

Perspectives on Leadership

Editor's Note: Leadership perspectives provide insight and lessons from leaders in the field as they share experiences and offer advice on leading libraries through a period of particularly rapid and unyielding change.

Interview with Elisabeth Doucett

By Anne Peters



Elisabeth Doucett

Elisabeth Doucett took an unusual path to her current position as director of the Curtis Memorial Library in Brunswick, Maine, and she is now experiencing her third career after spending six years in nonprofit fundraising and fifteen years in marketing and brand management in the consumer packaged goods industry. Indeed, Doucett's résumé reads like a perfect marriage of corporate America, academia, and public librarianship. She earned an undergraduate degree from Smith College in art history and classical Greek, after which she began her first career as fundraiser in the development departments at Harvard and Boston Universities. She went on to earn an MBA in marketing from the J. L. Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University, launching her next profession as a specialist in consumer marketing. Doucett worked at Kraft Foods, Dunkin' Donuts, and Quaker Oats, then went on to consult for multiple Fortune 500 companies.

After receiving her MLS from Simmons College in 2004, Doucett took the role of assistant director of the Lucius Beebe Memorial Library in Wakefield, Massachusetts, a position she held until accepting the directorship at Curtis Memorial in 2007. Doucett is the author of *Creating Your Library Brand*, published by the American Library Association in 2008. Her second book, *What They Don't Teach You in Library School*, will be published by ALA in the summer of 2010. Doucett's leap

from the for-profit world to the world of libraries may seem incongruent, but she quickly found commonalities between the two. "I found that my business skills could continue to be very useful in the library environment," she says in the preface to her first book, "particularly my skills in marketing." I talked with Doucett about the role marketing could—and should—play in libraries today.

Q: What inspired you to leave the world of corporate marketing and begin a new career as a librarian?

I left marketing because I wanted to have a career that had a more direct positive impact on people's lives than marketing. Marketing was fun, challenging, and interesting. However, I always felt like I was missing something in my career and my work wasn't as useful to society as it might have been. I used to joke that at the end of my life I wanted my tombstone to say something other than "She sold a lot of coffee, donuts, and oatmeal."

In 2001 there was a confluence of events that gave me the "push" I needed to move in a new direction. September 11 had a huge impact on me, as it did on most of the people in our country. I watched normal people have their lives cut short tragically. It really brought home to me that life goes by very quickly and you shouldn't waste it doing work that doesn't have meaning to you. Also, my husband started law school (something he had always wanted to do) and that became an inspiration to me that I could make a similar change in my life. Finally, I was working in marketing consulting at the time, and in the recession that followed September 11, the industry went through a major contraction. I realized that I was probably going to be downsized (which I was) and that I needed to have a plan B. I decided that becoming a librarian would be my plan B. I chose librarianship because I love reading and I believe completely in the power of reading and education to transform lives. By working in a library I felt like I would finally be contributing to our society in a way that I felt made a real difference. Also, I knew that I could use and incorporate my business skills into my work as a librarian. That was important to me because I wanted to build on my past, not discard it.

Anne Peters (anne.peters@utsa.edu) is Communications Coordinator for the University of Texas at San Antonio Libraries.

Q: How do you feel the skill set you developed in the world of business helped you to manage and lead a public library?

I think every library manager or leader can benefit tremendously from having business training. Getting an MBA was all about learning to manage an organization, whether it was a nonprofit or a \$500 million business enterprise. I took courses in personnel management, finance, marketing, operations, accounting, and organizational behavior, and every one of those courses has proved helpful to me in my role as a public library director. In fact, the reason I decided to go into library administration was that I wanted to incorporate what I had learned in business with the skills I learned in library school. It is important that I am able to understand, as a librarian, what is needed to make my library run effectively. However, in terms of the day-to-day running of the library, my business skills are every bit as useful as are my skills as a librarian.

Q: In your book *Creating Your Library Brand* you advocate for libraries to embark on a brand development process. Why do you think it's important for library leaders to pay attention to branding?

