

by  
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It's getting so that I am afraid to open the morning paper. I can always seem to count on at least one headline with bad news about the economy. "Oil Closes at Record High"; "Builders' Confidence at Record Low"; "Unemployment at Four Year High." When organizations continue to tighten their budgets as the economy contracts, every department gets scrutinized. While I continue to believe that, one glorious day, librarians *will* rule the world, until that time we have to continue to assume that funding for libraries or information centers is not guaranteed.

As an independent information professional and a former special librarian, I have gone through several cycles of economic downturn and recovery. What I have learned from experience is that there are both long-term and short-term techniques for weathering downturns. Most of these involve taking the long view and planning accordingly.

*Library Journal* had an article in the Aug. 15, 2008, issue headlined "Future-Proof Your Library" [<http://tinyurl.com/562xsd>]. The article comprised some of the big ideas in the profession — great content, but I winced at the headline. Information professionals are *not* "future-phobic." The future isn't something we need protection from — it is what we plan for. Maybe I'd prefer a title like "How to Make Your Library Future-Philic."

# LIVING LARGE in LEAN TIMES

This article will look at how both libraries or information centers and independent info pros can weather lean times. Note that I am not looking at situations in which libraries have to close or severely cut staff; my intention is to provide some general guidelines on how to address the pressures of an economic slowdown on a library or independent info pro business.

## Take the 5-Year View

One of the early purveyors of recycled paper goods, Seventh Generation, chose its name to reference the Great Law of the Iroquois: "In every deliberation we must consider the impact on the seventh generation ... even if it requires having skin as thick as the bark of a pine."

Taking the long view can be tough, but having a hide of bark can help. In a more positive light, organizations that can look beyond the *crisis du jour* to underlying issues and needs are the ones that will survive. I grant that unless (like us info-entrepreneurs) you head your organization, it's hard to know what decisions upper management will make that will have an impact on the information center. And, of course, we have no control over the economy or, usually, on the strategic direction

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of our organization. But we can peer into the future of our profession and take some educated guesses as to what skills and expertise will become or remain most valuable in the long run.

Keep in mind that we are all free agents. Unless we have an employment contract stipulating how long we will remain with the organization, we always have the option to change jobs. And it always makes sense to think strategically about your own professional career trajectory. Do you want to be employed as an info pro in 5 years? If so, then consider building your professional skill set so that you remain competitive.

Members of the Special Libraries Association, for example, can take advantage of a self-paced learning initiative called 23 Things [<http://wiki.sla.org/display/23Things>]. Members are encouraged to spend 15 minutes a day on professional development, working their way through the 23 “things” — Web 2.0 technologies and applications such as Second Life, wikis, podcasts, and so on. Each module covers the technology and encourages participants to “localize your learnings” by applying what they’ve learned in their own workplace.

As for why we need to keep our professional knowledge honed, Nancy Hancock of Current Issues had an interesting per-

spective. Commenting on why she registered for SLA’s 23 Things, she said:

I’m 50 years old and really have little to no interest in Web 2.0 and the whole Second Life ... I have a first life that is full and keeps me happy and busy. Why do I need or want an avatar or to waste my time with all of this when I could be gardening or reading my endless stack of books that I love? Because I have to work at least 12 more years and have to deal with the Millennial Generation who wear all of this as second skins. That said, after I returned from the 2008 SLA Annual Conference, I started the 23 Things Initiative. Yes, this is a conscious choice — not an interest, really, but something I know I need to spend some time with. The adventure begins ....

Staying on top of new technologies, particularly ones that don’t appear to have much relevance to our day-to-day lives, can be challenging in the best of times. But the info pros who are going to thrive are the ones who embrace technologies that they suspect will some day be ubiquitous in the workplace. That’s why I have a Second Life avatar, why I Twitter, and why I text message my siblings. I know that, as more people of the Millennial

## Living LARGE on Your Own



In addition to the suggestions in this article, we independent info pros have some other options in terms of cutting expenses. When is the last time you compared health insurance premiums? Is it time to raise your deductible and promise yourself you won’t get sick? Could you be getting better interest rates and fees with another bank? Is your credit card processing company charging you more than another vendor would?

