



## Preaching to the Converted

From the desk of the Library Provocateur

One drawback of belonging to ALIA since before Methuselah was old enough to join the Summer Reading Club has been the sheer volume of paper I have accumulated over the years; and consequently feel obliged to sequester about Chez Provocateur.

At last count, my unofficial ALIA repository had nearly 20 linear metres of ALJ gathering dust and cockroach droppings on shelves in the garage, a little less of *inCite* stacked in neat piles in the spare bedroom, and the kids' cubby pretty much collapsing under the weight of two cubic metres of various committee meeting papers, pamphlets, circulars, and conference proceedings.

Fortuitously perhaps, I have recently noticed a somewhat leaner if not meaner *inCite* arriving in the letterbox each month. And, as if to reinforce the point, my weekend sorties to Ikea for flat-pack BILLY bookshelves have not been so frequent. Gud vad jag älskar Svenska köttbullar!

Traditionally, for seven days in late May each year we celebrate Australian Library and Information Week. In theory, if not always practice, it is a time for libraries and library workers everywhere to showcase their talents and wares; ideally with the intention of wooing new customers.

Sadly, I say 'in theory' because the reality is typically very different and most libraries I know fall into the trap of proselytising to their true believers anyway. If ever a customer recruitment campaign thinly disguised as a celebration is wasted by our profession, it is generally Library and Information Week. However, our perennial misunderstanding of what constitutes 'marketing' I will address at another time.

Lots of us have organised and participated in a good many Library and Information Weeks, and one thing strikes me about the contemporary event as compared to a decade ago – nobody seems to care much anymore!

Talking to colleagues in various libraries, I hear of the odd desultory attempt at a foyer display, perhaps some competitions, and the obligatory morning tea attended by a senior manager or local worthy. Meaningful attempts at genuine customer engagement sadly appear few and far between.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the pages of *inCite* this month – a worryingly thin issue for supposedly our biggest celebration of the professional year. Where are the success stories to inspire us, the innovative ideas for engaging with new customers to share with colleagues, and the robust debate about our professional present and future to inform advocacy efforts?

Where is the passion for sharing libraries with others? More importantly, where is the passion?

If we take this month's *inCite* as a barometer of our collective professional engagement, it is low enough to make me fear very unsettled weather ahead!

Some weeks ago, I was obliged to relocate about a decade's worth of *inCite* to the dog's kennel. In the process of aggravating my paper-mite allergy, dodgy 'shelver's back', and the family Labrador, I happened across the issue of *inCite* from July 1996 – the cover photo showing a submerged diver reading a book on corals. It's an inspiring celebration of Library and Information Weeks past, and an issue (Volume 17, Number 7) I would like to share briefly with you now.

For those who might not recall, Library and Information Week in Queensland that year was launched from inside the main tank of the Great Barrier Reef Aquarium in Townsville. It made the cover of *inCite* and garnered good mainstream media coverage across the state.

Elsewhere in the country, media interest in Library and Information Week was also intense – all thanks to the efforts of passionate local library workers. In Darwin, a local commercial radio station broadcast live from the public library. Where are the 'Black Thunders' in every large Australian city these days?

In Hobart, a leading local journalist launched Library and Information Week in the State Library, guaranteeing extensive coverage in *The Mercury*. Sponsors then helped fund a feature on Tasmanian libraries in *The Sunday Examiner*.

Across Bass Strait in Victoria meanwhile, sponsors including the ALIA state branch (remember those?) helped to fund a full page invitation to Library and Information Week in the Sunday edition of the Herald-Sun newspaper – an initiative that potentially reached up to 1.5 million Victorians.

The profession in Queensland funded a community television advertisement on the Ten Network, which aired for the two weeks leading up to Library and Information Week and Media Monitors calculated to be worth many tens of thousands of dollars in 'return on spend'.

For sheer imagination and promotional reach though, the prize for most effectively promoting Library and Information Week in 1996 must go to our NT colleagues. It was they who organised a Territory-wide promotion in which every milk bottle top during Library and Information Week was printed with the tag line "Libraries cover a lot of Territory". Brilliant!

Where is that energy and imagination now I wonder, on the eve of another Library and information Week, 14 years on? The lack of interest in contributing to *inCite* this month suggests we all have better things to do with our time – and perhaps we do. But can we afford to ignore opportunities like Library and Information Week? I think not. As events, they may not be perfect, but they are only ever going to be as good as the effort and creativity we choose to put into them.

We need to remember another point as well. As the profession of 1996 demonstrated, Library and Information Week is not about preaching to the converted. Lee Welch reminds us that we can do that for "the other 51 weeks"<sup>1</sup> of the year – our regular customers should be made to feel special each and every time they visit our libraries.

For this one week however, we have the opportunity to stretch ourselves a little and work collectively to get our message across to new customers. The real challenge for us here and now, as it was in 1996, is recruitment – new customers, new believers!

Now, a quick question to finish – who bottles your milk?

*Ed: Does anyone still have one of these bottle tops? We want to know!*

<sup>1</sup> Lee Welch (2006) *The other 51 weeks : A marketing handbook for librarians*, Wagga Wagga, N.S.W.: Centre for Information Studies, Charles Sturt University.

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