Branding is primarily about telling a story. In the case of libraries it is telling the story of why libraries matter. I believe branding is critical for library leaders if for no other reason than the fact that it makes them consider why their library *is* important to their community and then work at finding a way to communicate that information in a compelling and succinct fashion. All too often when libraries develop mission and vision statements we do it via committee. Every person on the committee has a key point that they want communicated, and as a result, these statements end up sounding like laundry lists of what the library wants to do versus being a powerful statement about the value and role of the library. A branding story by its very nature has to be short and compelling. It is meant to convey a great deal of information in a small “packet” of information. However, it is impossible to do that if you haven't thought very carefully about what you want to say and how you want to say it. Once you've done the work to articulate your brand story, you have developed a very potent and effective tool for guiding your organization and talking effectively to your library users. How can that be anything but useful and important for library leaders?

Q: In your book you state that “you do not need to be a brain surgeon to do branding” (x). What do you say to other library

managers who feel unqualified to run a brand development project?

Good marketers or branders have one key skill—they know how to listen. They listen to the people who buy their product or use their service and they listen to the people who don't. From their listening they then develop a service and a story about that service that will be relevant and important to their audience. If someone can listen intelligently, then learning the other skills of branding is relatively simple. Most library managers and librarians are already good listeners or they wouldn't be in their jobs. That means they already know how to do the hard part of branding. I guarantee that they can certainly teach themselves the rest—lots of librarians have already done just that.

Q: You clearly indicate the importance of getting the right people involved in a library branding project from the early stages. How can a library leader best ensure buy-in without bogging down the process?

The best way I've discovered is to spend time before starting a branding process identifying the official *and* unofficial decision makers at a library. Official decision making is usually directly related to a job title. In a small library the library director might be the final “go-to” person for any issue regarding the library. In a larger library the director might delegate responsibility for decision making to individuals with more immediate experience than the library director has in a specific topic area. In both cases you can identify the official decision makers simply by asking who is responsible for marketing and branding the library. However, every library also has the unofficial decision makers, and these are harder to discover. An unofficial decision maker might be a board member who has been involved with the library for thirty years in one capacity or another. It might be a staff member who had a prior career in design and understands branding. It might be a member of the community who helped develop the “old” brand that you are considering updating or replacing with a new brand. If you can't identify and involve these individuals in your branding initiative, any one of them could easily derail your entire process.

So, how do you identify them? I usually start by asking questions. I talk to library staff and ask them who should be involved in a branding process. I put out surveys for the public and ask them to identify themselves if they are interested in being involved in branding. I talk to board members to see who might have a passion for being involved. When I collect four or five names, I gather those individuals together and I ask them who we are missing, assuming they will also have a good idea about who should be involved. If I end up with six to ten participants, then I

feel like I have a good number. However, if I end up with too many names (generally more than ten) I know I won't be able to incorporate all these individuals in the primary branding process. I don't want to lose their input, nor do I want them to be upset at not being involved. So, I establish a secondary team of participants. These are folks whom I know need to be kept involved with regular updates and need to be given the opportunity to participate. If you discover that you need to follow this process, clear communication of expectations to this group is critical. They need to know how they will be involved and what opportunities they will have to participate, and you need to be willing to follow through on that commitment. This process facilitates involving a larger group of stakeholders efficiently without losing the nimbleness of a smaller, primary group of decision makers.

Q: “Do not be afraid to achieve less-than-perfect results” (p. 71) is one of my favorite quotes from your book. How has your professional journey shaped this “better to do something than nothing” philosophy?

When I started working in business in 1988, the traditional path of developing a new product for the marketplace took two years. Ideas were tested in markets and with consumers, market research was done, products were reformulated, and then everything was tested again. Finally, there would be a huge market launch, often costing millions of dollars. However, over time that process started to change. The cost of developing and launching a new product had to be reduced as businesses became unwilling to spend so much money on a product introduction that might or might not be successful. The business world became more comfortable with making decisions on-the-fly and dealing with mistakes versus trying to completely avoid mistakes. As a result, companies became adept at getting new ideas and products to market in shorter and shorter cycles and managers in business such as myself learned to move more quickly, become more efficient, and be more comfortable with ambiguity versus certainty.

