

Janice Lachance
Sierra Nevada Chapter
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Defending Libraries in a Time of Budget Uncertainties

Thank you, Jane, and good evening. I am very happy to be here with you in Sacramento.

After that wonderful wine tasting . . . a fabulous dinner . . . and a healthy helping of sparkling conversation . . . I am so relaxed that I am going to make a confession:

I love my job!

After all, there is no better company than a group of information professionals. You are smart, you are funny, and you know so many interesting things. I'm simply delighted to be with you.

Because you are such a well-informed group, it will come as no surprise when I tell you this: Our nation's economy is in bad shape. The mortgage mess and sky-high gas prices seem to have conspired with Mother Nature. We are watching the cost of doing business and consumer prices go

up . . . profits and sales and property tax revenues go down. Every so often, just when it looks as if things might be getting better, a hurricane or an earthquake jolts us back to reality. And every economic unit, from our families, to corporations, to governments at all levels is looking for something to cut.

- If you have had to trim your household budget, you have probably taken a hard look at what you can cut—and what you can't. Every line item must be evaluated on the basis of how essential it is to the operation of your home. Satellite TV? You might be able to survive without it. But electricity? You can try to use less electricity, but cutting it out is not an option. To save big on electricity, you will likely have to spend big money and invest in things like more efficient appliances and new windows.

A similar scenario plays out when companies or governments are obliged to cut costs. We must be able to demonstrate that every item in the budget is essential to the operation of the business. That means we should be prepared to answer some questions:

- How does this item help your organization achieve its mission?
- How does it support the organization's strategic goals?
- Who are the stakeholders? Who wants it ? . . . Who needs it? . . . Who relies on the work product you generate with it?

All too often, executives looking for a place to cut spending are finding that cut in the library or information center. They are not doing this to be mean . . . they are doing it because they need to cut any spending that is not absolutely necessary. If you have not shown them the connection between your work and the ability of your organization to have the right information to make wise decisions, your budget may be targeted.

Do the people who make decisions about your future have the right information about your library or collection? Do they know what you offer and who needs it to do their job? Most important, can they see the outcomes within your organization that were only possible because you linked people with the right information.

These are critical questions. How you answer them will determine whether your work is deemed “mission critical” or simply “nice to have.” Needless to say, in times of economic uncertainty, “nice to have” is not necessarily nice enough to *keep*.

That seems to be what happened at the Environmental Protection Agency—EPA—and at a number of other federal agencies. As belts tighten, we can expect to see it happen in organizations of all kinds and sizes.

Let me give you a little history of what happened at EPA. Then we can look at what we all can learn from the experience.

In 1970, when environmental pollution was first becoming a widespread concern, Washington had a bright idea: Bring together all the federal research, monitoring, standard-setting and enforcement activities aimed at protecting the environment. so they decided to create an agency whose mission is to protect human health, as well as the air, water and land we require to maintain it.

There are millions upon millions of things that affect the environment—substances, processes, activities, events and much more. And, of course, much information about these things has been generated, collected, compiled and otherwise brought together in the EPA's network of 27 libraries and information centers across the U.S. A lot of this information is unique—it cannot be found anywhere else.

The need for these libraries seems pretty evident—at least to you and me. People rely on this information to make decisions that affect everybody's health. There's EPA itself, its scientists and researchers. And there are other Federal agencies, states and local governments, industry, academics . . . We even heard from exterminators who relied on local EPA libraries to learn about the chemicals they use in houses and put down on lawns.

But SLA learned in February 2006 that the Bush Administration's fiscal year 2007 budget proposed to cut more than two million dollars—closing those libraries and information centers.

I am proud to say that SLA—your association—was the first library association to speak up *and be heard*. We immediately issued a news release condemning the cuts and

put out a legislative action alert asking our members to contact their representatives in Congress.

Then we went to work with our partners at AALL, ALA, MLA and ARL. Together, we sent some strongly worded letters to key members of the House and Senate outlining the problems associated with closing the EPA libraries.

Then we met with EPA staffers and learned something very interesting indeed. Their thought was to digitize all the unique materials in their libraries. There were big problems with that thinking, though: they had no business plan, and no timeline, and no budget. And as far as we could tell, they had no knowledge of the technology involved or its limits—and no plan to safeguard original documents.

And nobody had analyzed the impact on users. Would EPA scientists have access to previous work? Would the public be able to get at information that only EPA had? Would public officials be able to put their hands on the right information in time to deal with toxic events such as chemical spills or industrial accidents? Nobody really knew.

If they had only listened to an information professional!
Every one of you could have told them that this was a

penny-wise, pound foolish strategy. To make matters worse, EPA didn't even wait for Congress to approve the budget cuts. In August 2006, they began to pack up some of their libraries.

How did things get to this point? There is little doubt that EPA's lack of innovation in information management decreased the efficiency and usefulness of their libraries. And that made them an easy target at budget time.

We kept the pressure up, and at least some in Congress listened—including your senator, Barbara Boxer, who has been a great friend to SLA and the information profession.

