

Management 2.0

Librarian As Consultant: Reaching Out to Small Business

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“I ask you, what am I? I’m one of the undeserving poor: that’s what I am. ...But my needs is as great as the most deserving...I don’t need less than a deserving man, I need more.” ¹

In Shaw’s *Pygmalion*, Alfred Doolittle bemoans his fate – the difficulty of obtaining help when one is considered ‘undeserving.’ He has the same needs as other people, in fact, he may need more help than the ‘deserving poor’ who will occasionally benefit from other people’s largesse, but he’s often last on the list for aid, if he gets any at all.

The small business person might well feel as ignored by the library as Alfred Doolittle was by those charitable donors. For while it is true that most librarians have an ‘urge to serve,’ it can seem that service is mostly directed toward those individuals and organizations that find favor with librarians or toward those populations covered in library school courses such as young adults or people with low literacy. When it comes to organizations, it wouldn’t be unusual for a librarian to feel that her service was better focused on nonprofits rather than for-profit organizations because those poor nonprofits have so few resources and small businesses are, well, businesses with resources, right? In this issue, I introduce doing outreach by acting as an ‘Information Consultant’ to community-based small businesses. I suggest that the librarian is uniquely qualified to fill the gap left by other small business service providers.

It’s a new world for everybody

You don’t need to be told that the field is changing. Many people no longer feel a need to go to the library to meet their information needs, because, as we all know, all the information anyone could ever want is on the internet. Budget cuts can leave your library with fewer employees who are burdened by more work and few opportunities for a raise or promotion. The library manager must justify her organization’s very existence in more ways, showing how it provides a return on investment, whether that ‘investment’ is the library’s share of a university’s budget or an allocation from the local government’s tax revenues. Library managers have had enough to deal with in their own organizations; understandably, they may not have worried too much about managers in other fields, however, we may have reached the point in the economic ‘new normal’ where they can lift their heads up and look around to see what is happening in the rest of the world.

The fact is, small businesses face many of the same problems that you face – less money, rapidly changing workplace technology, increased cost of resources, and often not enough staff with the right skills to get the done (and no money for new hires). You may not be able to help them find more customers or investors, but as an information consultant, you are exceptionally able to help them meet their information needs.

What does it mean to be a consultant? A consultant has a level of specialized knowledge that makes her an expert in the field. That level of expertise allows her to recognize problems, be familiar with patterns and notice when the pattern is no longer there. Experts can use past experience to forecast what events are likely to happen. Being aware of the big picture, they adapt when the picture starts to change without becoming overwhelmed. Experts know when they've done well and when things have not gone as planned; they know their own limitations. They can stand back and critique their performance, learning when they need to change.²

Sarah Murphy suggests that librarians already possess the skills common to consultants. Consultants are good at listening and determining a client's needs – librarians not only listen to what the patron says her needs are, but I suggest they are also good at ferreting out the client's unstated needs. A consultant seeks out information for problem solving and can analyze retrieved data. Librarians are effective searchers, of course, but are also willing to share their search strategies so that the client can do more on her own the next time she faces a similar information problem. A librarian will encourage the client to make sure that the retrieved information actually meets the client's needs, but she also creates an environment of comfort and trust so that the client knows she can return for more help without feeling anxious or embarrassed to do so.³ If you think about it, you and many members of your staff probably act as consultants already.

Small Businesses and Their Information Needs

Why reach out to small businesses? Where do they fit in the national economy? There are approximately 23 million small businesses in the United States⁴ with small firms having most of the growth during the recent recession.⁵ We may think of a 'small business' as mom and pop starting a business over the kitchen table or their kids developing a software firm in the garage, but small business in the United States looks quite different. As defined by the Small Business Administration, a small business is independently owned and operated, organized for profit, and not dominant in its field. Small business size can vary depending on the industry, product, or service. For example, a manufacturing business may have from 500 - 1500 employees; service providers may earn from \$2.5 to 21.5 million; and retailers may have from \$5.0 to 21.0 million in receipts. Agricultural businesses may have receipts up to \$9 million.⁶

In the past, many small businesses were of a type that were self-sustaining, had few relationships with other businesses, and few information needs. The dry cleaner on the corner may have belonged to a cooperative that enabled him to get solvent at a reduced price, but his interaction with other dry cleaners was limited. As American business has changed, small businesses are beset by a number of problems in adjusting to the new economy. These issues include a lack of trained technical personnel; insufficient funds to meet the demands of technology and infrastructure development; lack of knowledge of best uses of information technology; ignorance of knowledge management processes that support organizational learning and memory; and an inability to leverage information and knowledge as strategic assets.

In the new economic environment, there is more information for the small business to handle and manage. A business may now have to file state sales tax forms online. Its suppliers may use e-commerce websites to facilitate ordering and purchasing. A competitive construction firm may have hundreds of electronic documents prepared for the bidding process. Contracts with federal and state governments create even more need for documentation. In their efforts to hire diverse contractors, government agencies may mandate a technology and information management burden for which these businesses are unprepared.

To address these changing needs, small business or entrepreneur outreach centers have been established at business schools across the country. These centers apply the research of the business school to the practical problems encountered by local small businesses, such as writing a business plan, providing general management guidance and support, or acting as an intermediary between small businesses and funding sources. The center may also provide opportunities for a 'real life' consulting experience for business school students.

For example, at the University of Maryland, the Dingman Center for Entrepreneurship of the Robert H. Smith School of Business provides small businesses with access to investors and legal advice, and technology (<http://www.rhsmith.umd.edu/dingman/>). Governments at the local, regional, and state levels also sponsor similar centers, such as the Washington Small Business Development Center in Washington State (<http://www.wsfdc.org/>).

