

Navigating Through Turbulent Times: How the Corporate Special Library and Brand Communications Work Together to Forge a Path to the Future

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Abstract

Unprecedented shifts in the economic and political climates demand new and creative solutions to business problems, as well as proactive guidance from information professionals. As organizations revise their strategies in order to adapt to marketplace conditions, corporate librarians have an ideal opportunity to carve out expanded roles for themselves as educators and advisors. Their insight can have direct impact as to how businesses position themselves and their products to thrive despite the economic downturn.

At Affinion Loyalty Group (ALG), a solo librarian is responsible for researching and analyzing competitive and marketplace intelligence to inform the entire organization and, in particular, the marketing department. At the direction of the president, the librarian was paired with the brand communications department to facilitate information sharing among the two functions that act as service providers to the organization and its clients. With this model, the librarian provides the content needed to drive brand messaging to both internal and external clients, while the marketing professionals lend their expertise to promoting the librarian's role. To date, the partnership has yielded successful results for both parties as their roles, in close collaboration with the company president, have furthered thought leadership inside and outside the organization. Recent examples include the execution of two industry conference presentations where new product positioning was introduced, development of a client marketing plan, as well as improved internal branding for the library's competitive intelligence function. Other projects include developing a series of white papers that describe ALG's strategy for succeeding in the 'new economy.'

In this paper, a librarian and marketing director will share examples and insights gained from their collaboration, and provide guidance and ideas as to how such relationships can be applied to devising future-looking strategies. By working together to share ideas and expertise, both professionals have inspired the other's thinking, and in turn, thinking within the organization. This cross-functional partnership will help ensure the organization is prepared to meet current and future challenges.

Introduction

The economic events of recent months proved to be among of the most devastating in modern history. Whether in the public or private sector, nearly every organization is reeling in the aftermath of the housing and financial market collapse, the severity of which took even the most seasoned business leaders off-guard. Best Buy's CEO, for example, blamed "rapid, seismic changes in consumer behavior" for the company's inability to react quickly enough in one of the "most difficult climate[s]" it had ever seen.¹ The havoc wreaked on the business sector spread quickly throughout the economy as unemployment rates accelerated across nearly every industry, stifling consumer and business spending and pulling the economy into a severe recession. Within the information profession, public librarians garner prominent media attention as they struggle to accommodate the surge in demand generated by the crisis. A recent *New York Times* article describes how 10-30% increases in patronage nationwide are stressing libraries coping with limited capacities and resources, and in some cases, unusual outbreaks of violence.²

Today, as during any time of upheaval, opportunity presents itself alongside new challenges. As corporate librarians, we are both afflicted and bolstered by disruptions within our organizations and the marketplace. Shrinking budgets and the specter of layoffs are certainly unsettling, but that uncertainty must not paralyze us from proactively seeking opportunities to add value in our roles. Our ability to help our companies weather this menacing environment can solidify and even advance our positions within our organizations. In fact, the economic crisis is perhaps our best opportunity to reassert our value so that we emerge from the recession in a more stable position than when we entered it. Achieving this success relies on an enterprising attitude and imagination that creatively applies our services to helping our companies successfully adapt.

Like nearly every responsive company, ALG is reconsidering its product and positioning strategies in response to external changes. In doing so, it is exploring modifying existing and creating new products, reaching out to the local community, and asserting its leadership within its industry. Old practices and ways of thinking are continually being challenged throughout the organization, while risk-taking and creativity are encouraged by those at the highest levels. Within this climate, the solo competitive intelligence (CI) librarian has an exceptional opportunity to make a substantive, positive impact on the organization by providing timely information and identifying new marketplace opportunities for sales and product development. This opportunity is all the more attainable given the strong relationship that exists between the library and brand communication functions within the company. The special relationship between these two units produces critical synergies that allow each to have more impact within the organization than they would alone. The partnership serves as a model for information

professionals seeking to expand their roles and develop new skills and relationships that advance both library and organizational goals.

COMPETITIVE INTELLIGENCE AND BRAND AT ALG

Competitive Intelligence

Prior to partnering with the Brand Communications team, the CI librarian functioned independently, serving the research needs of the entire organization with an emphasis on serving the marketing department and executives. More specifically, she served the sales, product, brand, and account management teams, as well as the needs of the president and other executives. While she reported into the executive level, she was not a formal member of any team, and so the position was somewhat isolated in this respect. In her capacity, she provided proactive and reactive information services that addressed a variety of business needs including product positioning, competitive benchmarking, market sizing, and other ad hoc research requests. Generally speaking, the CI librarian's primary role is to collect, analyze, and proliferate an external marketplace view throughout the organization. The table below outlines the major outputs of the CI librarian prior to the partnership forged with the Brand team.

