

Earning the Right to an Opinion

by Stephen Abram

“In my opinion . . .”

“My experience tells me that . . .”

“My best advice is . . .”

“My considered opinion is . . .”

“If it was my choice, I would . . .”

Professionals start sentences like this. Professionals are respected for their opinions because they have the education and experience to make good judgments. They are thoughtful, authoritative, respected and trusted. All of these qualities can be lost in an instant with our users if we play loose with our opinions. Some special librarians and information professionals seem to still struggle with having the confidence of our opinions.

As technology choices are an increasing dimension of our users' life decisions, and information becomes an even more essential part of our enterprise's DNA and decision-making workflows, we, as our organizations' information experts, must step up to the plate and offer a *professional* opinion. It's an even more exciting time in our professional lives that we can more strongly position ourselves for our expertise as opposed to just our collections and databases. Expertise isn't just our information skills. It's also about the role we play in advising our enterprises about content, technology and what are the **best** choices for our environments and our users' needs.

Are we ready? I don't know. I have had many conversations about this topic in the past few years and followed many conversations on SLA discussion lists, conference panels, blogs, etc. I worry when I see statements that some new technologies have no place in special libraries. I've seen and heard folks make blanket statements about this. I am not truly appalled until I ask them what their experience with these technologies is. Too often, and actually the majority of the time, they have little to no actual experience with the technology they are criticizing. It's just an opinion or feeling. I try not to let my jaw drop. So, jaw firmly clamped, I ask why they feel as they do. Often it's driven by media hype, experience in observing a few children, or some other information process that resembles hearsay more than research.

(On a slight tangent, I hear many colleagues often comment on the quality of library schools and their graduates. Again, I ask when they were last there, saw a class or met a student. Too often their opinions are informed by their own experience decades ago and they've rarely returned or even seen a range of

library education programs. Again, I find too often that they have an uninformed opinion and still feel strongly that they are right. That's interesting and sad. Having actually visited dozens of schools, taught in a few programs and met so many student SLA members, I can only say I am impressed. I trust my own experiences.)

So, if you're a regular reader of this column, coming into its sixth year, you'll know that I am a big fan of experience-based learning. I also believe that experience trumps book learning every time. If we want to be perceived as thoughtful, authoritative, respected and trusted we need to have the bona fides. That means that we should have *at least have played* with many of the most interesting and leading edge new technologies. We don't need to adopt them all into our regular work lives – not at all. We don't need to bet the business on transient or in-development tech either. We just need to have a better informed opinion than our users and clients. They have a right to get the best opinion possible from their information professional. So, here are a few things that I think that we need to be experts in. This is a great place to start to position ourselves as experts. (We could even play with each and blog it or offer our insights and informed opinions in the company/library newsletter or library intranet presence).

Content

Our users are challenged by making decisions about what content they should choose. Many falsely think that the web might be enough. Arrghhh! We make great collection development choices for our enterprises and still free web search engine bullies have major mindshare. We need to get more comfortable in presenting best choices in both print and e-content including all media. We, as special librarians need to make sure that we're positioned as format and container agnostic and the best place to ask for advice on podcasts, streaming media, blog searches, YouTube, Technorati, Podscope, ODEO, iTunes, and more. This space is emerging as one of the most exciting places to play with content right now.

Instant Messaging

Conversations are one way that information and knowledge transfers very effectively. Telephone conversations and our in person reference interviews and research conversations are excellent examples of how we have great competencies here. In the Treo / Blackberry world text messaging is becoming the equal of actual voice calls. In the PC/Mac world, instant messaging is the norm for under 30's. IM clients like AOL, MSN, Yahoo!, and ICQ are must haves for people who give advice and service. Are we ready to use these and add voice, links and video? Are we ready to handle conversations with everyone using easy aggregators for IM conversations like Meebo, GAIM and Trillian? There's a new presence in this space called Twitter. I am not really impressed that it's a great new tool but I have played with it. I can see enterprise use for

keeping in touch in the short term during corporate events, conferences or special work teams. You never know. It's easy to play with these tools with fellow SLA members.

