Incorporating Metrics into Your Mission

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With apologies to Mission: Impossible: “Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to communicate your library’s mission and value to your stakeholders.” (Right—as if you have a choice to accept or decline this mission!)

The first question to ask is, What is your library’s mission? This leads to some related questions: Do you have a mission? Do you even know whether you have one?

I researched library mission statements and found a wide variety, from short and concise to lengthy and detailed. Here are a few that are on the short end of the spectrum (names have been omitted to protect the innocent):

• We bring people and information together.
• To bring opportunities for knowledge, learning, and achievement to our customers and community.
• The university libraries provide quality resources and innovative services to stimulate creativity, intellectual curiosity, and to facilitate lifelong learning and research within the communities we serve.

Most of these mission statements made me want to ask, Why? Why bring people and information together? Why bring opportunities for knowledge, learning, and achievement to customers and community? Why stimulate creativity and intellectual curiosity? What is the purpose of doing these things? What is the benefit? What is the value?

This brings me to my second set of questions: What is your library’s value to your organization? How do you determine that value? Can you connect your value to your mission statement so you can communicate it to your stakeholders?

At the SLA Route 66 Chapter’s Road Trip Symposium in September, a number of us gathered to discuss what makes special libraries special and talk about ways of improving and demonstrating our value to our organizations. Return on investment (ROI) was a recurring theme at the symposium, as it’s the most-often-used metric for measuring value. To our frustration, it often fails us when we use it to assess a library’s value.

In strict terms, ROI is based on money spent and money earned and is calculated after the fact. Most libraries spend money and earn very little (if any), but we know that libraries provide a lot of benefits. Because these benefits are largely intangible, however, we need to look at other ways of demonstrating value.

I suggest we use a metric called total economic impact (TEI) that was developed by Forrester Research. TEI takes into account intangible benefits and, in most cases, uses them as part of ROI calculations. With a few tweaks, TEI can be expressed roughly as follows: We will be doing _____ to make _____ better, as measured by _____, which is worth _____.

Our keynote speaker at the Road Trip Symposium, Carol Tenopir from the School of Information Sciences at the University of Tennessee, reported that a typical researcher will spend a month of 8-hour days each year just reading articles—and this does not include time spent searching for said articles and other information. One can easily make the argument that this is not productive time. If, instead, a researcher asks a librarian for assistance finding information, that time becomes productive for the librarian—this is the librarian’s job, after all!—and for the researcher as well, because he/she can use that time on other tasks.

How do you measure this activity and demonstrate its value? Try this TEI statement on for size: We will be searching for articles to make Dr. Researcher’s time spent better, as measured by her hourly salary, which is worth $100 per hour. So, using this approach, our example library’s mission could be one (or all) of the following:

• We help our patrons find information faster so they can return to their missions.
• We leverage our resources to make others more efficient.
COMMUNICATING YOUR LIBRARY’S MISSION

REFLECTIONS

- We save the organization money by making others more efficient.

These are mission statements that don’t prompt me to ask, Why? These are mission statements that are easy to communicate to stakeholders. They explain who is doing what for whom and why, as well as expressing the value or benefit of the activity. These are “elevator pitch” mission statements. (Next time you’re in the elevator with upper management, introduce yourself and tell them your library’s mission statement.)

You need to go further, though, and plan a campaign to share your mission with the organization as a whole. In other words, you need a marketing plan! Visuals are far easier to broadcast to the larger community, so how can you make your mission statement visual?

Our first example mission statement makes me think of wings on feet or a sports car, maybe even a rocket ship launching. Our second example makes me think of a fulcrum, with the librarian lifting the library’s resources to support some visual interpretation of efficiency (maybe a speedometer-type gauge). Our third example expressly mentions money as well as efficiency, so we have stacks of cash and a gauge.

I found a few images in Microsoft clip art that could illustrate these statements:

Once you’ve developed a visual mock-up, share it with a few friends and colleagues. Keep the words to a minimum and make them a call to action, as in the following:

- Visit the Library Today
- Challenge Us to Find Something for You
- Let A Librarian Save You Time

Do your friends and colleagues get the intended message from looking at your visual? Developing a concise and clear message is hard, and it will probably take several iterations. Once you have a final version, plaster it everywhere! Find at least five different ways to share your message: send e-mail blasts, add it to your e-mail signature, hang a poster in the breakroom, give out bookmarks, and post it on your website and link to it from each stakeholder category: users, employees, donors or supporters, etc.

If you have the budget for it, order promotional giveaway items like pens or pencils, note pads, or something else people will keep and use. Once you have these in hand, give them away—they don’t do you any good sitting on a shelf.

Now that you’ve defined your mission and communicated it, your job is almost finished. You must still answer one last question: How are you going to measure whether you have achieved your mission? **SLA**