I think libraries are sometimes still locked in a mentality similar to that of the old business environment—a concept has to be fully tested and “perfect” before a library is willing to try it. I think we need to start being more comfortable with experimenting, making mistakes, and trying new ideas. Otherwise our profession will run the real risk of becoming obsolete. Change is now the only constant in our society and no institution has the luxury of simply standing still. The branding process is a perfect example of something that you can try at your library with minimal support and staff and have a real, positive impact on your communications with your customers. It doesn't have to be perfect, and you will make mistakes. However, the key is to

get going so you can take advantage of the opportunity to develop better communications with your patrons.

Q: You devote an entire chapter in your book to blogs, indicating that “A blog can become either an indispensable or hated part of a library director’s life” (p. 89). Are you currently blogging for Curtis Memorial? What is the most valuable thing you learned as the result of a blog conversation?

Curtis Memorial Library just launched a new website (www.curtislibrary.com) as part of the development of a new brand at the library. The entire website is essentially a blog because it is developed on WordPress. Any member of the staff can add content to the site or respond to patrons who can leave comments on the site. I've discovered several important lessons as we've developed this website:

- Patrons don't just start chatting with you because you have a blog website. You have to write blogs in such a way as to invite commentary, and this can be difficult when you are used to writing for the sake of presenting information. So, my staff and I are all learning to write in a new way for our website.
- As much as you might take great pride and joy in your new website, patrons aren't going to visit it regularly unless you give them a reason to go there for information. So, keeping your website current has to become a regular “to-do” in your weekly list of activities.
- Not all blog responses are equal. We have received some good feedback about our website from our patrons that was helpful. However, we also got some comments that fell into the category of “can't be repeated in polite society.” So, we've learned to check out comments before we make them public to ensure that our website won't end up offending the entire town.
- The most valuable thing I've learned to date? Be very careful about the assumptions that you make as you write a blog and know that the people who read your blog or website will catch every mistake you make! Curtis Memorial Library has tremendous community support. However, as part of a community survey blog, I made the mistake of asking “why do you think Curtis Memorial Library is a special place?” One library user told me very quickly (via blog) in no uncertain terms that he resented my assumption that the library *was* a special place and that I should not have phrased the question in such a leading way. The worst part was that he was correct! I've learned to be much more thoughtful about what goes into the blog environment.

Interview with Amed Demirhan

By Eric C. Shoaf



Amed Demirhan

Librarianship can be a challenging profession, and some parts of the world have much more challenging social and economic circumstances affecting all types of public institutions. Such is the case in Iraq, the present location of our interview subject. Amed Demirhan was born in Northern Kurdistan (Turkish part of Kurdistan) and was educated at American universities, earning an MLS from the University of Southern Mississippi and an MA from Wayne State University. His language proficiencies range from Kurdish, Swedish, and Turkish to Spanish and English. Demirhan has contributed to numerous newspapers and online news portals as a columnist in international affairs. He was appointed in September 2006 to build a new library for the then newly established University of Kurdistan Hawler (UKH), an English-language university in northern Iraq. He quickly discovered the challenge of international transportation of books and serious limitations of the local market in building a library collection. However, over the past three years, the university has prospered and the library grown along with it.

Q: One would expect that building a university library in Iraq has been a challenge. What actions have led to successes?

When one works in a post-war environment or in a developing country, one will encounter many unforeseeable conditions. The situation sometimes is very static and sometimes very fluid but hardly ever “normal.” Therefore, one has to be very flexible but patient and persistent in pursuit of the main goals. To be more concrete, I could say the following were very important, but not necessarily in this order:

- Having a clear vision and mission that is relevant to the community and in line with the university founders’ vision. I will talk about this more later.
- Taking initiative and leading in library matters: don’t wait; no one is going to tell you how to do something or what to do.
- Hiring the right staff members for the right job.
- Communicating across the university about library development (new additions, information literacy, new services) or about the needs of the library; reinforcing communication on an ongoing basis, particularly in

writing, but following up verbally to appropriate committees and venues.