Table 1: CI Responsibilities Prior to Partnership

Proactive Information Services (Ongoing Responsibilities)	Reactive Information Services (Ad Hoc Requests)
Publish monthly newsletter and news alerts (<i>News Points</i> and <i>News Flash</i>)	Develop company profiles
Produce competitive product benchmarking analysis (<i>Gap Analysis</i>)	Provide topical research on a variety of subjects including legislation, technology, and new products
Publish and post weekly featured statistic (<i>Stat of the Week</i>)	Respond to client requests as provided by account managers
Gather and publish quarterly company statistical data	Compile market sizing data
Publish and discuss marketplace trends in regular meetings	Create SWOT Analyses
Collection development and vendor management tasks	Collect demographic data
Provide news alert training	

While the CI librarian enjoyed a wide range of responsibilities and regular contact with all units within the marketing department, the fact that she was not an actual member of any of these teams proved limiting. The CI role was widely appreciated, but not well understood.

Furthermore, the lack of informal contact with team members reduced natural opportunities for collaboration and innovation that could lead to improved library services. As we will see, the CI-Brand partnership not only allowed the librarian to enhance existing services, but also to develop new skill sets and take on additional, high-visibility projects that help the company navigate through difficult economic circumstances.

Brand Communications

The Brand Communications team is responsible for representation of the ALG brand as well as those brands of its clients by offering a full suite of creative services including communication strategy, concepting, design/layout, copywriting, print management, etc. The Brand team acts as an in-house creative agency, working closely with its clients to understand their overall marketing strategies and to align supporting communications to complement their existing marketing activities. This creative group has experience working with some of the most recognized brands in the world, and acts as an extension of the company’s clients and their brands.

The Brand group’s expertise spans from the complex development of program-specific websites to direct mail campaigns, executed by individuals with varying backgrounds ranging from advertising agency to financial institution experience. In addition, the Brand group manages marketing strategies internally ranging from product development and launch campaigns to public relations strategies to sales collateral and positioning.

To support the internal brand initiatives such as product launch campaigns and sales proposals, the Brand group serves a set of internal clients to which it offers its in-house creative abilities. With a creative agency on-site, internal clients have immediate access to creative professionals to collaborate with on various projects. Having an in-house creative is uncommon among companies of ALG’s scope. Many organizations have marketing departments, however ALG’s Brand group differs in both the experience its team members possess as well as the deliverables it is able to provide. Table 2 below lists outputs representative of the Brand Communications group’s work.

Table 2: Brand Communications Department Responsibilities

Creative Services	Creative Deliverables
Marketing Strategy and Recommendations: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Traditional Direct Mail - E-mail Marketing Concepting: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Brainstorming and Ideation - Look, Feel, Messaging Copywriting Creative Development:	Print materials: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Direct Mail Campaigns - Catalogs - Brochures - Newsletters - Postcards - Posters - Sales Sheets and Collateral

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Layout/Design - Graphic Creation - Copywriting <p>Interactive:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Website Design - HTML Programming <p>Public Relations Strategy</p> <p>Event Management</p> <p>Print Production</p>	<p>Interactive materials:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - E-mail Campaigns and Newsletters - Websites - Sales Presentations <p>Public Relations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Press Releases - News Articles - Whitepapers - Trade Shows and Events <p>Other Outputs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Logo Design - Product Names
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The CI-Brand Partnership

The history of the CI-Brand partnership dates back to early 2008, when the company president directed that the CI librarian physically relocate from a cubicle space to the Brand department's open office environment where its employees are located. In doing so, the president intended to create more than just a change of scenery. She strategically placed the units together to facilitate informal information-sharing that would improve Brand's knowledge of the marketplace and, in turn, their promotional and creative works. As it was conceived, the CI librarian would read about news and trends that she would discuss with Brand staff in the course of her work. In learning of this information, Brand staff would incorporate up-to-date marketplace information into its communication deliverables. To date, the CI-Brand partnership has jointly delivered numerous projects including press releases, news articles, and whitepapers, as well as positioning for marketing of ALG's new and enhanced products and client-specific campaigns directed to end consumers. Because of this ongoing knowledge sharing, each deliverable reflects greater understanding of external factors, whether they be legislation and its effect on the industry being incorporated into a news release, or what messages resonate best with targeted segments when developing messaging for a marketing campaign. An unintended though no less important consequence is that the CI librarian is learning a new skill set that allows her to more effectively carry out her primary duty of keeping staff informed while also involving her in additional projects that give her the opportunity to add even more value in her role.