Info-entrepreneurs also spend money — judiciously — on advertising and marketing. For example, you may place display ads in the key publications your clients read. Look at each of these carefully and consider whether this is a critical marketing expense. It may well be that you decide it is vital that your clients see your name in every issue; if so, move down the list to other ads or sponsorships you maintain and evaluate the ROI of each one. But remember, you don’t want to suddenly disappear from your clients’ landscape.

Like other info pros, we have to think about how we can make ourselves recession-proof. The key element is to think strategically, which means spending your marketing budget (in terms of time and money) equally on efforts that will have short-term and long-term pay-offs.

This also means building the right kind of client base. Clients worth pursuing and cultivating usually look like this:

- Likely to provide repeat business
- Likely to become a source of referrals or will provide you with access to prospective clients
- Have more money than time
- Understand the value an info-entrepreneur provides
- Integrate you into their information-gathering routine.

As you evaluate your marketing plan for the year, consider what specific actions you can take to attract those ideal clients. That might mean focusing your marketing on a higher-level executive, expanding your niche in response to what the market needs, or developing a stronger reputation within your prospective client base to establish yourself as *the* information expert in their field.

Generation join the workplace, I will need to be familiar with the technologies that are second nature to them. Investing my time in staying cutting-edge is one way that I keep myself prepared for whatever way the economy goes.

## False Economy

It is human nature to panic when faced with budget cuts or a slow-down of clients. Unfortunately, it is also easy to make decisions that, while saving money, actually cost money in the long run. For example, I have seen independent info pros drop their business phone line or not renew their membership in the key professional associations of their profession and their clients.

While these yield short-term savings, they also block the ability to recover from a cash flow crunch. No business line? How will potential clients find you if they can't look you up in the business pages? How will they react when they get your home voice mail and hear "Leave a message for Tim and Cathy and we'll call you later"? Likewise, if you have a toll-free number your clients can use, this is no time to cancel it. Any client who uses that number and gets a message saying the number is disconnected will not likely look up your regular business number.

Belonging to the Special Libraries Association or, for us info-entrepreneurs, the Association of Independent Information Professionals (AIIP), is one of the most effective ways we keep our professional skills sharp and learn about new job opportunities. Networking is one of the best ways to keep all your options open — either for a new job or for new clients — and dropping your membership to a key professional association means you aren't tapping into that resource.

## Short-Term Fixes Versus Long-Term Payoffs

So, what *do* you cut if you need to get even more lean and mean? There are effective choices in both short-term changes and those that will show a payoff down the line. We will look at some effective examples of each, but first a caution.

Cutting costs through small steps such as reducing your travel budget next year or cutting back on the online budget is difficult to sustain over time. Like a beach ball pushed underwater, these expenses will likely pop up again next year, meaning that these are only effective cost-cutting measures if you know that your budget will return to the past higher level. Unless you are positive that the money will be there in the future, these fixes amount to Band-Aid measures rather than techniques for sustainably reducing expenses.

## Approach Matters Strategically

As you approach the thought of strategic budget cuts, remember that virtually anything is negotiable. (A great book on negotiation, although skewed to the female perspective, is *Ask For It*, by Linda Babcock and Sara Laschever [Bantam, 2008].) The first step toward success in negotiating is to consider the situation from the other party's point of view. Is your VP drastically cutting your budget? First, keep in mind that, in the immortal words of Michael Corleone in *The Godfather*, "It's not personal, Sonny. It's strictly business." Then think about what is driving your VP's decision. Is the library seen as a source of revenue or as overhead?

At a presentation she recently gave in California, Janice Lachance, CEO of SLA, noted that "in times of economic uncertainty, 'nice to have' is not necessarily nice enough to keep." While any department of an organization contributes to overhead (salaries, rent, expenses, and so on), some departments are seen as revenue generators — sales and production, for example — and some as necessary expenses — including human resources and legal.

Your mission is to ensure that you are seen as a revenue-generating operation. While you probably can't directly bill your organization's clients for the information services you provide your internal patrons, you can focus on and *measure* the ways that your services contribute to the bottom line. That might include the following:

- Collecting testimonials from your patrons describing how you helped land a large customer or project
- Building an industry web portal that helps clients and prospective clients learn more about your organization and industry and drives traffic to your organization's website
- Developing customized alerts that notify sales staff to important news about their clients.

