



Remarks by Nancy Sansalone, COO/CFO, Special Libraries Association

Positioning the Information Profession and SLA for Success in an Evolving World of Technology

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Thank you...Christine ...for that very nice introduction. It is a pleasure to be with you this morning on such a beautiful day...in such a beautiful city...at such a beautiful time of year.

I should probably note...however...that the Washington D.C. Chamber of Commerce would never forgive me if I did not mention that the fabled cherry blossoms in the nation's capital are in full bloom.

If you have never had a chance to see them...I strongly encourage you to do so. They are absolutely spectacular.

Unfortunately... though...it is always difficult to predict when they will reach their peak or how long they will remain. That is because changes in weather each year affect when they blossom and when they disappear.

As we all know...change is not only a constant in nature...it is a constant in life...and it affects all of us. I am very pleased to have this opportunity to speak with you today about some of the changes affecting your profession and what we can do together to anticipate and respond to these changes in today's hyper-competitive business environment.

Specifically, I would like to talk with you about a project SLA has undertaken to examine the information profession and the roles information professionals and SLA will play in the future.

I doubt there is anyone in this room who would not agree that we live in a time of extraordinary change. The global economy...spurred on by rapid advances in communications and information technology...is changing the way we do business and transforming entire industries almost overnight.

And...it is having a direct and significant impact on the way you do your jobs.

Here are just a few statistics I thought you might find interesting. Of the more than 6 billion inhabitants of the planet...nearly 20 percent use the Internet.

In the United States...seven out of ten people have been online. China's Internet population alone grew by nearly a third last year.

How many of you remember the first time you logged onto the Internet?

You may recall that back in days of CompuServe...back in the early days of the public's use of the Internet...the user experience was very one dimensional...very flat. You could retrieve information and you could post it. You could send email and you could receive it.

Web sites were little more than brochures and online catalogues you did not have to wait for to be delivered by fax or by the Postal Service.

And...then...something interesting happened. Internet users.... with the help of like-minded programmers ... developers...and other techie-types...began to discover the power of the Internet to amplify a single voice.

It suddenly gave this voice substance...authority... reach...and influence like never before. In fact... we have witnessed the rise of a whole new class of video journalists...armed only with mobile phones... who are changing the way we see the world... from the violence in Tibet ... to gaffs on the campaign trail.

Seemingly overnight...NBC...CNN...Fox News and others... have hundreds...if not thousands...of would-be colleagues and competitors across the globe.

As you know...we have come to characterize the extensive...multi-faceted... and collaborative nature of Internet communications today under the broad umbrella of social networking.

The features of the post-Web 2.0... and soon 3.0... world are making the Internet an extraordinarily robust vehicle for personal and professional expression of every kind through blogs...RSS feeds...wikis...and networking sites such as MySpace and YouTube. They are also making life a lot more challenging for those of you in the information industry.

Andrew McAfee of Harvard University was the first to identify the increasing use of social networking between companies and their partners or customers as Enterprise 2.0. This use of social networking for business purposes is being viewed as a significant improvement over the use of email for business communications and is likely to grow.

As a result of these and other changes in the marketplace... you are being called upon to adapt like never before...while your organizations struggle to define what business will look like in the next three...five...or ten years.

Not only are you already expected to retrieve... manage...and disseminate vast amounts of strategic information and data in highly technical or complex fields...more and more of you are being called upon to understand the latest innovations in technology...including social networking... and how to put them to use for your organizations.

And if you think we will see a slowdown in the development and adoption of new technologies anytime soon...I suggest you think again. Suffice it to say... these and other technological developments will continue to impact the way you do your job in the years to come and will require you to continually upgrade your technical knowledge and professional skills to remain relevant and competitive.

Let me say that again. With all of the technological change taking place around you...you will constantly have to upgrade your technical knowledge and professional skills to remain relevant and competitive.

But what does it really mean to be relevant and competitive? How do you as librarians and information professionals evolve from business-as-usual to business in a wired-in world?

I believe this requires an alignment of your professional skills and capabilities with the information needs of the organizations you serve or will serve in the future. In order to accomplish this...I suggest it takes a lot of business acumen... a considerable amount of effort ... some measure of clairvoyance...and even a little bit of luck.

While SLA cannot guarantee clairvoyance or luck...we can do everything in our power to help you understand what the future of the professional will look like in the years ahead...and what will be necessary for you to be successful. And that is exactly what we are doing.

As I believe most of you are aware... SLA is undertaking a comprehensive analysis of the roles librarians...info pros and the association will play in the future. To assist us in this effort...we are collaborating with a team of experienced research and communications professionals led by the well-respected... international consulting firm...Fleishman-Hillard.

We have also included as part of our team...futurist and author Andy Hines of Social Technologies and the business analytics firm...Outsell.

The project...which relies on primary and secondary research...not only seeks to anticipate the future but...in fact...to define it.

