

No More “Extra! Extra!” But “Read All about It!”

Julie B. Todaro

I could *not* decide on the content for this column and I usually have a good idea at least a month before, but—in my defense—there is *a lot* going on in libraryland and, honestly, everywhere else right now. In fact, one can’t swing a stuffed cat without hitting a new presidential initiative (from either the American Library Association [ALA] president or the United States president); assessment, assessment, assessment; toolkits for almost absolutely everything; green and sustainability issues; new webpage designs; blog-your-little-heart-out; wiki-your-little-heart-out; online/electronic everything; recession, recession, as well as predictions of the *worst* recession juxtaposed with hope, hope, and more hope and unless we conserve our finances, we might also be risking our future. We’re also being told—unless we conserve, preserve or digitize—that we are losing our past. So I’m torn—negative or positive or both? *But* since I typically lean toward positive, no wait—negative, yeah, I lean toward negative—I’ll shift my paradigm and take a positive stance on this list of today’s headline issues.

New Presidential Initiatives, ALA

Although I am far from being an expert on ALA presidential initiatives, I have worked on initiatives for Pat Schuman, Mary Somerville, Nancy Kranich, and, now, Camila Alire. In addition, I have worked on several Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) presidential initiatives. Given this experience and the wide range of initiative goals, I think I can speak with some authority on the structure, content, and processes that have flowed through presidential elections, and overall I have to say that I find great value in these projects. In addition, as the years go by, ALA’s goals—to have initiative content build on previous content and to have content speak to all types of libraries—are excellent ideas.

What is fascinating to me is that in looking back, each of the campaigns had distinctly different processes, but all were very member driven. Some campaigns were designed to focus attention on something “new” or previously unaddressed, while others were designed to look at a common

issue through a different lens or with a different focus and still others are primarily reactive to critical, current and often future issues. In addition, over the years I have seen content articulate a vision yet become more and more practical in application and suggested directions.

In campaigns today, given our electronic opportunities, it is easier to maintain and even expand member-driven processes; it becomes easier and easier to build content; it is easier to broaden initiatives for relevancy to all types of libraries and all types of library and information professionals; and—finally—national and even global distribution is possible throughout initial initiative activities as well as throughout the life of the presidential years.

Today’s and tomorrow’s presidential initiative can and should be a “living” vision that morphs throughout the years based on profession and member needs. Is it easy to design, tailor and then distribute to meet all needs? Absolutely not! Is it a worthwhile endeavor to create a vision for today and the future? It is. Yes, if you get the chance to contribute to your profession, do it.

New Presidential Initiatives, USA

We’ve had our share of interested and committed presidents and first ladies. And although everyone will say good things about libraries, and although everyone longs to be photographed or interviewed in front of shelves of books, there are few administrations that—as we all like to say—put their money where their mouth is where libraries are concerned. So coming off our most recent, significant federal funding increases, there has and continues to be great buzz over the (and I swore I wouldn’t use the “S” word) stimulus package discussions.

I had great hopes for specificity for libraries. But alas, we lack specificity and instead are primarily referred to as “eligible institutions,” and so it’s left up to us to lobby and



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position ourselves locally and at the state level to be recognized as significant partners. Libraries—in states that are accepting stimulus dollars—are left to lobby umbrella institutions, governmental structures and non-library decision makers to recognize our eligibility and bring us to the head of the line or even just to be one of the institutions in line or on a list. In addition, other than construction dollars and some senior hiring programs, many dollars are for services we need, but may not necessarily have now. So, does the stimulus money promise to support basic services? No, it's not designed for that. Will it keep a library from closing by providing operating funds? From what I've seen, probably not, but soft money programs aren't designed to do that anyway. What's in it for us? Most of us don't know, but we're resourceful and creative and if you are "shovel ready" for construction or renovation, and you're not using bond money—start there. And don't forget to share your successes.

Assessment, Assessment, Assessment

I have written about assessment a variety of ways in a number of columns and if you're like me, you have been searching for wisdom on assessment for years. I find myself reading in our own field, in other related professions, in research just on assessment, and in the professional literature of our umbrella institutions. I'm always searching for that magic bullet, the perfect formula, or that unique outcome. In my quest I have discovered some truths that I've mentioned before but have now been broadened to include:

- **Start small.** Pick one target population or one service or one resource to assess.
- **Shorten your assessment year.** Choose a period of time that is possible, such as a season, or a semester, or a specific month, or a predetermined period of time identified as a service timeline. (Example: You want to measure impact of large print materials, so you advertise heavily and assess outcomes for the first six weeks after marketing heavily.)
- **Build on what you have.** Identify all available baseline data and choose assessment of an area for which you already have baseline data.
- **Match any assessment areas with goal areas.** Specifically structure data gathered to support needed decisions for goal objectives and strategies.