Gaming

I am surprised at the vehemence of opinions among adults, and fellow SLA'ers, about gaming. Even with the average gamer now running about 32 years-old, many folks still see this technology as merely play. It appears that the world can be divided into those who 'get' gaming and those who despise it. One SLA discussion list recently discussed gaming and several expressed the opinion that they had no role ever in special libraries, but maybe games could find a place in public libraries. I was distressed at the lack of understanding here. Gaming is one of the largest revenue generators in the publishing space. That alone makes it worthy of further investigation. Games have found great success in the training and development arena. If your library supports employees there may be a role here for your skills in ensuring identification and access to these collections. Games are a major key to the training and development of our military with many of the major consumer titles were developed for military purposes first. Many advertisers are working on understanding how to add game play to their marketing strategies. The point with gaming and special libraries is to understand them enough to advise and imagine a potential role. Imagination is the key. Closed minds aren't.

Virtual Worlds

Often confused with gaming environments are virtual world ecologies like Second Life and Active Worlds. Again, these are just in their earliest days. Eastern University in Pennsylvania has built their library services in Active Worlds. It's an amazing environment and shows how far the envelope could be pushed. Second Life has a few special librarians and special academic libraries (like law and medicine) being built out. All told, we don't know what fruit these virtual worlds will bear but they surely offer great promise. I still remember the early days of online searching and web searching. I also remember a few library pundits of the time offering their opinion that these were fads and could never survive or compete with real librarians or real online dial-up services. Yes, some of the original brands of those days (hello AltaVista) are not with us anymore. The trend did develop though. I'd hate to see us make the same mistake again.

Social Networking

It seems a few folks read about social networking sites and hear that these are just for kids (or students). I know they couldn't be more wrong. It's a personal and professional opinion formed by experience in these networks. Facebook and MySpace are the market leaders now with Bebo and Orkut doing well outside of North America. I was surprised to find that I thought I knew how these worked

but that when I signed up and committed, the experience was much different than I believed it would be. I can't really explain adequately how different the relationships are in these sites. They're meaningful, fun, educational and more. The continuing development of new circles of interested friends and groups was my personal surprise. I don't think you can understand it truly without getting in there and learning. Then your opinion will be informed by experience. Recently Bill Drew set up a new special social network about Library 2.0 in Ning, a free place where private social networks can be created and nurtured. This one went from one to 1,000 members in less than two months and is still growing and developing! I've seen other Ning networks on School Library 2.0, Academic library 2.0 and Classroom 2.0. I was amazed, as an association junkie, how quickly folks could coalesce, share and collaborate.

Workflow tools

Our users are looking for the tools that let them be more effective in a mobile, nomadic workplace. Are we ready to advise? Are we offering the tools that help research workflows? New tools like Zotero, an Internet scrapbooking software, are great options to complement our traditional offerings of citation tools to make the creation of footnotes and bibliographies easier. It's also interesting to watch the building up of the Google offerings to compete with MS Office. Google Docs and Spreadsheets, Google Calendar, gMail, and the rest are viable options now. Services like Zoho allow you to use web based e-mail, calendars, phone systems, CRM, file storage and transfer, documents, spreadsheets, database and forms, design, project management, presentations, meetings, accounting & billing, collaboration, and office sites. There are dozens of free tools that support the mobile workplace now. We need to be there to advise our users.

So, if you're interested, the technologies mentioned above are easily learned, mostly free, and with an investment of 15 minutes a day should buy you the authority to inform your users. You have an excellent foundation for personal positioning. It can be grown and developed.

We earn the right to have an opinion by being the expert. When we have the experience and informed perspective, we earn that right and increase our value to the enterprises where we are employed. We have a duty to ensure our users are informed. We also have a duty to make sure that our opinions are informed too.

An informed opinion will take you far.

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