This project is bold and ambitious...and absolutely necessary. And I would like to take much of my time with you today to talk about it.

In order for librarians and info pros to align themselves better with their customers...they must have a solid understanding of how they and their profession are perceived. This is a way of thinking...communicating...and behaving that connects you and your profession in a unified way. It focuses on who you are as professionals; what you stand for...and what you deliver. And it explains this clearly...credibly ...and consistently.

Even more than that...it seeks to identify the essential truth of your profession. It is your professional DNA; the fundamental idea...mission...core purpose...ethos...and value...of who you are as professionals.

With a clearer...more effective...articulated explanation of this fundamental idea...you can position yourselves and the profession in ways that differentiate you and help build loyalty and trust with your stakeholders.

In marketing terms...this means understanding the attributes of the profession and how these attributes are communicated....in order to create a brand positioning.

For those of you who may not spend a lot of time with the folks down the hall in marketing...a brand is the promise a product...company...or profession makes that shapes its image...and defines its relationships with customers... employers and other stakeholders. It answers the fundamental question...what can they expect of you?

As this project to unearth these key truths about your profession and the Association got underway...our consultants began with an extensive review of existing materials ranging from task-force reports to membership surveys...and past media coverage. This secondary research was intended to provide a first blush at what we and others think of the profession...and what the association does to help members.

There were no surprises...but the consultants did validate much of our initial thinking. Based on the extensive reading they have done and interviews they conducted with many SLA members at the 2007 SLA Annual Meeting & INFO-EXPO in Denver last year....they felt many of our assumptions to date have been accurate but required further examination.

With regard to membership...they recognized that growth is imperative to the Association and to the profession... especially because of the decline of the number of working Baby Boomers and the tendencies of Gen-Xers and Gen-Yers to be less active in organizations of any kind.

They are also concerned about what appears to be the growing perception that librarians and info pros are no longer necessary in some organizations because of the increasing use and effectiveness of general search engine technology.

The consultants found that the value-added intelligence info pros provide is not as widely understood as it should be and that speed...convenience... and self-service are gaining momentum in many enterprises at the expense of accuracy and validity.

In the face of these challenges...however...the consultants did see great possibilities. It is their belief that librarians and info pros have the opportunity to be part of the foundation of the evolving information industry. And they see enormous potential to highlight the value librarians and info pros provide to the strategic information needs of senior executives and their organizations.

But this was only the beginning. The hard work is yet to come.

Specifically...this will involve a comprehensive examination of the future roles of librarians and info pros in a new and evolving information landscape. It will require us to explore the current position info pros hold in the marketplace and seek to define a platform...based on sound scientific research...that is relevant...differentiated...deliverable and can stand the test of time.

We must develop a strategic framework that defines the information profession in a way that members recognize and embrace as profoundly true. And...armed with this understanding...we will have an opportunity to reach out to a broader spectrum of information professionals...if we so choose.

Once we have completed this part of the project...we will next seek to align SLA's diverse activities through a relevant and compelling communications platform that expresses the core values of SLA and the profession as a whole.

Specifically...we will identify the programs ... tools... language ... and materials that uniquely express and amplify the importance of the profession and the valuable work you are doing on behalf for your companies and stakeholders.

When we have completed our work...we will have successfully examined all aspects of the profession and SLA... and identified the right words and visual representations to communicate the core truths of the profession and the Association.

One of the points the consultants are likely to make is that as successful organizations grow and diversify...they tend to develop numerous visual identities. In their experience...successful organizations find it necessary eventually to seek a more integrated look.

Interestingly...our consultants found no less than 80 different logos representing units throughout the association.

The secondary research conducted to this point in the project has been designed to examine our working assumptions...but...more importantly...to tell us what we still need to know.

That is why the next phase of the project...the primary research phase... is crucial and will help us define clearly the knowledge gaps that remain. This...as they say... is where the rubber meets the road.

During this next phase of primary research...we will tackle some of the more challenging...and...dare I say...perplexing questions facing the profession and the association.

One of the first things we will do is look at everything from existing trends in the profession to perceptions around information technology. Every idea... thought...concept or opinion is in on the table and likely to be challenged as we undertake this phase of the inquiry.

In order to gather this information and opinion...our consultants will gather input and feedback from target audiences that will play a role in your future success and the success of SLA. Considerable attention will be paid to those who will help define the information profession in the next decade ...especially senior executives who will determine the funding for the critical services you provide.

In short...this is what we must find out. And while this may be a tall order...it is absolutely essential to the continued success of your profession and your professional association.

So while we have completed the first part of our inquiry...listed on the slide you see here....we have only recently begun the primary research phase. Again...during this phase...we are going to answer the questions we and our team of consultants believe we must in order to develop an approach that will ensure the vitality...relevance...and longevity of SLA and the information profession for another hundred years.

