

Why Libraries Fail & Tips for Staying Alive

Jane I. Dysart

For years, I've thought about why libraries fail, and what they should do to stay alive. This article distills my experience and findings into 10 key strategies for survival.

1. See changing patterns in your community

Foresight is not enough to guarantee a profitable journey toward the future...[but] without foresight, the journey cannot even begin.

Hamel and Prahalad,
Competing for the Future

At the heart of why libraries fail is lack of awareness regarding organizational changes, demographic shifts, economic conditions and user behaviours. An excellent tool to study and interpret your operational landscape is environmental scanning of social, political, economic, ecological and technological events. Environmental scanning illuminates the challenges, growth areas, trends and conditions that will affect you. Techniques include:

- systematically monitoring current events, industries and technologies
- following the research of futurists
- utilizing brainstorming and scenario building

Although they are qualitative, subjective and speculative, these methods lengthen your planning horizon, translating an inkling of an opportunity or threat into a clearer strategic issue or answer.

2. Keep up with new developments and trends

Libraries also fail if they don't keep up with trends in technologies, information management processes, social structures, behaviours or funding models. In our field, there's no excuse, since we have plenty of trend monitoring tools, including:

- LibraryStuff.net, produced by Steven Cohen
- ResourceShelf.com, by Gary Price
- ShiftedLibrarian.com, by Jenny Levine
- SearchEngineWatch.com, by Danny Sullivan and Chris Sherman
- Infodayblog.com, by Information Today
- LISNews.com, by Blake Carver and others

In fact, our profession has so many weblogs and other Internet sources that it is nearly impossible to keep up without using RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feeds through free aggregators like Bloglines to help monitor the huge array of content.

3. Identify key market segments and clients

We set ourselves up for failure when we do not know the key clients of our organization or library and instead try to be all things to all people. To ensure success, we must focus our attention, energies and resources on those people who are most critical to us, developing products and services for these key customers.

Through market segmentation, you can determine preferred target markets, by examining your client universe, and assessing each client's importance to you and your organization. Preferred targets should be:

- Profitable: Can they support you or "buy" your offerings?
- Relevant: Do they need your types of offerings? And can you enter this market easily?
- Strategic: Are they important and do they fit with your goals?
- Measurable: Can you clearly define them?
- Accessible: Can you reach them? Are delivery channels in place?

As you define your market, or target groups, look for those that meet these criteria.

4. Align with and engage the community

Once you've identified your target market, ensure that you align with and engage that community, especially in the wake of changes. Do you have 360-degree awareness of what's happening in your organization? Have you kept several champions, even when your senior management has changed?

One way to deepen your community awareness is through an information audit, which systematically examines "information use, resources and flows...to establish the extent to which they are contributing to an organization's objectives. The audit is verified by reference to both people and existing documents."¹ An audit will help you understand your market's needs, attitudes and perceptions about information, its cost, value, issues and opportunities. It focuses on:

- Clients: What do they need and value?
- Content: What have we got? What do we need?
- Value or cost of information: What are we spending? How do clients value it?
- Information flows: How is information shared? What impedes its transfer and exchange?²

To answer these questions, you can use various survey strategies: questionnaires, individual face-to-face or telephone interviews, group interviews, focus groups, or any combination of these techniques.

However, you may not need a full information audit to ensure alignment with your community. A market analysis may answer all your questions. In a market analysis, you study your organization's business, mission, purpose, strategic imperative, objectives and key players. You identify opportunities to use information resources for strategic advantage and decision making, and develop key partnerships and marketing opportunities. In addition to reviewing the annual report, strategic plan and (official and unofficial) organization chart, talk to your boss, your clients and executives in other key areas. Face-to-face or telephone conversations can yield valuable market information. Your market analysis should answer the following questions:

- Where do we fit in this market today?
 - What is our market size and market share?
 - Which client groups use our services, and how?
 - Which client groups are not users, or show declining use?
 - What are the trends, dips and blips in usage statistics?
- What are the perceptions of clients and non-clients?
 - How are our services used and perceived?
 - Where do we fit in their information usage behaviours?
 - What are their experiences with our offerings?
 - What is their level of understanding?
 - What are their "pain points," and what are their current and desired solutions?

Once you know your market's needs, information gaps and values, you can create or redesign services, play a unique role for your clients, identify key partnerships and decision-making opportunities, and highlight ways to engage them and get their support.