- Developing staff hiring policies and procedures in accordance with professional values and standards that are internationally acceptable. Insisting on professional standards, for example, by enforcing copyrights, defending academic freedom, implementing equal opportunity policies, and more.
- Committing to offer the highest level of service to the students and staff. Providing ongoing advocacy of the value of the library for communities (university and wider communities).
- Being emotionally intelligent; this is particularly important in this kind of environment. As the institution is in a building/development process, many rules and regulations are not necessarily in place or yet established; therefore, one could face many conflicts that would be avoidable otherwise. Handling human territoriality in a less or unregulated environment requires strong emotional intelligence.
- Thinking strategically and longer term. Having the ability to read social and political conditions properly. Keeping communication at all levels professional, regardless of conditions or circumstances. Building confidence among employees and premier customers (student and staff) by applying the policies in a consistent manner.
- Serving the wider community. For example, by doing volunteer work to train other university library managers and staff in the region created good publicity and goodwill. It reinforced the commitment to serve the greater communities. In other words, this demonstrated that I am not just preaching right things, but I am doing right things, too.
- Practicing transparency. The library at UKH was the first department of the university to publish its work report online, making it available to everyone who is interested. Applying library policies that build trust on the use of equal access. Training staff about the “library bill of rights” and “code of ethics,” and library services and concepts, all of which improve quality of service.
- Developing international and regional cooperation. Establishing rules and regulations but enforcing them consistently to create institutional credibility.
- Creating a library advisory committee that has representatives from all members of the academic departments—student union, registrar, finance, and information technology support services. This has created an opportunity for a democratic participation of all stakeholders in the decision-making process and to help to further the library cause.

Eric C. Shoaf (eric.shoaf@utsa.edu) is Assistant Dean at the University of Texas at San Antonio, and editor of *LL&M*.

- Becoming a member of the American Library Association and its divisions, which has helped to build the international profile of the UKH library and has contributed to staff development.
- Building good relations with locally hired university staff because they provide the best access to local knowledge. Every one of them is expert in something local regardless of their position. Most information is not organized yet, there are not enough directories about local market and local traditions, and more, these make good relations with local staff more important. Keeping everything documented and open as much as possible.

Q: The library's website (www.ukh.ac/library) has mission and vision statements on the homepage. Can you describe the importance of these statements and how they were developed?

The library mission and vision statements are fundamental guides to library development and direction. The vision of an organization is the soul of that organization and reflects its values. Library creation is based on this vision and mission. When I came to Hawler, the capital of the Kurdistan Federal Region in Iraq, to work at the newly established university, the first Rector of UKH told me that the founder of the university, the Prime Minister of the Kurdistan Region Mr. Nechirvan Barzani, had asked him to build a university to the highest Western standard. This was my instruction. One has to take in consideration the local, regional, and global needs when designing a library mission and vision statement. After studying and thinking about how this library should be built for this university and region, I started to develop the mission and the vision for the library. I already had very good knowledge about the country history, culture, and diverse population. It had to be realistic and easily understandable and defendable. After approval by the academic committee, it became operational.

Every newly hired staff member has to learn about the vision and mission of the library and has to understand why we have that. During university staff inductions and information literacy classes we always start with our mission and vision. The library staff hiring procedures, job announcements, staff development, and library services are based on these elements. If one examines the UKH library work report, job announcements, and interview questions, one can see it is a reflection of the library mission and vision. The mission and vision are sources of the library's operation and direction. It is our public commitment to our users, client, and patrons—what we are doing and what we will do.

Q: What sort of training did you receive over your career that has been the most useful in your role as director?