Figure 1: CI Librarian and Brand Communication Synergies

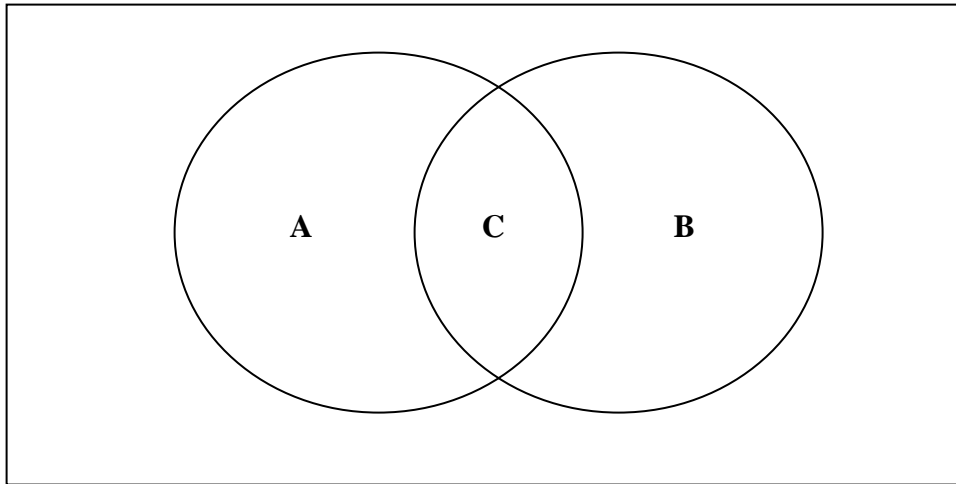


Figure 1 above represents the major skills and abilities that both CI and Brand bring to their partnership, and the synergies they create. Circle A represents the skills and assets that the information professional brings to bear, which include the following:

- Information searching, evaluation, and analysis
- Knowledge of reliable information sources
- Information and data organization
- Application marketplace information to business needs
- Contact with external subject matter experts

Circle B represents the skills and other assets the Brand team brings to the relationship, including:

- Communication strategies for various audiences
- Brainstorming and ideation methodologies
- Print and interactive graphic design
- Internal and external positioning
- Brand development and maintenance

As you can see, each team brings with it a distinct set of unique skills that also complement one another. For instance, the combination of information gathering and communication skills lends itself well to developing trade publication pieces. Such synergies are represented by area C in the figure above, and are the subject of the discussion that follows.

The Value of Brand Communications: The Competitive Intelligence Perspective

The value derived from librarians working closely with brand professionals is both subtle and concrete. At ALG, the soft skills the librarian acquired are not empirically measurable, but nevertheless enhance her ability to serve her internal clients. Those soft skills are nourished both directly and indirectly. For example, the Brand Room space is a dynamic social and business hub within the organization. There are no cubicles, but open desks where colleagues communicate

freely. Here, you will find toys, candy, ample whiteboards, sofa chairs, and even a trampoline - all intended to nurture creative thinking through a fun atmosphere. As a result, everyone from salespeople to account managers to the company president are drawn to the space and drop in on a daily basis to chat and work on presentations and other projects. While this type of environment may be common among advertising and creative agencies, it is somewhat rare for information professionals. However, this innovative space makes the librarian privy to casual conversations and ideation sessions that inspire her to be more creative in her own work, and also permit her to keep a close pulse on organizational needs and thinking. Indirectly, the physical proximity of Brand and CI in a casual work environment is an ideal backdrop for needs assessment and relationship development.

Far from being a fly on the wall, the CI librarian is an active, integral part of Brand, and she has ample opportunity to put her newly-discovered soft skills to work. Since being involved with Brand, she participates in brainstorming sessions that determine new product names, direct mail messaging, and graphic presentation elements. For example, in an ordinary day, the graphic artist may call the librarian to her desk to get her opinion on which image to include in an email piece, while the brand director may work side-by-side with the librarian to develop messaging and visual elements for the president's trade show presentation. Through this joint work, the librarian improved her ability to generate ideas and to understand the strategies involved in communicating information.

