

Strategic Alignment: Positioning our Brand for the Future

SLA'S Strategic Alignment Process is an Extensive, Research-based Examination of the Profession and of SLA's Position within the Evolving Information Economy

By Cindy Romaine, Gloria Zamora and Bill Fisher

Have you ever had your back out of alignment? The pain can come and go, but it's clear that something isn't right. When you are out of alignment, you simply cannot operate at full capacity. Only rarely will your back heal itself--most often, you must seek a professional adjustment to return to your efficient self.

Something similar is going on within SLA. Members have a burgeoning sense of "career angst." They say that they are not as valued in their position as they feel appropriate. They say that positions in the library have been eliminated or sent to project teams with little or no consultation. Finally, members say that salaries for positions outside the library pay better. These insights indicate that the association needs--without overworking the metaphor--an adjustment, because it is clear that the problem would not work itself out.

In response, SLA began a process of strategic alignment in 2007 that will influence our brand positioning and platform for years to come. So, without resorting to more chiropractic terms, what exactly does a strategic alignment mean for the association?

The strategic alignment requires that the leadership of the association, both staff and the board, take a fresh look at three key areas: 1) the drivers in the current information marketplace; 2) the value of the information professional; and 3) the skills that information professionals need to be most effective. In business terms, alignment is a discipline to deliver "clarity, credibility, [and] consistency" to the association.¹ Alignment is a process that leads to thinking, communicating and behaving as one enterprise connected by a common vision.

SLA's strategic alignment process is an extensive, research-based examination of the profession and of SLA's position within the evolving information economy. After comprehensive research, SLA will look at how to position itself in the marketplace--with both current and potential members--so that the association can be a more effective advocate for its members' success.

Seismic Shifts

Seismic shifts in information collection, access and delivery over the last decade have altered the required skills and competencies necessary to thrive as an information professional. For example, there is less emphasis on managing a hard copy collection or on working with a physical location than previously. At the same time, there are more opportunities for organizing information and working with Web 2.0 social networking tools.

The association is reviewing evidence of how the profession is evolving, what impact that has on our members, and how to position, brand and provide services in the midst of this new reality. If the association does not adapt and keep up with the changes taking place in the profession, it could become stagnant and irrelevant. In a worst-case scenario, SLA could even cease to attract enough members to maintain its services.

A Calculated Risk

What is the risk of not taking advantage of this opportunity? We feel there are dangers both for the association as a whole and for our individual members. As SLA Fellow Jim Matarazzo found out in his pivotal study on why some organizations were closing their library, it was because the organization felt the library was no longer in touch with what was going on within the organization and where it was headed in the future. The decision to either close a library or to eliminate its staff while retaining the physical collection was based not so much on how the library was run

but on how well it was aligned with the organization's strategic direction.²

This situation has not changed in the 25 or more years since Matarazzo interviewed the corporate executives responsible for making those decisions; if anything, in the current economy, our ability to stay relevant and be seen as a vibrant part of our parent organization is even more crucial. The recent, and thankfully unsuccessful, attempt by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to close libraries is a current reminder of how critical this is. As our members recognize the need to adapt to stay relevant to their organizations, the association itself recognizes the need to adapt to both develop the programs and services our members will find useful in the years ahead and to maintain SLA's position within the greater world-wide information professions.

Then there is the notion that closed libraries do not mean the end of librarians. Even as libraries close, the information professionals' function continues to exist for those who are embedded in the organization in other ways. Alignment means understanding these forces and, as an association, acting as an agent for information professionals who engage both inside and outside traditional settings. In fact, this may be the best way forward for information professionals, as well as an area for recruitment of new members who have information-intensive jobs.

To reiterate this notion, here's a dialogue snippet from a recent Leadership and Management Division posting:

The profession will become obsolete if we do not see what is happening around us. In fact, I have seen many libraries close and many librarians lose their jobs. Those that survive are the innovative [ones] who are running alongside the other business units inside the company. --Then we suddenly become the lifeblood of the organization and not a limb to be amputated in times of trimming the budget. In fact, then we become not custodians of "things" [but] knowledge brokers.³

We are blessed with a core of members who have belonged to SLA for many years, but at some point they will retire. We need to ensure that the pipeline of active and involved members stays full. We hope this opportunity to refocus our vision and reaffirm our strategic purpose will help us identify new members who will lead the association and the profession in the coming century and beyond.

Time for Change

Why is the association researching strategic alignment at this moment in time? One reason, as we mentioned previously, is that the epic shifts in

the information industry have caused library closures. Another reason is the realization that we need look ahead to stay engaged and successful. The association and its members need to embrace and direct the opportunity we have to create our future and its inevitable changes.

But perhaps the most important reason for taking on the strategic alignment at this particular point in time is that SLA's 100th anniversary is being celebrated in 2009. The SLA Centennial affords us the opportunity to not only honor and celebrate our past but, more importantly, allows us to use the insights gained from reflecting on our past to look forward and envision how the association can best serve the members, the profession and the industry.

