

Research Being Conducted as Part of the SLA Alignment Project is Providing Findings and Recommendations That Can Help Demonstrate the Value of, and Need For, Information Centers.

By Amy Affelt

"What do you do?" It seems like simple cocktail party conversation, but that basic question often elicits a "deer in the headlights" response. Have you wondered how to find the right words to explain the value of your work and the impact that you have on your organization?

At this year's SLA Leadership Summit in Savannah, Georgia, SLA President Gloria Zamora and CEO Janice Lachance presented powerful research that provides proof of exactly how to answer that question. They unveiled the results and recommendations of the third research phase of the SLA Alignment Project, which is being conducted by a consulting firm, Fleishman-Hillard, with assistance from Outsell, Inc. (For more information about the Alignment Project, visit the SLA Web site at www.sla.org/alignment).

The third research phase identified corporate executives in information-intensive organizations. Extensive data on their views, attitudes and key priorities relative to information services were compiled using surveys, interviews and "dial testing" focus groups (sessions in which participants turn a dial to indicate a reaction to a statement or concept). The data were then used to develop a framework within which information professionals can deliver strategic results that positively affect their organization's bottom line.

The idea behind this phase of the Alignment Project is to determine what we as information professionals should do to characterize our contributions to our organizations in a way that resonates with senior executives. In Fleishman-Hillard's words, the goal is to "promote rather than defend the value-driven benefits" we provide.

The project as a whole focuses on identifying tactics we can use to strategically align ourselves with our organizations and remain a vital, growing profession that is recognized across industries as part and parcel of successful businesses. These tactics include the following:

- Developing language to explain what we do and the variety of services we can offer;
- Quantifying the deliverables, value and intelligence we provide; and
- Cultivating the unique skill set and specialized knowledge that are hallmarks of our profession.

In sum, the goal of the Alignment Project is to codify these practices so that information professionals will have a roadmap to guide them in demonstrating how invaluable they are to advancing the goals of their organization.

A Practitioner's Toolkit

How many times have we heard that we can shape our own destiny? The challenge lies in knowing how to do it. The research generated from the SLA Alignment Project provides concrete examples of what we need to say, how we need to say it, and what we need to do in order to remain vibrant and viable for the next 100 years and beyond. Using the toolkit outlined here is one way for you to meet this challenge and align your information services with your employer's priorities and expectations.

Identify who and what you are. We may struggle with whether we are librarians or information professionals, but there are many things we know we are not. If your job title is vague or the same as that of others in your organization who are not engaged in the search for and dissemination of information, it is time for a change!

The word "knowledge" resonated again and again during the interviews with executives because it implies a deep understanding of information. Info pros should keep this in mind when recommending new job titles. "Knowledge Manager" and "Knowledge Leader" describe professionals who are at the forefront of finding and organizing information in their workplace. They describe professionals who set the pace for information retrieval and dissemination, who know what kind of information is needed and how to find it, and who know how to turn information into knowledge and results.

The word "intelligence" in a job title implies that the professional is not just doing "rip and ship" one-off projects but instead is using information and adding value to it to produce key intelligence and enable good decisions. The words "strategist" and "analyst," on the other hand, were not seen as favorable terms--executives want to make their own decisions after analyzing the expert information that we provide.

Like your title, your job description should incorporate meaningful terminology. Executives noted in their interviews that they rely on information professionals to be able to identify and use accurate, highly relevant information from the highest quality sources. They need you to add value to premium content in order to save them time and money and enable them to make decisions efficiently. Your job description needs to reflect the fact that you have expert-level knowledge in uncovering intelligence and data that contributes to furthering the goals of your organization.

Define your mission and goals. A careful reading of the language that was viewed favorably by participants in the Alignment Project can help make the task of writing your

information center's mission statement easier. The recommended language is clear and can be easily incorporated into a sentence or two that defines what your organization expects you to contribute to its success. Your stakeholders look to you to turn information into knowledge quickly and efficiently and give them an edge over the competition. Your mission statement must reflect that expectation.

Management guru Peter Drucker often said that in order to be effective, organizational mission statements need to be short enough to fit on a T-shirt. When writing a goal-setting document, you typically have more space than that--enough to list all that you hope to accomplish, provided each goal is tangible and forces accountability. Your goals should reflect the ideals of your profession: to deliver to people exactly what they need (and often don't even realize they need) in a form that they find helpful and usable, from a source that is highly accurate and reliable, in a way that saves them time and money.

The Alignment Project's research determined that executives and other stakeholders look to information professionals for three mission-critical contributions:

- Unique knowledge regarding the information sources available and how they can best be used in your organization's unique setting;
- Assurance that you are aware of the "newest and truest" sources of information and are making that information available to the organization; and
- Best practices in the most efficient use of information resources.

It is notable that the executives interviewed for the project were not interested in process and methodology. Frankly, how you access information is not important to them--they just want to know that it is highly reliable and accurate.

Put words into action. Once you have goals that resonate with the key players in your organization, you will need to think of ways to translate those goals into a tangible, pragmatic information product that benefits management's bottom line. One of the easiest ways to do that is to institute a custom clipping and alerting service. There are four main reasons to offer alerting services, and each one provides opportunities to fulfill needs that the executives interviewed for the Alignment Project consider important:

- To market your information center and your services;
- To advance the work and practices of your firm;
- To grow your firm's client base; and
- To keep tabs on the competition.