The partnership generated more concrete results for the librarian as well. Due to the fact that Brand now has an improved understanding of CI needs and functions, they are better able to assist her in carrying out her regular duties (see Table 1). For example, the librarian worked closely with the graphic artist to redesign various templates used by CI. One such item is an attractive logo that won an American Inhouse Graphic Design Award, presented by Graphic Design USA, a news magazine for graphic designers and other creative professionals (see Figure 2). The librarian applies this logo to all of her deliverables including presentation decks, Word documents, and signage. In doing so, she clearly identifies CI works, giving her position greater internal visibility and recognition.

Figure 2: Competitive Intelligence Logo



Similarly, the Brand team devised a new name and design for the monthly CI newsletter, formerly known as *News Points*. The librarian desired a more modern look-and-feel to the newsletter, and a name that better described its purpose. After a brainstorming session, the team created the name *news in(forum)*. As the name suggests, the newsletter is intended as forum for news and information. The spelling and format also tie into the CI log format, thereby presenting a consistent image.

Figure 3: Monthly Competitive Intelligence E-Newsletter - Before Redesign



Figure 4: Monthly Competitive Intelligence E-Newsletter – After Redesign



The ability to communicate visually as well as verbally is a key skill for information professionals dealing with ever more complicated information. Particularly in this economic environment where dramatic changes happen almost daily, decision-makers must understand detailed information in the most quick and simple way possible so that they can respond promptly. As one communication professional describes, “Visual tools enable effective communication, understanding and engagement in an increasingly complex world. We are all overwhelmed, and visual thinking and the parallel trend of simplicity are gaining momentum. We need relevant information that we can quickly and easily understand. Words alone are not enough to deal with today's complex business problems.”³ Because of the close relationship forged with the Brand Communications team, the CI librarian can now include design in her arsenal of communication tools.

Another concrete benefit of partnering with brand is that the librarian now accounts for her time in the same way a creative agency does. The CI librarian tracks all of her work time back to projects set up in Brand's Access database and follows their practices. The time spent on these projects is assessed a dollar value that is in-line with standard CI consultant fees. As a

result, the librarian can demonstrate the value of her work in dollars, while also tracking the time spent on projects to ensure it aligns with company priorities.

Perhaps most importantly, the CI-Brand partnership allows the librarian to more effectively execute the president's and the organization's response to the deteriorating economy in the areas of new product development, positioning, and proactive response to impending legislation. The CI librarian and Brand Communications Director participate in bi-weekly status meetings with the president where all parties share insight into their work and current issues. The librarian and Director also work side-by-side in developing copy and strategy that address company communication needs. These opportunities did not exist for the librarian prior to joining with Brand. As she strengthens her ties with Brand, the CI librarian shifts her role toward one more integrated with overall organizational objectives and her tasks tend to be more proactive and strategic.

The Value of Competitive Intelligence: The Brand Communications Perspective

Since the CI librarian has joined the Brand group, the team completed various projects that highlight the company's thought leadership. To strengthen the company's position as an industry leader, a comprehensive public relations strategy was developed to communicate the firm's position within the industry. Through the CI-Brand partnership, the outputs of the PR strategy have been stronger, and more valuable to the organization along with the industry. The partnership has allowed for the sharing of knowledge and ongoing dialog to further promote both the brand director's and CI librarian's knowledge of the current state of the industry and its impact on the company, its clients, and consumers. Because of the constant interaction, the brand director along with the entire Brand group has become more versed in industry trends and the external factors affecting the industry. This knowledge helps better position the company in whole through sales opportunities such as proposals, public relations efforts, and client marketing.

The CI librarian also brings a different perspective into brainstorm sessions and ideation that are regularly held within the Brand group. She continually offers value in the knowledge she brings from outside of the creative world, such as news and trends from within specific industries and consumer behaviors, and her forethought of what could result from current industry and consumer trends. Specifically, her insight into demographic segmentation and consumer behavior allows the Brand group to develop targeted marketing materials on behalf of its clients. These materials generally include direct mail and direct e-mail communications to end consumers. Without the insight into the demographic makeup of this consumer base, and the motivating forces that influence their purchasing behaviors, the marketing materials would not be as successful in driving the desired outcomes. This success impacts both the company's clients, which the company promotes on behalf of, as well as the company itself, in qualitative and financial terms.