You can also demonstrate your value by analyzing how much time you spend on research projects, how much time your patron would have spent, and how much that saves the organization in labor costs.

Then look at how you currently spend your budget; it should reflect the priorities of your organization as a whole. Plan on expanding (or at least maintaining) spending in a growth area for your organization and reducing or eliminating spending on products or services that no longer match the priorities of your organization or that can no longer pull their weight, financially speaking. That may mean eliminating a service that you have offered for years or one that feels important to the library staff. You must take dispassionate looks at all your services; if you can't justify a service to the VP, then it probably needs to go by the wayside.

Garry Harpst, author of *Six Disciplines for Excellence: Building Small Businesses That Learn, Lead and Last*, recommends, "At least every year, leadership should revisit their goals and the plans to achieve them. If the big goals are no longer right or the means to get there altered, change them." This applies to info pros as well as the C-suite; we need to change our activities to reflect what the goals are now, not what they were when more funding was available.

After you have looked at the services you provide and aligned them with the strategic goals of your organization, how do you go about providing the best possible service while reducing your expenses? Following are some examples of ways to cut costs or to ease cash flow, in both short-term and longer time frames.

### Examples of Short-Term Cost-Cutting

First, remember that your goal is to cut nonessentials and to retain the tools you need in order to remain a critical asset to your organization. The following examples show how you can either postpone or eliminate expenditures without significantly affecting your ability to provide essential information services to the critical groups within your organization.

*Defer upgrades on technology.* Yes, it would be nice to get that new laptop or sexy mobile device, but is it really critical to how you work? If you can't get your job done without an upgrade, go for it. If this is a "nice-to-have" purchase, it can wait.

*Use open source or low-cost software,* but only if it has no impact on how you deliver results to clients or patrons. For example, I use FireShot, a Firefox add-on, instead of a commercial application to capture webpages, Flash files, and screen shots. If you need to create PDFs and you don't need sophisticated options, a number of free and almost-free PDF creation tools can save you the \$300 you would pay for Adobe Acrobat. And OpenOffice.org is one of the better-known sources for an open source alternative to the Microsoft Office suite of applications (and it includes a PDF creation too). However, as cloud computing grows, keep an eye on new opportunities. For example, Microsoft has announced it will begin delivering Office suite applications as web SaaS services. [Read Erik Arnold's *InfoToday NewsBreak*, "Entering a Post-Software World—Microsoft Finally Embraces Cloud Computing," Nov. 6, 2008, <http://newsbreaks.infotoday.com/nbReader.asp?ArticleId=51455>. —Ed.]

*Use a VOIP service such as Skype for nonessential calls.* Calls within the network (e.g., from your Skype account to another Skype account) are free, but the quality of calls can vary from great to impossible. This is a case of "don't let 'em see you sweat";

I will use Skype when calling a colleague but I won't use it to talk with a client. The chances of getting a poor connection or getting cut off during the conversation are too high for me to risk sending a signal to a client that I am too cash-strapped to pay for a phone call, even an international call.

*Outsource anything that saves you money and doesn't affect the quality of your services to your clients or patrons.* Depending on the situation, that might include interlibrary loans, serials management and the like, or — for info-entrepreneurs — some of the brute-force search post-processing work, basic accounting, and so on. Your core competencies can't be outsourced, though; I see as many libraries returning to doing research in-house as libraries sending their research work to lower-wage countries. During budget crunches, it is tempting to offshore the work done by (more expensive) information professionals at home, but the unintended consequence is the perception that the library's work is not highly skilled and that info pros within the organization don't bring added value with their internal understanding of the organization.

*Cut back on nonessential professional memberships.* Do you belong to the American Library Association, Special Libraries Association, your state or regional library association, and the Society of Competitive Intelligence Professionals? During lean times, it makes sense to drop some of the more tangential memberships; you can always rejoin later. But hang on to at least one key association membership. How else will you maintain your network of colleagues and possibly the best source for your next job?

Now, pause and note the cautions I inserted with each of these short-term fixes. They boiled down to these two:

- Don't cut the tools that enable you to provide strategically essential services.
- Maintain existing standards for value-added services.