5. Set a clear direction

Without a clear sense of direction, libraries can flounder. Do your stakeholders know and understand the direction you're taking? Do you have a clear focus and strategies? Planning for the future, strategic planning, direction planning, or whatever you call it is imperative for any organization. It is surprising, however, the number of organizations who do not apply rigorous planning in their regular activities. We use a direction planning tool, or business planning framework, with our clients:³

6. Link staff expectations and plans to the strategic direction

If you've set the direction for the next two to three years through a strategic planning process, individual staff expectations and deliverables should cascade from it. Annual business, department and individual plans reflect organizational goals and outline the resources needed to achieve them.

7. Play a key role in the knowledge value chain

Sometimes libraries fail to play a key role in the value chain. Ask yourself what is really important to your organization or community.



- Inquiring: Listen carefully to what people are saying and ask questions to fill knowledge gaps; librarians are experts at this.
- Leading: Rather than imposing solutions, transmit information in a way that leads people to talk about possible solutions (i.e. storytelling).
- Proposing: Present possible solutions, a choice of options.

10. Ensure leadership, team development and succession planning

In any organization, leaders set the tone. They understand the environment and engage the community. They have a clear direction and communicate it. They are fair, they support and develop their staff, and they plan for the future.

Leaders do not sit in the stands and watch. Neither are leaders in the game substituting for the players. Leaders coach. They demonstrate what is important by how they spend their time, by the priorities on their agenda, by the questions they ask, by the people they see, the places they go, and the behaviors and results that they recognize and reward.⁴

The ability to learn is a defining characteristic of being human; continuous learning is an essential skill of leadership. Leadership in this world of ever-accelerating change requires both the wisdom of our elders and the insights of younger people. In *Geeks and Geezers: How Era, Values, and Defining Moments*

What are they trying to do? Is your library critical to your organization? Do you have a good understanding of the organization and your role in creating value? And then answer this question: what impact do you have on your clients' clients?

8. Take risks, try new things, challenge thinking patterns

To be successful, libraries need to challenge paradigms and take risks. You've heard the definition of insanity: doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. We have to try different things, make mistakes and learn from them. If you are contemplating something risky, ask yourself, "What's the worst that can happen?" If you can live with the answer, go for it. Or think about the answer to futurist Joel Barker's paradigm-shift question: What is

impossible to do today, but if it could be done, would *fundamentally* change what you do?

9. Communicate well and use "influencing skills"

If you can't get your message across to your key stakeholders in a way that engages them, you have no chance. Beyond just hearing the message, you want them to take action for you through resource support, partnering or commitment. One way to ensure greater communication success is to understand the style of your target audience. Do they prefer face-to-face meetings, one-page reports, telephone conversations or email? What works for them?


In tailoring your message, the following influencing skills can also be very effective:

- Pacing: Vary your communication to match your audience; good sales people are experts at this.

Shape Leaders, Warren Bennis and Robert Thomas talk about how leaders:

- create meaning from events and relationships
- have the ability to process new experiences, to find their meaning and to integrate them into their own life – an adaptive capacity
- have courage, optimism, tenacity and self-confidence
- are first-class noticers: recognizing talent, identifying opportunities and avoiding pitfalls
- have neoteny, retaining youthful qualities as adults: curiosity, playfulness, eagerness, fearlessness, warmth and energy

In developing leaders, we should try to understand the geeks, the up-and-comers, and those who are concerned with meaning, significance and making a difference, in collaborating and experimenting. We should seek more collaborative ways of doing things and technologies that support this globally. We should be bold, try things, and learn from failures and mistakes.

Let me know if some of these tools work for you! 

Jane Dysart co-founded Dysart & Jones Associates after 17 years as Manager, Information Resources, with the Royal Bank of Canada. She is a former president of the Special Libraries

Association, and a recipient of its John Cotton Dana award. She can be reached at jane@dysartjones.com and www.dysartjones.com.

Notes

1. Aslib Information Resources Management Network (www.aslib.co.uk/info/subjectsinfoaud.htm).
2. For more information, see “Information Audits: Building a Critical Process,” *Searcher Magazine*, January 2004.
3. For details, see “Business Plans: Roadmaps for Growth & Success,” *Information Outlook*, December 2000.
4. James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *The Leadership Challenge* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002).