Many may wonder how the association was galvanized over an issue like strategic alignment. The answer is a tale that highlights the power of networking within the association. In the recent past, SLA presidents have appointed task forces to study the relevance of our association and profession. Cindy Hill, Ethel Salonen and Pam Rollo included these studies as part of their presidential objectives. In late 2005 and the first half of 2006, then-President Pam Rollo launched seven task forces to assess the future of the profession and SLA's role in supporting it. One was the Professional Values Task Force, which included Ethel Salonen, the SLA chair and past president at the time, and Cindy Romaine, a board member. At the Leadership Summit in Houston in January 2006, Romaine and Salonen, who were passionate about moving the strategic alignment forward, noticed a paper tablecloth at a networking dinner. They scribbled profusely on the tablecloth, making charts, lists and diagrams—trying to capture the importance and urgency of aligning the association with the changes that were taking place at the leading edge of the industry. As the evening wore on, the subject of the Centennial celebration came up. "That's it!" they exclaimed, realizing that the Centennial would be an ideal focal point in which to direct energy and introduce change. Reflecting on SLA's history, Romaine and Salonen also posited, "What will the association look like in the next 100 years, and how can we influence it?" They knew the Centennial was an opportunity that the association would not have again for a long time. From here, the task force consulted with other association leaders, including Cindy Hill, Stephen Abram, Pam Rollo, and Gloria Zamora.

When reporting on this initiative to the board of directors, the task force recommended that the association hire a public relations firm and commission primary research in order to put in place an evidence-based strategic plan in time for the association's Centennial celebration. The goal would be to simultaneously honor the past and embrace the future with confidence.⁴

Doing the Research

To address the strategic alignment, SLA contracted and is now working with a suite of consulting firms. We are working with Outsell, Inc., for research; gaining insights from futurist Andy Hines of Social Technologies; and collaborating with Fleishman–Hillard, an international public relations firm, for communication. Both primary and secondary research is being used for this project. Primary research will draw from members' CEOs and other decision makers, librarians and information professionals, and students in various MLIS programs.

The objectives of this project, as laid out to SLA leaders at the January 2008 leadership meeting, are:

- Examine thoroughly the future roles of librarians and information professionals in a new and evolving information landscape.
- Explore the current position in the marketplace and define a platform based on sound scientific research that is relevant, differentiated, and deliverable and that will stand the test of time.
- Develop a strategic framework that underscores SLA's value for existing members and enables outreach to a broad spectrum of information professionals.
- Align SLA's diverse activities through a relevant and compelling platform that expresses the core values of the association and the profession as a whole.
- Identify programs, tools, language and materials that uniquely express and amplify SLA's positioning to members, employers, partners, regulators and the public and highlight the value of information professionals in today's economy.⁵

The public relations team of Fleishman–Hillard is using a variety of high value tools to validate the message that SLA will use in its communications. They are even using approaches similar to the dial testing tool that was used on CNN during the 2008 presidential debates.

The Fleishman–Hillard team combed through voluminous background information and conducted interviews with SLA leadership and membership. Additionally, they scanned media coverage on issues related to the profession. One of the key strategic issues they uncovered is that "instead of using functional descriptors, librarians and information professionals need to be defined in terms of the value, benefit and impact provided to their organizations; for example, advancing business development, facilitating good decision–making, managing crisis, etc."⁶

According to Fleishman–Hillard, an effective strategic alignment will build a communications platform that stands the test of time and will remain relevant as the industry evolves. It will also create a framework for the development of consistent communications materials throughout SLA's programs and services.⁷

SLA as a Big Tent

Fleishman–Hillard has stated that "SLA has the opportunity to position itself as the premier association for a broad range of information professionals."⁸ As a big tent, SLA would seek to provide value and to be inclusive of all types of information specializations.

And, frankly, we need a big tent. Contemporary job titles, and the underlying skills, applied to librarians are becoming more diverse. Here are a few examples: information design specialist, information researcher, corporate information specialist, information consultant, and market research analyst. The cold hard truth, depending on your point of view, is that jobs with these titles are better compensated than jobs with "librarian" in their titles. SLA is a great networking source for the traditional librarian and it is a great networking source benefiting innovative and dynamic information professionals. By casting a wider net, the association would be stronger and more able to help members do their job well.

As a case in point, Sandia National Laboratories, in New Mexico, has never used the term "librarian" for their information professionals. They required a technical degree as well as the MLS in order to work in the technical information center, where professionals were referred to as "technical information professionals" to emphasize the scientific and technical background they need to deal with the specialized information required by the scientists and engineers at the laboratory. The management felt this likened their positions to those of the researchers and demonstrated that they were a valued and vital part of the research team.

Strategic Alignment Goals

One goal of the strategic alignment is to increase the association's membership. We will do this strategically, by looking at professions whose skill sets complement our own. We may also collaborate with other groups, following on our success with the Software & Information

Industry Association. Furthermore, SLA will target hiring organizations that could broaden SLA's global reach.

Another goal of the strategic alignment is to give our members the correct tools to compete in today's workplace. Members need powerful words and ideas to advocate for themselves. With these tools, members will be able to better communicate the value of the information professional to their own companies and demonstrate why it is vitally important that they play a prominent role in their organizations.