As you look at these quick-payoff options, keep in mind that, once the quality of information services drops to a certain point, the information center starts losing its existing support and runs the risk of being seen as a nonessential entity.

### Examples of Longer-Term Cost-Cutting

Taking the longer view in terms of cutting costs, look at how you will be spending money 6 months or a year from now and evaluate how you can make changes now that will lower costs later. That means looking at all your recurring expenses.

*Put a mental "sunset clause" on all your costs,* so that you can evaluate their importance on a regular basis. Do you have your most expensive subscriptions on an automatic renewal

plan? If so, cancel that auto-renewal; when the expiration date nears, look into other options. Do you truly need a subscription to each publication or can you rely on retrieving individual articles online as needed? Can you get the heaviest users of the publication to carry part of the cost? Is there a lower-cost publication that might constitute an acceptable substitute? If you do decide that the subscription is justified, consider only renewing a year at a time. You lose any multiyear discount, but you have the option to reconsider your subscription the next year.

*Cut back some of your online search service subscriptions, but only as long as you know you can subcontract the work.* You may decide that you don't need subscriptions to Dialog, Dow Jones/Factiva, and LexisNexis, for example, but each of those services offers exclusive content. Before you cancel your subscription, explore the alternatives. Can you change your subscription from a flat-fee to transactional pricing? Do you use the service infrequently, and, if so, is there an independent info pro who can search that service when you need it? For info-entrepreneurs, membership in AIIP offers transactional pricing to the Big Three online services, so AIIP members can offer access to high-end content without having to pay a flat fee.

*Re-evaluate your technology needs and resources.* Do you really need that BlackBerry or iPhone, or can you make it without 24/7/everywhere email and web access? Do you routinely replace your laptop every year? This might be the time to soldier on with last year's model for another 12 or 18 months.

## Make Yourself Recession-Proof

There are other ways of addressing the challenge of lean times — strategies that will result in a stronger, more diverse client base. And I'm not just talking about an independent info pro's client base. Unless you are a private librarian for an individual, you have multiple clients, users, or patrons, and some of them have more clout or influence than others. Not to suggest that any individual gets slighted, of course, but these are times when it is only prudent to have strong, influential advocates of the library or information center.

First, *focus on what added value you can provide to all your information services.* While we info pros are driven by the desire to provide the highest services to everyone, that may not be the best approach during a financial crunch. If your budget were in peril, which of these would you rather be judged by?

■ “The information center increased the number of online searches it provided by 15% and has completed X research projects.”

■ “The information center is known as the go-to place for in-depth research and analysis — the place to find info pros who can help make sense out of information.”

While the latter scenario may involve redirecting some of the more basic research requests to self-serve options, it also ensures that the information center is viewed as a strategic asset and not “merely” a source for research services.

*Look at ways that you can provide synthesis and analysis of the information you provide to clients.* How could you provide graphics or tables to make the information more “digestible”? What format would be the easiest for the client to use? (For an outline of a presentation I gave back in 2007 on adding value to the material we find, see <http://www.batesinfo.com/creating-groupies.pdf>.)

*Pay attention to what drives not just your industry but your clients' industries.* That means reading whatever you can find about your own organization's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats and seeing what services or products you can develop to support the strategic goals of the organization. For example, a special librarian whose company was being pummeled by a relatively unknown competitor might offer the strategic planning department a weekly analysis of news and buzz about the competitor.

*Build your personal brand as someone who knows not only how to find information but also what to do with it.* The experience that many info pros have with both virtual communities and information management means that we can provide creative solutions to the questions that people are likely asking within the organization:

- This is interesting. Do my colleagues know about this?
- What's this? Do any of my colleagues know about this?
- Who else knows about this? Should we be talking together?
- Who knows about this vendor/customer/competitor/etc.?
- What is happening in my professional “territory”? What should I be watching?

What can you do to help with these questions? Our Web 2.0 skills enable us to offer information management services to our organization by building wikis for groups, offering customized RSS feeds, or facilitating the creation of a social network of employees.

And finally, be flexible. We live in weird times, and we're required to regularly challenge all our assumptions. As we expand our own notion of what our strategic value is within an organization, we can start living large, even in lean times. ■





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