Congress asked GAO—the Government Accountability Office—to look at EPA's long-term plans and at how it would keep its unique materials accessible during the transition. Yet even as GAO looked into the matter, EPA began to close libraries. They even auctioned off some of the furniture for pennies on the dollar.

So we met with EPA, and then we met with them some more. In November 2006, our supporters in the Senate again stepped in. They asked their colleagues who are in charge of EPA's budget to order EPA to maintain physical

access to its libraries and give the public a chance to speak up.

Finally, in January 2007, EPA agreed to stop closing libraries without further consultation. But we knew that this might only be a temporary cease-fire. So we kept asking questions—in a very public way. What research had EPA done on the effects the reduction of services might have on the public's health and safety? Had the Justice Department advised about possible legal consequences of digitizing EPA official documents?

In February, I submitted testimony to the U.S. Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, outlining SLA's concerns about EPA's plans. And we continued the dialogue with EPA, even inviting the director of EPA's Office of Information Analysis and Access to speak at our 2007 conference. He accepted—in fact, EPA even exhibited at the conference. If you were there, you know there were some lively discussions.

Over the next six months, the House and Senate both passed budget legislation that required the EPA to keep its libraries open. Even better, Congress provided additional funds to re-open the libraries EPA had closed.

This was a great outcome after a long battle. But the story is hardly over.

This past February, EPA responded to us, Congress, and other stakeholders and submitted its plan to restore its libraries and ensure public access to its environmental information. We are very pleased to see this positive outcome but we continue to monitor EPA's progress closely, speaking up whenever concerns come up.

I'm very proud to say that SLA's Chief Policy Officer, Doug Newcomb, has been invited to serve on a workgroup that will take a look at EPA's major information audiences, the kinds of environmental information they need, and best ways to make the information accessible. This workgroup will report to the National Advisory Council for Environmental Policy and Technology, which will in turn recommend to EPA's administrator a strategy to make environmental information accessible to the people and organizations that need it most.

So . . . you may now know more than you ever thought you would about this effort. My purpose in recounting this rather

long story . . . and your purpose in asking me to . . . come down to the lessons we have learned.

What can you do if you are faced with a similar threat?

I recommend a four-step plan:

- Anticipate
- Collaborate
- Verify
- Persevere

Let's start with *Anticipate*.

There is a law of business that goes something like this: If you *cost money* instead of *make money*, some day you may find yourself *out of money*.

In other words, except perhaps in cases where your organization's revenues come directly from information, your work is probably undervalued . . . because people do not understand what you do and why it is important to your organization.

But you can change that. It is in your hands. You are *experts* in information. You can document executive and customer feedback. You can document how your processes compare to those of similar libraries and information centers. You can document the steps you are taking—and the progress you are making—in increasing efficiency and aligning with your organization’s strategic goals.

You can do all of these and more. That means you *can* measure your success and market all you have to offer.

SLA has a wealth of information to support your efforts, from ClickU Live programming to the Information Portals you’ll find in SLA.org’s list of Resources.

You can even learn how to use Web 2.0 tools to get the word out by visiting the SLA Innovations Laboratory while you are online. If you haven’t signed up for “23 Things,” you are missing something really special. It offers self paced, bite-size lessons on everything you should know about Web 2.0.

On to *Collaborate*.

Strong structures can stop damage in its tracks. If you don't believe me, ask the people in New Orleans, who nervously watched their fragile levies during Hurricane Gustav recently.

Take every opportunity to fortify your connections with other information professionals and with the leadership of your organization. At the same time, tear down the walls that separate your library or information center from the rest of your organization.

If the EPA network of libraries had made more progress in working with each other towards a national unified data system, they and their assets would have been far less vulnerable.

Be proactive about partnerships. Make friends with other organizations in your field, industry and community. Build a network, and make it your job to advocate mutual support. This is another great way to use SLA. Your professional association provides you both a local and global network as well as divisions that provide you with contacts in your subject area.

Remember—the time to get to know the other passengers is before the ship starts sinking.

When you do need help, let SLA know. We can help you get the word out, let your peers know what is happening, connect you with useful information and more.

That brings us to *Verify*. In crisis situations, the rumor mill usually goes into overdrive. Don't waste your energy and risk your credibility by reacting to rumors. Go directly to the source and ask for clarification. You'll save a lot of time.

But even more important, you will establish yourself as a fair arbiter. I cannot tell you how many times SLA met with EPA and found out that a rumor that was circulating was just that—a rumor. If you operate in an open and transparent manner . . . if you make it clear that you expect others to do the same . . . Chances are, you will emerge a leader.

The last step: *Persevere*. Budget uncertainties are like weed seeds; once they start blowing, there is no telling where they might pop up.

It has been 31 months since SLA first spoke up about EPA libraries. That's almost as long as the War of 1812—which, as we learned in school, didn't end until 1815!

In these lean times, the price of business-as-usual is immense. Information professionals *must* stick together, professionally and personally . . . and plan to stay together for the long haul. Keep up your involvement in SLA, and make sure your colleagues join, too.

Information is power. Information professionals joined together—why, that's a force of nature!

I am so happy I could join you tonight. Thank you.

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And now, I believe I have a few minutes for questions...

