

Image problem? Try some self-promotion



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Picture — elm trees bedecked with light green leaves, the sun glistening on the canals, tall houses with their distinctive gables. That was Amsterdam in August and the venue of the 64th conference of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions. Picture also more than 2000 librarians and thousands of tourists all jostling for places on the trams, entry to the museums, somewhere to stay and a seat at one of the outdoor cafés. The locals didn't stand a chance.

This year, I experienced IFLA for the second time. My only other encounter had been in Sydney in 1988 and dissatisfaction lingered. Like many 'first-timers' IFLA 1988 was not an entirely comfortable activity and the overall standard of papers did not seem high compared with those presented at most Australian conferences. A decade later it was different and it was obvious that IFLA was in a process of change. More of the sessions were workshops. This enabled greater interaction with colleagues and a sharing of information not possible with lecture-type presentations.

It is always salutary to attend an international conference. Apart from the obvious delights of foreign travel, being a stranger often heightens awareness of how much everyday things are taken for granted. At an Australian conference, you tend to know people and consequently have a sense of belonging. Out of that comfort zone, you have to make an effort to meet people and establish contacts. Otherwise, it can be a bleak experience.

While at IFLA, a daily diversion was 'spot the librarian' on my way to the conference venue. Sometimes this was easy, as many of our colleagues were inseparable from their conference satchels and name badges. Without such clues, however, a librarian could just as easily have been an Amsterdamer.

Is there a stereotype of a librarian? Does it matter and if it does, how can it be changed? How do we want to change it? Will changing the image of librarians result in improved funding, higher salaries or better services?

Typcasting is inevitable. At some time, we are all guilty of assuming that a person's occupation is related to characteristics such as their appearance, educational achievements, wealth, political beliefs or intellectual capacity. We are often surprised when these correlations are not valid. My grandfather was a tram conductor who weighed 108kg. Stereotypically, he should have been interested in horse racing and beer. In fact, he was a teetotaler who played the viola, listened to Beethoven incessantly and performed in amateur musicals. He rarely felt the need to disabuse people of their erroneous perceptions, and enjoyed the paradox.

I have never been concerned by any stereotype of a librarian. Like my grandfather, I do

not feel that I should have to justify myself. Nevertheless, one way to stop most conversations is to say that you are a librarian. People either assume that you are some kind of effete intellectual whose days are spent quietly reading or that you stamp out books. Regrettably, we have to convince others of the range of activities undertaken in libraries and of their importance to society.

Any image problem from which librarians and libraries may suffer is largely within our capacity to change. How do we do that? It is mostly a matter of analysing the issue, implementing change and telling the world about it. Above all, it is about being positive.

Self-analysis is always beneficial. Look in the mirror — do you look like the sort of person who inspires a sense of confidence and capability? Examine your attitudes and behaviour — do you have the service approach you would expect from a shop attendant or bank clerk? Take a critical look at your surroundings — is the library untidy or unwelcoming? A little self-promotion never hurt — how enthusiastic are you about libraries? How well do you promote libraries and librarians? For most people, you are the stereotype librarian. You are the standard against which the profession is judged. Your library is the benchmark.

Through an initiative of the NSW and ACT Branches, ALIA has been looking at issues related to the image of the profession and libraries. Research so far indicates that poor self-perception is a major factor. By and large there is a lot of positive opinion about libraries and librarians.

A recent report by the Australia Council and the Australian Bureau of Statistics indicates that more people use public libraries than visit museums. Of those surveyed, the majority was not in favour of increasing government funding to museums but believed that libraries should be better supported. Obviously, someone thinks we are worthwhile. A critical task for the future will be to devote time and funding to promoting libraries and librarians as key contributors to the nation's social, educational and economic health.

ALIA already has a strong lobbying campaign and many branches, divisions, interest groups and individuals devote considerable energy to promoting the profession and libraries. Part of our future strategy will be to enlist the assistance and commitment of everyone associated with libraries. A positive self-perception and constant promotion will go a long way toward resolving any image problems.

Don't wait for 'them' to do something. Start today and become a one person advertising campaign. Perceptions won't change overnight but you will be surprised by the unexpected victories you have along the way. ■

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