Having a well-known and accomplished mentor like the late Dr. Donald E. Riggs, former dean of the University of Michigan libraries and later the vice president of Nova Southeastern University in Fort Lauderdale, was a great good fortune for me and a wonderful source of inspiration. Dr. Riggs introduced me to theories of leadership, particularly library leadership, about which he himself was a leading writer and practitioner in the field. I learned many valuable things from him, such as the importance of mission, vision, strategic planning, public service, and outreach.

Attending the Sun Seekers Leadership Institute (2003–2004) in the Southeast Florida Library Information Network (<http://seflin.org>) was very helpful. In addition to providing theoretical knowledge, this training introduced me to some very important things; the participants were from all kind of libraries from southeast Florida. Because of that I learned about other libraries and their issues, successes, internal relations, and more. Another aspect of this training was that in every meeting the participant had an opportunity to hear a successful library leader's vision and advice for the success and importance of leadership.

Meeting Mr. Tom Sloan, the executive director of the Southeast Florida Library Information Network, was another great benefit of the Sun Seekers program (Sloan is now the executive director of DuPage Library System in Illinois). Mr. Sloan has been a source of inspiration and encouragement since then—particularly since my arrival in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, his support and advice have been very important. I have learned many things from him and he is one of my role models.

Finally, working in Broward County Joint Academic and Public Library was a very important learning experience about diverse clientele and their needs. Drawing from my international, multilingual, and multicultural experiences has been very useful, in addition to my library-related training.

Q: What attributes do you consider essential for a leader, and why?

It is well known that there are many attributes of successful leadership. The late Dr. Riggs used to say that there are at least one hundred definitions of leadership. From these, some attributes are consistently and universally on the top—honesty, integrity, and positive thinking. I think the value of honesty and integrity is self evident. However, in increasingly volatile and changing environments, these values become more important. Your employees, your customers, partners, and others should be able to count on you and trust you to carry on your vision and mission, or to

respect it, or to help implement it. For example, you cannot develop good customer service if the vendor you are working with will not deliver your goods and services on time.

Positive thinking has a great impact on those you are working with, particularly in difficult times and in a challenging environment. It makes a big difference when one starts the work day with a smile and good greetings, and these are the things we don't have even to pay for.

In the global context, the ability to communicate across cultures and social groups and to be open-minded are most critical. Accepting differences of values and cultures is fundamental for leaders. However, this doesn't mean adopting others' values and ways of life, but rather, recognizing and respecting them or respectfully disagreeing. We have all grown up with certain values, assumptions, and prejudices; therefore, the ability to recognize reality and overcome one's own assumptions and prejudices is very important to effective leadership in different parts of the world.

Q: Tell us about use of the library at UKH. How do students and faculty interact there, and what is the library's role in the academic process?

The library is very well used by the students. In a recent survey, 68 percent of the students said they use the library at least once a day, and there are other students who use it more than once a day. Some faculty members come to the library with their students, while some prefer to use the library's online resources from their offices. All faculty, staff, and students are always invited to the library for information literacy classes or individual tutoring about the library resources and how to use them. Relations between and among students and faculty are very good, and the library is doing its best to work with them to attract as many of them as possible. The library provides students with unrestricted Internet access and wireless access. The students at UKH are very motivated and interested to learn. Many resources in the library are very new for them, and these create more interest. The library tries its best to create a very comfortable and welcoming environment for its users. In January of this year, one of the university's Access Program/English Language students, Ms. Lilan Loai, worked on a project about the library available now on YouTube (www.youtube.com/watch?v=mC0lxq4RKuc). I think this could be very useful to see how students describe the library at UKH.

The library director is a member of the University Academic Board and several other relevant academic committees, and the deputy library director also represents the library on several committees. In short, the library is well represented in the academic decision-making process. The library has been persistently insistent about participating in university-wide committees and decision-making processes.

Q: What are the most challenging parts of your job as library director?

I have learned to see challenges as an opportunity and to learn more than anything else. Some of the fundamental challenges are related to the concept of the modern Western library. This could relate to public service, the copyrights issue, and more. Another challenge is that all teaching faculty members are either people from different countries, mainly English speaking, or members of the Kurdish Diaspora who were educated in the West and are from highly diverse backgrounds. Both collection development and finding qualified staff, even library assistants, have been serious challenges. This diversity may be considered a very great asset, but at the same time, in the institution-building process, it could create a serious challenge.