In order to accomplish this task...we will rely on several exciting research tools. The first is a tool called..."Interactive Editor." As the name implies...the tool allows respondents to interact with the concepts they are considering.

Because language plays such an important role in communicating complex thoughts and ideas...it is important that the language we choose to convey the essence of who we are and what we do resonates with our members...key stakeholders...and the public. This interactive approach will help us do that.

After we have aggregated and analyzed all of the conceptual research gathered with the help of Outsell...and the results of our inquiry on language...we will videotape various members and SLA leaders answering questions about the profession and association. They will be using both current communications messages and messages that will be developed based specifically on our research.

Then using a technology called "Instant Response Dialing" ...we will test these messages in "real time" with representatives of different stakeholder groups.

You may have seen this technology used on television during this year's U.S. presidential primary coverage. It allows respondents to react instantaneously to what they hear or see and judge its value and effectiveness on a moment-by-moment basis. This will be very important to us in evaluating the potential of future messages.

It is especially good for analyzing language and specific word combinations or phrases.

Because people develop impressions of things very quickly...it is essential that we create messages about the profession that can be understood quickly and clearly...and will resonate with those who hear them.

When we have completed this phase of the project which is expected to be sometime in the fall...we will consider the results....and work with our consultants to translate all of this into a highly effective platform that articulates a common vision...identity...and core purpose for the profession.

We will also create a framework for the development of communications materials. This will enable us to be consistent in the application of our key messages...and provide us with a platform that can stand the test of time...remaining relevant to librarians ...info pros... employers... partners...and the public for years to come.

In many ways it is interesting that this project takes place on the eve of SLA's centennial celebration. While this may be interesting...it is not entirely coincidental.

As SLA CEO Janice Lachance said in her remarks at the 2007 Annual Conference in Denver last June..."While it is appropriate and beneficial to look back at previous accomplishments on this type of anniversary...it is absolutely

essential to use such a milestone to focus an organization's critical thinking and creative talents on what lies ahead."

That is why we are making the most of this important commemoration...and we believe this is the ideal time to undertake the type of extensive examination of the profession and the association to which we have committed ourselves.

While the alignment project is a focus of much of our activity at SLA headquarters this year....we are also making plans to celebrate SLA's one hundred years of service to the profession with a variety of activities and events throughout the year.

As most of you are probably aware...we have created a Centennial Commission to begin work on plans for the year-long celebration. They have been hard at work for many months now planning everything from a traveling exhibition about SLA...to the release of a new book history of SLA by Guy St. Clair...and from creating a Centennial Web presence to planning a semi-formal ball at the SLA Annual Conference in Washington, D.C. in 2009.

At the most recent SLA Leadership Summit in Louisville, Kentucky...we asked representatives of the divisions and chapters to brainstorm on ways they could also celebrate this important occasion. And this is something we would like to hear about from you. What do you think we can we do together to make this once-in-a-lifetime celebration as meaningful and enjoyable as possible? I hope this is a subject DPHT is or will be discussing.

I also want to tell you about a couple of other exciting initiatives we are undertaking on the eve of the SLA Centennial.

Under the leadership of SLA President Stephen Abram...we are in the process of creating a technology Innovation Lab.

The lab...sometimes referred to as a sandbox.... is designed to give members hands-on experience with emerging technologies in a controlled and risk-free environment.

In this new lab...members will not only be able to experiment with these technologies...but also create projects and save them to a library where others may benefit from their work.

This is an exciting new member benefit and one I hope you will take full advantage of.

We are also continuing to make significant advances in the development of SLA's industry-leading Click University. Besides increasing course offerings and adding an extensive online management and leadership library....we have recently

added two new certificate programs in Knowledge Management and Copyright Management.

Last year... we began offering members for the first time a certificates program in Competitive Intelligence.

We feel strongly that these programs will help you enhance your professional skills and prepare you to accept new responsibilities in your current position or in a position with another employer in the future.

2009 will be an exciting year for SLA. It will not only mark the association's one-hundred years of existence...but will mark the beginning of our journey into a new and promising future.

In the meantime...we at SLA headquarters remain committed to the three priorities of SLA's mission... learning... networking... and advocacy.

And we continue to work tirelessly to improve SLA's management practices...enhance the association's technological capabilities...build membership across the planet...extend SLA's influence globally...develop new services and offerings that increase the value of membership...andyes...look to the future of SLA and the profession.

The future of SLA is...after all... about you. It is about your commitment...passion...and dedication to a profession that may be unsung at times...but makes an enormous contribution to the advancement of organizations and to the people you serve. Thank you for your work on behalf of SLA and your profession.

It is an honor and a privilege for me to serve you...and I could not agree with Janice more when she says...I can't think of any other group of smart...creative and savvy professionals with whom I would rather meet the future.

Thank you very much.