In addition, the perspective of the CI librarian influences the product development and positioning of new products that the company introduces to the marketplace. With her knowledge and input, she helps cultivate the marketing materials that are presented to clients

through her understanding of segmented markets and her ability to lend that knowledge to develop messaging that resonates best with the company's intended audience, whether that be the client or end consumers.

With each interaction between the CI librarian and the Brand professionals, knowledge is shared that ultimately influences the outputs of the Brand Communications group. The marketing materials developed today are far more advanced in terms of messaging and positioning than they were before the CI librarian was placed within the Brand group. Through this true partnership, each role gains greater understanding of our industry and how to position products, the company, and its clients to targeted audiences.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Certainly, not every corporate librarian enjoys the ready availability of a brand department or executive buy-in, but this model partnership elucidates some key practices that can be adopted by almost any professional regardless of their circumstances. This example demonstrates that partnering with someone with complementary skills can greatly improve each participant's own work while generating new opportunities to add value. To find an ideal partner, it is crucial that you understand your own strengths and weaknesses as well as those that exist in your organization. Every organization includes people with hobbies, interests, and abilities who could be useful allies. Methodically seek out individuals who can help you attain abilities necessary to enhance your role by strengthening your weaknesses, or by making existing strengths even more robust.

While not absolutely necessary, physical proximity proved to be a pivotal factor in the success of the CI-Brand partnership in that it facilitated the free flow of ideas and information. In fact, the informal encounters with Brand and its internal clients are just as important as the other partner outputs as they entrench CI in the corporate culture. The highly-trafficked brand room made informal meetings more frequent, which in turn made the librarian more effective in understanding business needs and building relationships. When possible, consider creating opportunities for informal contact with your partners. Opportunities could include brown bag lunches or after-hours activities. Whatever the case, one should not overlook the roles the physical environment and personal relationships play in achieving business outcomes.

Another useful strategy is to seek other partners who work on high-profile or mission-critical tasks. In the case of Brand, the department creates promotional pieces for top clients, directly helps drive sales, and figures prominently within the company. By actively offering valuable expertise to perceived needs, the librarian endeared herself to key internal clients. With the renewed emphasis on responding to external marketplace threats, the current recession provided ample opportunities for the CI librarian to showcase her value through Brand projects in addition to her own. As natural promoters, the Brand professionals recognized these contributions and shared the benefits of them with other colleagues. In time, internal clients realized the value of including CI in their own projects as well. Indeed, it is not uncommon for someone seeking Brand help to now receive solicited and unsolicited CI help when they would not have thought to ask for it in the past simply because the librarian is more visible. Building

advocacy and greater usage in this manner can also help gain executive support if it is nonexistent.

Competitive intelligence expert Kenneth Sawka recently wrote a piece about how to position CI roles for success during the current economic crisis. Among his tips, Sawka advised taking a fresh look at your purpose and states, “The very survival of the CI function and your role in it may depend on your ability to deliver unique, rapid, and relevant insights that can help your company navigate through a tough economy. Now more than ever, you have to take your CI deliverables a few steps further to truly help your management team navigate uncertain economic waters, spot new business development opportunities, and contribute directly to revenue generation or expense minimization.”⁴ For corporate librarians, economic challenges have indeed carved out a need for innovative solutions to pressing business problems. But solving them requires the combined efforts of every colleague. As ALG’s CI and Brand professionals found, non-traditional partnerships nurtured the creative thinking and the talent resources to produce new outputs and value to the organization. Mutually beneficial partnerships bring together new combinations of skills and ideas that can result in the fresh thinking that can help steer companies into calmer waters. To use Sawka’s words, that new way of thinking could likely prove to be the ‘few steps further’ that will secure success for all.

Endnotes

¹ Best Buy, “Best Buy Sees Softer Consumer Spending, Lowers Fiscal 2009 EPS Guidance,” http://www.bestbuyinc.com/news_center/01-09-09/best-buy-sees-softer-consumer-spending-lowers-fiscal-2009-eps-guidance, accessed April 25, 2009.

² Susan Saulny, “Downturn Puts New Stresses on Libraries,” *New York Times*, April 1, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/02/us/02library.html?_r=1&pagewanted=all, accessed April 25, 2009.

³ Ellen Coomber, “The Visual Advantage,” *Communication World*, September-October 2008, 37.

⁴ Kenneth Sawka, “Making Lemons out of Lemonade: Weathering the Economic Crisis and Positioning for Long-Term CI Success,” *Competitive Intelligence Magazine* 12, no. 2 (2009): 32.