At the conclusion of the process, the association will have a compelling communications platform that will convey the value of the information professional. As an outcome, the association will be in a position to help librarians and information professionals align their knowledge, experience, and skills with the evolving expectations of organizations.

As we write this, Fleishman–Hillard has presented its results and recommendations at the January 2009 Leadership Summit in Savannah, Georgia, including the results of the dial testing. Conclusions of the research and more specific recommendations will be delivered at the Annual Conference in Washington, D.C.

If you take nothing else away from this discussion, please understand that your professional association is deeply concerned about the destiny of librarians and information professionals, and it is working diligently, proactively, and thoughtfully to ensure that you are successful now and into the future. SLA

KEY FINDINGS OF THE ALIGNMENT PROJECT

Leadership Summit attendees received a briefing from SLA President Gloria Zamora and CEO Janice Lachance on the latest findings to emerge from the third research phase of the SLA Alignment Project.

The project's goal is to bring clarity and unity to the core identity and values of SLA and the information profession. We are working with a multidisciplinary team of research and communication professionals, led by the international communication firm Fleishman–Hillard and supported by futurist Andy Hines of Social Technologies and the information analytics firm Outsell Inc.

Following a thorough review of SLA and Outsell data, interviews with leaders and members at annual conference and the Leadership Summit, and numerous focus groups held with members and other information professionals throughout North America, the research phase of the project began.

The first phase of the project was a survey of attitudes about the information profession. Included were individuals from a wide range of professions--corporate executives, people in information technology, human resources, marketing, and strategy--as well as information professionals. It was conducted in the U.S., Canada, Australia and the United Kingdom. In the next phase, we used the survey findings to construct a series of statements about SLA and the information profession and tested specific terms and concepts with a broad cross-section of people both within and outside the profession. The purpose was to identify words and terminology that resonate well across the board--and to find words that do not work in communicating the value of the information profession.

In the latest phase of alignment project, the winning words and phrases were incorporated into statements. SLA leaders and others were videotaped reciting the statements, and audiences made up of two groups--information professionals and corporate executives--used "dial testing" to react to them. (If you watched the U.S. presidential campaign debates in 2008, you may have seen dial testing in action, as audiences turned dials to indicate their reactions to statements made by the candidates.) The two groups' reactions were tracked separately in order to pinpoint statements where their reactions were either very similar--or, more revealingly, very different.

Below are some of the conclusions that can be drawn from the research to date:

- Promote the benefits of the profession. Messages about what information professionals bring to an organization are better received than messages about the shortcomings of the information people find on their own.
- Knowledge is the bridge between information and action. It is a very strong word for describing the unique benefits of having an information professional's work.
- Corporate executives readily acknowledge the value and importance of good information. But they need to know how that information will create a competitive advantage for your organization and how it benefits the bottom line.
- The word librarian is a double-edged sword. People love librarians; however, they find the word librarian dusty and antiquated.

For much more information on the Alignment Project and the latest research, visit the SLA Web site.

REFERENCES

¹ Fleishman–Hillard, "Positioning SLA for the Future: Principles and Process for the Alignment Initiative" January 21–25, 2008, Louisville, Kentucky, p.3.

² Matarazzo, James M. Closing the Corporate Library: Case Studies on the Decision Making Process. New York: Special Libraries Association, 1981.

³ Stanford, Xenia, "A Future without Libraries? A Radical New Idea," email. October 25, 2009.

⁴ Professional Values Task Force Recommendations, Board Document A06–46, June 9, 2006.

⁵ Fleishman–Hillard, "SLA Strategic Alignment Project," February 2008, p. 4.

⁶ Fleishman–Hillard, "Positioning SLA for the Future: Principles and Process for the Alignment Initiative" January 21–25, 2008, Louisville, Kentucky, p.17.

⁷ Fleishman–Hillard, "Positioning SLA for the Future: Principles and Process for the Alignment Initiative" January 21–25, 2008, Louisville, Kentucky, p.35.

⁸ Fleishman–Hillard, "Positioning SLA for the Future: Principals and Process for the Alignment Initiative" January 21–25, 2008, Louisville, Kentucky, p.10.

⁹ Fleishman–Hillard, "SLA Strategic Alignment Project," February 2008, p. 5.

CINDY ROMAINE is currently the principal of Romainiacs Intelligence Research, an information consultancy, after 16 years at Nike as the director of the Design Library and as corporate archivist. A longtime contributor to Information Outlook, Cindy has just concluded serving on the SLA board and as chair of the Innovation Laboratory.

GLORIA ZAMORA has recently returned to Sandia National Laboratories as a manager in the Government Relations Office, after completing an assignment as a congressional fellow. She has been a member of SLA for 30 years and has held several leadership roles. She was named a fellow of SLA in 1999 and received the John Cotton Dana Award in 2007. She is currently serving as SLA president.

BILL FISHER is a professor with the School of Library and Information Science at San Jose State University, where he teaches in the areas of management, special libraries, and business information resources. He has more than 25 years experience as an LIS educator. He is a past-president and a Fellow of SLA.