumers they will be targeting for their product or service, as well as the most effective ways to market their product or service to them. They also request a list of potential financiers or funding sources for their business venture. As such, they need lists of granting agencies and foundations, as well as business loan banks and venture capitalists. Less often, business community library users need literature on current business trends for professional development activities such as developing business training sessions for employees and producing company newsletters. They need articles in a topical area from business presses, such as journals and magazines, as well as newspapers. Also, these library users need to conduct research to make informed investment decisions and to track their personal investments (stocks, bonds, etc.). Sometimes library users need career-related resources such as career guidebooks, résumé-writing manuals, and websites for job searching.

Scenario-Based Outreach Presentations

Another service offered for business library users is custom-designed workshops. Much of the time, research consultations occur at the point of need, but group sessions tailored

to specific business needs are routinely scheduled by the Business Librarian. One approach that has been used in meetings with the business community is scenario-based outreach presentations, which work well and can be described as a kind of storytelling technique to engage participants. These scenarios illustrate library services and resources by using realistic examples of research assistance so that people become interested in how the librarian might be useful to them, and also enlightened about the availability of resources to meet their needs. A sample scenario could be one in which a reference librarian is assisting an entrepreneur who wants to open a comic book and gaming store, but has limited funds. To attract investors or lenders the entrepreneur needs a business plan that includes demographics and other statistics about the potential market, and he or she is wondering whether Las Vegas or Reno, Nevada, would be the best start-up location for this new business. How will he or she convince a bank that there are enough customers out there to generate enough income to pay off a loan? This type of scenario used during a presentation to the business community enables librarians to promote increased awareness and understanding of library services and available resources. Since there are some access restrictions for community users, it is important for librarians to emphasize what *can* be offered, and to focus less on what cannot be provided.

Benefits of Outreach

For academic libraries, promoting library resources and services to community business library users, as well as the level of reference services delivered to them, is very different from that of public libraries. At Lied Library, we believe that a balance must be achieved. We want to make positive connections and to provide assistance, but the daily reality is that some policy-based restrictions exist for community users that can be construed as negative if not communicated in a positive light. These limits are in place because the primary constituents are our students and faculty. However, the librarians are working to achieve that balance by providing optimal assistance utilizing those guidelines for library use while building collaborative relationships within the Las Vegas business community.

One of the benefits of outreach to the business community is that participating in business-based meetings or workshops and providing research assistance (such as help with business plans) promotes the value of the academic library in a community and increases awareness of its services and resources. UNLV Libraries have documented business outreach initiatives in their newsletters to community members, and many of the community agencies that have partnered in these efforts have also documented the initiatives in their newsletters. The reverse also happens; librarians become aware of community services that can be helpful to their users and other staff, and it increases their reference knowledge base. This reciprocal benefit is evidenced at the UNLV Libraries through its Business Community Resources Guide, which includes a list of local community agencies and resources that can support business start-up and growth. Another advantage to making connections and building relationships with business partners is that it can lead to exciting and unexpected opportunities for external fundraising. The contacts made through business outreach activities of the UNLV Dean of Libraries and the Business Librarian have significantly expanded the potential donors maintained by the Libraries' External Relations Department.

Another benefit arising from business outreach activities is that collaborative activities and research assistance with people from one agency or company often connect the library to other organizations within the community, and new relationships are formed. Such a relationship was shaped with Nevada Industry Excellence (NIE), a company designed to improve efficiency in business operations. NIE invited the Business Librarian to participate in an exporting workshop for local manufacturers called ExporTech. A similar relationship was developed with the Nevada Small Business Development Center. The Business Librarian was invited to participate in a business plan workshop for local entrepreneurs called NxLevel. In addition, the Dean of Libraries was asked to join and is now an active member of the Las Vegas Rotary Club. At one of their meetings, she promoted library services by saying,

I am here to tell you about this valuable resource in your own backyard. . . . The UNLV Libraries provide onsite access to hundreds of databases, millions of electronic articles from more than 20,000 journals, newspapers, and other sources of information. This is content we license for our students and faculty—it is at the heart of teaching and research—we may have 10,000 students a day walking through our doors—but we also have over 3 million searches a year in our databases. (Iannuzzi, 2009, n.p.)

This type of direct participation widens the community's understanding of the library and the university's role and mission.

Outreach Challenges

Such benefits garnered by outreach do not just happen without being accompanied by a few challenges. In many ways, public libraries are able to assist community users with their research without regard to their status because they serve the general public, and every library user is entitled to the same level of assistance. In academic library settings, since community users have some limitations to their access privileges, creativity and diplomacy are often required by librarians to enhance the effectiveness of the research process for the business community user. One particular challenge faced at UNLV Libraries is that because academic libraries purchase subscriptions to licensed databases intended primarily for users affiliated with educational institutions, there are restrictions on commercial use. Library policies allow nonaffiliated community users access to proprietary research databases with specific restrictions. They must come into the library to use the designated guest computers located behind the reference desk (no remote access), and log in as a guest researcher. These computers have no Internet access, except to government-based websites. Printing and e-mailing are occasional obstacles, but it is also our policy to accommodate library users whenever possible, so they are frequently assisted with courtesy printing or e-mailing files by staff from the nearby reference desk.