These centers offer valuable benefits to their clients, but there is something missing. That 'something' is the presence of information professionals who offer a very different skill set than those possessed by the typical MBA-heavy business center staff. Here are just three of the possible areas where a librarian's expertise would be helpful when working with small businesses:

1. Introduce knowledge management – this includes knowing how to scale knowledge management projects for small organizations with limited budgets and focusing on the human aspects of knowledge management. More about knowledge management later.
2. Assist the organization with its research needs, including instructing owners and staff in search strategies and introducing free or low cost databases and online sources such as US Census information (<http://www.census.gov>). This can improve staff research abilities, enabling them to obtain more of the information the organization needs, rather than doing without the information or hiring outside services to do this work for them.
3. Suggest information technology tools based on an understanding of human information behavior and the information management needs of the organization, rather than suggesting technology for the sake of technology.

Why the focus on knowledge management? In my opinion, good knowledge management is the core of an organization's success. Information professionals instinctively recognize the need for organizations to manage the information they produce and use. But that is just the beginning. The primary reason for creating knowledge management systems is to reduce the transaction costs - the costs that decision-makers incur to acquire information.⁷ One way to reduce these costs is to make decisions based only on information readily available to the decision-maker by using nearby sources of information, such as people and the internet, because they are closer and don't cost much in terms of financial resources or personal effort.⁸ Another way to have more information is to make it less expensive to obtain, again, in terms of personal effort, monetary costs, or time. Using knowledge management is a cost-effective method of increasing the amount of knowledge available to decision-makers, while decreasing the costs.

Knowledge management may also decrease costs by increasing information sharing within the organization. The consultant librarian can help entrepreneurs learn how to create an environment that encourages staff to share information. In information sharing environments, employees realize that the

more they share, the better the organization functions, and there is no benefit to holding the information they possess as hostage in a play for raises or promotion.

A sharing environment also reduces *redundancy costs* - the repetition that occurs because people do not share information. They are especially costly to small businesses which may have a high turnover, many new entrants into the organization without previous experience, and a limited ability to absorb these costs.⁹ Despite the negative effect these costs can have on a business, small business owners rarely consider them, nor do they see them as a drain on resources. The librarian's expertise is valuable here, as she is able to show business owners the economic issues related to poor information control.

A small business, like any organization, can be a place where the only ideas accepted are those that come from within. Small businesses can thrive and be more competitive when they are able to look inside and outside of the organization to bring in new, useful, and invigorating information.¹⁰ The librarian consultant can show managers how outside information can be used to benefit the organization and encourage them to foster an environment in which outside information will be accepted.

Finally, even large, well-funded organizations need a champion or evangelist to help management understand the benefits of knowledge management projects.¹¹ The librarian can be this champion for small businesses so that firms that cannot afford a full time knowledge management specialist can still have the benefit of a trained information professional. In my opinion, assisting small business with knowledge management is the best service the librarian consultant can offer.

What Does It Take?

Not everyone is cut out to be a consultant. Librarians who want to contribute to their communities by working with small businesses should possess certain characteristics:

1. Leadership ability – the consultant must possess a willingness to lead. You can't wait for your opinion to be asked. You need to be out front, seeing problems that the entrepreneur doesn't see and willing to take risks to solve them. The consultant must be able to work with all types of people, from a variety of industries, on any day of the week, and from project to project – that sounds familiar, doesn't it?
2. Comfortable with change – The single constant facing any organization today is change. Change creates uncertainty, which in turn creates a need for new information. Can you work with clients to help them find – and understand - the information they need to deal with the changes facing their organization?
3. Knowledge of low cost, human-centered, knowledge management – Often the organizations you work with will not be able to afford expensive high tech solutions to their knowledge management problems. It is up to you as the consultant to recommend no or low tech methods to solve the problem. Usually this means focusing on human ways of sharing and transferring information, and using inexpensive technology as a helping tool rather than the primary focus of a knowledge management initiative.

4. Keeps up with technological changes – Just because the businesses you work with have limited funds, doesn't mean that they don't buy technology. The consultant must be aware of new developments in information technology while at the same time, limiting her recommendation of 'hot' but untested 'flavor of the month' technologies.
5. Learns quickly – You need to be able to pick up on jargon, terms of art, industries and services of the different businesses quickly. No owner wants to have to constantly explain what her business is about.
6. Analytical ability – A consultant, you are part of the team of experts gathered to help the business succeed. Your expertise needs to include the ability to analyze the information you obtain and present your analysis in a way the client can understand.
7. Can communicate to a variety of audiences – You may be more comfortable talking one on one or to small groups, but can you talk to large groups? Can you talk to company presidents without becoming intimidated and forgetting that you are the expert in the room? Can you focus your talks and get down to business, rather than provide so much information that your audience is overwhelmed?¹²

Make a Difference

Small businesses must acquire and use information, but they face the twin problems of a restricted ability to hire expertise and an incomplete understanding of information as a factor in business management. Librarians can help small businesses realize that information is an asset whose proper use and control can make the organization more competitive, thus more likely to survive.

If you hesitate to find small business with which to consult on your own, consider affiliating with an existing small business support center in your locale. Becoming an affiliate can raise the profile of your library among small businesses. It can also raise your individual and organizational profile among the executives working with the small business support center, providing new opportunities for networking for yourself and support for the library.

The consultant provides a model of the information professional to an audience whose close association with a librarian probably ended when they turned in their last term paper. She can become an integral part of the economic development of her community by helping start-ups and existing small businesses to be successful by helping them to recognize the role information plays in their success.

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