Toolkits

I'm partially to blame for "toolkits" or "tool cases" because I certainly created my share . . . but they work, darn it! A toolkit provides a set of items related to a common theme, but the beauty of the toolkit is that the set can be used in any one of a number of ways. There is no magic bullet that says this item has to be first as the user sorts through

content with their own view immediately. Toolkits are also easy to update, easy to personalize, easy to reproduce, and lend themselves perfectly to not only the print world but to any one of a number of online formats including our usual webpages, blogs, wikis, and other 2.0 tools.

My real worry is—and I'm really just kidding here—what's next? What might we call the next set of items . . . if you're fixing something you could say you are "healing" something and it could be a "medicine cabinet" or "medicine chest." Other containers that hold items to be used for a common purpose might be a backpack or a cosmetic case, but let's face it, the latter isn't as broad for diverse users. What we need to do here is bring back older references such as the "fill-in-the-blank shelf," a "clearinghouse," a "cookbook," or a "library." In fact, I'm always frustrated when I search for specific libraries and find that so many people use "library" as an all purpose catch-all for all of their resources.

So that's as far as I can go given that my search of a thesaurus does not yield much for other words for "toolkit." Instead, I think we are beginning to—and need to expand—descriptors such as "2.0 toolkit" or "online toolkit" to define our brave new world of gathering materials to display, personalize or repurpose. Until we get a new word I like, long live the toolkit.

Green and Sustainability Issues

I am, of course, committed to being "green" and find myself fascinated by the incredibly rapid embrace of green and sustainability issues and resources this time around. And "by this time around" I'm referring to the earthy sentiments of the '60s and '70s that never—in my opinion—spawned either the significant commitment or the resources to support the movement. That being said, adopting a green or sustainability commitment includes (from the broad to the specific):

- reviewing all goals and objectives to make sure green and sustainable commitments are included *and* that the term "sustainability"—also used for budget planning—is either changed to another term or defined appropriately;
- assessing supplies for correct contents and usage;
- identifying technology issues that overlap (for example, batteries, power draw, and "fuel" such as print cartridges);
- retrofitting or remodeling existing facilities;
- building new facilities;
- reviewing standards to incorporate a green/sustainability commitment (at the association level);
- budget design;
- design of institutional training materials;
- integrating content into organizational documents (orientation information, job descriptions, etc.); and
- new webpage designs.

Similar to painting the Golden Gate Bridge, just when you finish the design and population of your webpage or Web environment, you have to change it as your umbrella institution or environment begins a major redesign or—if you're really unlucky—starts over again. And—as with the redesign of anything—I'm not sure about the reasons each time, but I know it has to be done.

Whether your constituents or clients or patrons change, or there is a new “popular,” or the software changes, or instructional design principles change, or your organization acquires new skill levels, or your organization or institutional image or purpose or brand changes . . . no matter what, your website will change. Met with excitement but also “OMG, we have to change all of our information literacy content again,” it's inevitable. Minimizing grief gets easier when web content can be globally updated with good design and when some pages are linked to from other locations rather than housed as content within the site. Just be happy that our URLs don't change with such regularity *and* that if they do, we can redirect or use tiny URLs.

Blog Your Little Heart Out

Blogs are here to stay for both external and internal library uses, whether one is linking to and using library blogs for providing a forum for book or materials discussions; public relations for library services and resources; marketing resources and services; getting feedback from constituents; or for publicity, programming, or establishing an online presence for the library. What I love about them is that you can use them throughout all types of libraries; you can access, design, and “serve” within an hour, and you can invite comment with “lower end” 2.0 opportunities as well as populate the blog itself or link blog content to a variety of other lower end or higher end venues.

The downside of blogs—and I have to insert *some* negative comments here—is the fact that blogs are by and large associated with opinions, and this includes host opinion and invited guests in some cases while in other cases *any* readers who wish to comment may do so. To my taste, blog formats (typically lower end blogs) are great for delivering and inviting comments in lists but confusing for finding specific information as well as for presenting content in categories or organized formats.

Wiki Your Little Heart Out

Wikis are here to stay for both external and internal library uses and whether we are linking and using our library wikis for publicity for our programming, establishing an online presence for the library, providing a forum for book/material discussions, conducting public relations for library services and resources, marketing our resources and services, or getting feedback from our constituents. What I love

about wikis is that you can use them throughout all types of libraries; you can access, design and “serve” within an hour and you can invite comment with “lower end” 2.0 opportunities as well as obviously populate the wiki itself or link wiki content to a variety of other lower end or higher end venues. Free wikis provide few controls while inexpensive wikis offer opportunities to organize content and present current information while organizing past content.