Another particular challenge faced at UNLV Libraries is that clients who work with businesses are often accustomed to having research done *for* them, and do not necessarily recognize the difference between professional research services and assistance by an academic library professional. Explaining to a business community user what can and cannot be accomplished or provided is sometimes difficult, especially when the research help meets their needs but also “opens the door” for the possibility of services that exceed the scope of the librarian's time or expectations. Often, business community members expect the Business Librarian to prepare marketing lists and business plans

instead of assisting them in preparing such products themselves. Research assistance scenarios that exceed the scope of the librarian's time or expectations are those business queries requiring "expert advice," which is a common challenge for legal or medical-based queries. The librarians can end up on the proverbial slippery slope if reference help is interpreted (rightly or wrongly) as advice to the library user. To avoid misunderstandings or potential legal liability, it is best to offer information while avoiding analysis and to refer library users to experts who are qualified to provide analysis.

In addition, there are challenges in providing services within the time frames of busy professionals when they contact the library for help requiring immediacy, as staff assistance is often limited for assistance to members of the business community. The UNLV Business Librarian serves as the primary contact for assisting them, but cannot always be available when needed because of competing job responsibilities. Also adding to the insufficiency of staff availability, academic libraries face challenges in the adequacy of library resources for meeting community users' research needs, necessitating referrals to other agencies or services. Library users may want high-quality marketing resources, and available databases sometimes fall short of their expectations. The stakes of business research can be extremely high. For businesspeople, the bottom line is about money, making business deals and decisions, creating accurate financial reports, writing a successful business plan, submitting excellent grant proposals, and so on.

There are some other common concerns that can accompany reference transactions with users from the business community. As noted above, they can expect more than can be given, and information from libraries is considered to be "free," even when the library user knows a report or data may be coming from a very expensive database. Non-business librarians and staff are often not familiar or interested in the subject matter, and business questions can be complex and confusing. If the Business Librarian is unavailable, staff can offer incomplete or even incorrect information if they do not use a thorough reference interview to find out what the user needs. Business jargon such as "profitability ratio" or "earnings per share" can cause seasoned reference veterans to temporarily freeze if their training or context for this type of terminology is lacking.

Best Practices for Business Reference and Referrals

The best starting place for determining the right approach to business reference and referrals is usually a good reference interview to determine true needs. One technique is to assign a category or area for what the library user is describing; resources are arranged by business-related categories such as finance, marketing, local resources, etc. Appropriate questions to ask the users include the following: Are they building a business plan? Making an investment decision? Looking at a new market, product, or company? Once the need is established it is possible to match it with the appropriate resources that are grouped and listed on a readily available bibliography or subject guide. If it is appropriate to refer a library user to another agency or person, here are a few suggestions:

- Develop a list, website, or handout of community organizations that support and provide information or courses on business start-ups and expansion.

- Develop a network of community organizations that support and provide information or courses on business start-ups and expansion on social media professional sites such as LinkedIn.
- Include local community services organizations in a resources guide for the surrounding business communities.
- Refer library users to experts who can provide guidance with business plans, business financing, or professional investment advice.
- As lists and guides are developed, become familiar with them, share them with other staff, and have them ready for distribution.

For reference service staff members who need baseline knowledge to point people with business-related questions in the right direction, the following checklist should help:

- For company directory information either keep a couple of basic, current directories (local, state, and national) nearby, bookmark them, or know how to look them up quickly.
- Extensive and authoritative e-resources can be located through the Business Reference and Services Section (BRASS) of American Library Association's (ALA) Reference and User Service Association's (RUSA) website, available at <http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/rusa/sections/brass/index.cfm>. There are several LibGuides related to business topics that can be found at <http://brass.libguides.com/index.php>.
- Extensive and authoritative e-resources can be located through the Business and Finance Division of Special Library Association's (SLA) website, available at <http://units.sla.org/division/dbf/index.html>. A wiki related to business resources can be found at <http://wiki.sla.org/display/SLADBF/Home>.
- When using a search engine such as Google to look for business or company information, searches can be refined by a site domain, such as dot-gov (.gov) for federal and state government-based websites.

Other bits of knowledge for the business reference toolbox include industry and market research reports, investment information, funding sources from banks, venture capital, nonprofit funding sources such as foundations and grants, and resources for job searching and career information. References for learning how to find such information include the BRASS LibGuides.

Maintaining communication and collegial relationships with community business-people will perpetuate goodwill and build new connections. Keep library information packets and website URLs readily available, and include community library users in mailing lists for sending updates, newsletters, fundraising materials, and other communiqués. Ask them to share their library experiences with other library stakeholders and with their business peers. Libraries should track interactions to provide an account of outreach activities to administrators, publicize initiatives, include personal accounts of library users, and consistently emphasize the library's impact on the business community.

Conclusion

This new role in providing library services to support the local business community through proactive outreach efforts is a win-win collaboration that builds connections

with professionals in the community to forge a significant integration of the academic library into their professional lives. This role supports UNLV's efforts to spread awareness of the value of a research university within the community, which Oakleaf (2010) advocates that all academic libraries undertake in the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Values Report. The challenges of this new role are not insurmountable and are worth overcoming to enable the libraries to interact with the local community in innovative ways. These types of interactions can raise the profile of the library to stakeholders and community members and can also change perceptions about libraries as a whole, and increase their value to the neighboring businesses and individuals. In addition, this new service role has the potential for a domino effect by influencing other libraries to broaden their range of services because it encourages people to utilize libraries. Library staff, especially those who provide frontline reference services, may also begin to see the benefits of business community outreach efforts.

Oakleaf (2010) states that "library services and resources support institutional engagement in service to their communities by providing community members . . . locally, nationally, and globally" (p. 139) with information that is of high quality, is valid, and meets their needs. For UNLV Libraries, this new service initiative represents the start of a new collaborative adventure in supporting the community engagement efforts of its university.

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