The key to a successful clipping and alerting service is customization. Your stakeholders will be surprised and delighted when you send them information they didn't realize they needed (or didn't know existed) and that is central to their research or the case or project on which they're working. Being able to do this requires keeping an ear to the ground and learning about current and upcoming projects and clients' and executives' information interests.

For example, if client case strategy meetings are held, find a way to get yourself invited so you can understand the issues and suggest approaches to research. Track key business and industry publications as well as news from the big players (*The Wall Street Journal*, *Financial Times*, *The Economist*, etc.). Send articles to stakeholders who could benefit from the information.

When you share news with stakeholders before their clients or competitors obtain it, you are playing a major role that is central to their success and promotes your value. It is this kind of customization and personalization that causes management to realize they could not prosper without information professionals.

Seek out champions. Previous studies have suggested that info pros need to find leaders in the ranks of upper management who can tout the indispensability and accomplishments of the firm's information services. Ideally, these people are executives who frequently use your services and have been pleased with the results. Through working with you, these leaders have come to realize the contributions you make to helping them do their jobs effectively and efficiently.

Ultimately, when budget cuts are discussed, you will need someone who can be your advocate in the boardroom. If a high-profile executive can demonstrate from his or her own experience the value added by the firm's information services unit, you will have done one of the most proactive things you can to avoid being put on the chopping block.

Promote and sell. The Alignment Project's research found that the relevance, timeliness and accuracy of information were seen as much more important than the format and packaging. Therefore, when formulating an "elevator speech" or a presentation to stakeholders, it is important to emphasize the product that is delivered rather than the research process that produced it. The names of the databases, the charts and graphs that can be generated, and the search options available do not need to be explained; what is important is the content of the information and how it can fit the intelligence needs of the parties involved.

Your marketing materials need to reflect the language and priorities of your constituents. For example, newsletters or other outreach efforts should emphasize the content and uniqueness of the information, not the database's brand name. Rather than focus on the number of projects you complete, highlight the value of the personalization, customization and attention to detail in the services you provide. Value is much more important than volume.

Demonstrate your value. Information professionals often want to offer a metric as a way of demonstrating our importance. In the past, you have probably collected statistics on the number of requests you completed, the number of databases you accessed, and so on. Research has shown, however, that constituents are much more impressed by the value that you bring to the information you find.

Instead of listing the number of requests you process, offer a case study. This would be a much richer (and more readable) way to present the story of a recently completed research project. Using business school case studies as a model, you could write about the challenges involved, the approaches taken, the information uncovered, and,

ultimately, how your research was used to solve the problem, retain the client, and win the case.

Research department case studies illustrate the value-added information process in a concrete way so that stakeholders immediately recognize they can bring you a research problem and you will use a proven approach to produce a successful outcome. For maximum impact, the case study should also emphasize the time and money saved. A powerful ending for your story could be a statement (based on a conversation with the requestor) of how long it would have taken the requestor to conduct the research without your help.

All of this is not to say that collecting statistics has no value. What it means is that contextualizing statistics in a way that is meaningful to your firm's management can also tell a very powerful story.

Ongoing Value

Ultimately, the findings of the third research phase of the SLA Alignment Project have reinforced what we as a profession have always known: that we are "critical assets who provide value-added intelligence that facilitates good decision-making and creates competitive advantage for organizations." The overall project, meanwhile, has demonstrated that the mission and goals of information professionals across the globe are quite similar.

As a group, we can use the project findings to speak with a unified voice to guarantee that our profession continually moves forward. As individual practitioners, we now have confirmed data to help solidify our brand and message, whether we are seeking that first job or have worked in the profession for years. If you did not already know, you should now have a better understanding of what your stakeholders value and what they look to you to do. **SLA**

REFERENCES

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AMY AFFELT is director of database research at Compass Lexecon, an economic consultancy, where she conducts online research for economists who testify as expert witnesses in litigation. She has been a member of SLA for 17 years and currently serves as the membership chair of the Business and Finance Division. She would like to thank her SLA colleagues Stephen Abram, Jamal Cromity, Toby Pearlstein, Jan Sykes and Libby Trudell for their assistance with this article.

SIDEBAR 'YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE'

At the 2009 SLA Leadership Summit, SLA President Gloria Zamora and CEO Janice Lachance unveiled the results and recommendations of the third research phase of the SLA Alignment Project. The presentation reinforced SLA's vision that the insights gleaned from the Alignment Project interviews could be used to accomplish the goal of having every executive across the globe feel that their organization could not exist without the expertise of information professionals.

Immediately following the presentation, the SLA leaders in attendance began to ask how the association is going to use the information uncovered in the research process. More specifically, they wanted to know how SLA is going to help members benefit from the research.

SLA Past President Stephen Abram was quick to seize the opportunity to issue a challenge. "The question should be, what are you going to do with this information?" he asked. "Look around this room. You are hundreds strong. SLA is giving you the tools and information you need to create your own future. You can make a difference!"