As indicated in the mission statement, the library is open to the general public, but with certain restrictions. For example, members of the general public cannot borrow a book, but can read in the library and they can have unrestricted Internet access and access to other library resources. But the students and staff of the university always have priority. I was once seriously challenged by the university's former senior academic advisor who was from a prestigious British university and think tank. He could not accept this policy. We had a lengthy discussion on the subject of the importance of open access to the public, particularly when there is hardly a functioning library in the region. I am a firm believer that one shouldn't reinvent the wheel; but sometimes it is easier to reinvent the wheel than convince some people of the importance of the existing one. There have been other people opposed to library open access for the general public. One has to constantly defend this kind of policy despite it being well established in most Western countries, especially in the United States.

Our copyright policy was very challenging to establish, first of all because of our location. Particularly in earlier years, we had very limited access to library materials. We had to import most of our materials in small quantities; therefore, they were very expensive. The students were accustomed to copying entire books in the local market "Bazaar" or buying pirated books printed in some regional countries. During the Saddam era, piracy was "legalized" and universities "officially" reprinted books in violation of international laws. On the one hand, not being able to provide the books to the students, and on the other hand, insisting on copyrights, created a big dilemma and conflict.

I would like to share this experience. One day, one of the university English teachers arrived with some twenty English grammar books, and he wanted the library to reimburse him. (The library has to approve all book purchasing.) He had paid about \$4 per book and one was even one of my favorites. When I told the teacher, "Sorry I can't reimburse you for this," he was furious because his

students needed this book, and this book is one of the best on the subject. I agreed with him, but the book was pirated and it is against library policy to pay for pirated books or materials. The same book is \$45, plus shipping and handling, on Amazon, but we have to refuse to buy it for \$4 despite our students needing it. As one can imagine, this creates a serious ethical and economic dilemma. Fortunately, the copyright rule is now well respected by the students and staff.

Collection development was a serious challenge from the beginning, except for our electronic collections. It was easy for the faculty and university administration to accept library authority in choosing databases and other online open-access sources, but it was not so easy for the print collection. We had to work very hard to convince the faculty and administration about library expertise for the print collection, and initially administration wanted to rely exclusively on faculty and teachers' recommendations for the collection, but gradually library expertise became accepted. This took more than three years, however. Transportation of the print materials and ability to access professional collection development tools were very limited, too.

Finding qualified staff has been an ongoing challenge. Being an English-language institution and having high demand for quality public service makes it more difficult to find even a good library assistant. The one we find we have to train to bring the level of service to the Western standard, so a staffing shortage is ongoing. Another disadvantage for us is that we are competing with private companies for the same quality of staff—a college graduate with

good English skills. Because the Kurdistan federal region is rapidly developing, there are many private companies that pay high salaries. This puts the library in a more difficult position when seeking appropriate staff.

Diversity is one of the greatest challenges in institution building. While in most established Western universities, diversity is considered an asset, during institution building it creates a great challenge. In established institutions, certain rules, regulations, and institutional culture are in place, and therefore the newcomer has to fit in to a certain degree. However, in new institutions, all of these are missing. Therefore, everyone tries to impose their individual experience and will on others, and this creates many conflicts. As one who studied dispute resolution in graduate school, I don't think conflict is good or bad, but management of conflict will impact the outcome. Because most people can't manage the conflict, we tend to believe it is bad.

Another challenge to diversity is the fluidity of faculty members. Currently, I am the only senior administrator who has been on board since the establishment of the university. Most heads of department I work with are the third, fourth, or even fifth person who has held that position, and I presently work under the third university president (vice chancellor). I have had to restart with many of them and go through many things that my staff and I have been through before. However, I consider these to be great learning opportunities, to be able to work with so many different managers and heads of departments.