The downside of wikis—and again I have to insert *some* negative comments here—is the fact that free and low cost wikis are by and large vulnerable to outside tech influences. In general, however, I recommend wikis over blogs. What a boon for communication and organization of information!

Online/Electronic Everything

Not much to say here. A recent *New Yorker* cartoon showed a man getting a newspaper delivered to him from his dog with a comment something like “We still like print don't we?” And of course we still do. However, in these economic times when statewide electronic resources programs are downsizing, we're back not to square one but maybe square ten. Earlier decisions (actually the past two decades of decisions) had many of us making choices because we knew “electronic” was here to stay. And, of course, it is here to stay. But now that our finances are dramatically changed, not for just one year but for three to five years (“they” say), we are now making different sets of choices—harder choices—print-vs.-tech choices. Making these choices is not comfortable, and I'm pulling out my general accreditation guidelines and my discipline-specific guidelines.

Recession, Recession, Recession; Worst Recession; Hope, Hope and More Hope; Conserve Finances to Minimize a Difficult Future

So it's back. A recession, and not a little one or a temporary one but rather a big one—expected to last fewer than five years but absolutely more than two. As a manager, I have sat (or treaded water) through several downturns by now. These were years of flat budgets and many of us start out funded inappropriately anyway. I have assessed usage and hours, and cut hours. I have gotten funded for year one of a three year plan and that's all, several times. I have opened new sites using only existing funding many times.

But in the past four years, our fortunes have changed . . . I received (after gathering significant data) new positions on a three-year cycle and all three years of employees were hired. I have requested and received significantly more technology and purchase and replacement is placed within a three year replacement cycle. So *my* status quo is much better than my past status quo and reductions. But getting ready for the recession, or the *worst* recession, dictates a different way of doing business as we all now know. A few

cuts or fewer dollars in general, necessitates a thoughtful plan for assessing, cutting, tracking, and then requesting return to beginning levels of resources and services. The *worst* recession or a worst-case scenario dictates an entirely different approach that includes assessing institutional values, the organization's mission, new environmental scans, zero-base discussions that include "What happens if we just stop doing this?" and "What impact will discontinuing subscriptions make?" These tougher, mind-boggling, work-stopping questions spark early retirements in some and prevent early, on-time or long-overdue retirements for others.

But—and I promised that I would focus on the positive, so here goes—any recession in general and certainly a *worst* recession forces assessment and provides valuable data. With in-depth cuts, normal attrition doesn't typically satisfy the recovery of necessary dollars or a projection of significantly less money, so major changes are often in order. No one wants to face significant, potentially harmful and almost assuredly changed organizations by themselves. Managers should identify assessment teams, much like Emergency Response Teams (ERTs), to assist them in planning for the future. These teams, best when conceived as a cross-functional group, bring in *new* data and with more in-depth assessment can identify weaknesses, offer opportunities for change, reaffirm essential values, or indicate new values are in order. Major cuts managed by administrators and ERTs provide opportunities for temporary changes, changed resources and services, and programs for permanent changes with increased and structured data-gathering and with assessments directing future decision making.

Conserve, Preserve and Digitize, Or We Lose Our Past

An overarching issue amidst discussions of current significant cutbacks is the commitment to and need for digitization of materials located in hundreds (a conservative estimate) of collections. The significant network of digital environments is a sophisticated, formal and informal group of experts who, though funded by soft money *and* hard

money, are scrambling to maintain the progress made and the structure designed that identifies, digitizes, organizes, and serves the brave new digital world.

But things are different this time. Unlike other recessions where everything or "almost" everything is reduced or stops until recovery, digitization, no matter the expense, is seen as both a cultural savior and a smart business move. It's clear that this time around a critical part of the infrastructure of the future is the identification of resources, the digitization of resources, and the organization of digitized materials.

Conclusion

So much for today's headline issues in libraryland. But if you have these elements solved, yesterday's headlines are still there and include:

- **Copyright**—Copyright issues won't go away and we haven't settled it yet. I like the comment heard years ago, that hundreds of lawyers will spend dozens of years of researching copyright and get few answers and no solutions.
- **Net access**—While many have Internet access, we still have many who don't, *and* the issue now is more speed and delivery of content over the Net.
- **Technology trade out**—Just when we think we have the perfect tech set up, new hardware and software hit the market. How do we do set up rotating purchasing and fund it?
- **Digital born and digital native**—Who's out there? What do they know and when did they know it? What don't people know? Who are we leaving behind?
- **Economic value of information**—The print/online elephant in the room: What value do we bring to organizations? What value does information have?

In sum, given the depth and breadth of today's management issues and problems: Keep up and keep out of trouble—that's my motto.