



Feature Article

EFFECTIVE GRASSROOT ADVOCACY FOR LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SERVICES IN DEVELOPING COMMUNITIES

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Introduction

I am most delighted and humbled by your request for me to present a paper on effective library advocacy in the state. Distinguished chartered librarians of the Great Anambra State of Nigeria; I share with you the interest in this topic and welcome the opportunity to discuss some ideas on the best way forward. In doing so, I will consider the information role of libraries and librarians with a view to explain why they are the pillars of society. I will provide pertinent answer to the bugging question of the internet taking the job of librarians. Finally, I will discuss ten useful tips on how we can improve library advocacy in our community. Dike (2005) observed the role played by NLA, our professional association in mobilizing grassroots support for school libraries in the 1960s, suggesting the situation has changed today such that there should be a change of strategy. So if you are committed, join the mindset in this discussion. To start with: How do librarians make grassroots advocacy for Library and Information centres contagious in their communities?

Librarians and Information experts are not entering the age of Information; they are leaving it. They are entering the age of system, i.e. The hybrid library. The library books are also about to enter this world of maximum democracy. The long term impact of this

journey is of significant importance to librarians and how people perceive them in years to come.

In Nigeria, library books for the past decades have been frozen in print form, but today, they have been freed and democratized in speech, digitized and transmitted at the speed of light and with an ability to be shared more broadly than their publishers could ever have imagined.

Consequently, the communication role of the library and Information specialist is essential in contemporary network of systems that pose great challenge to the physical library. The numerous designs of computer systems and their software packages, the many options of on-line, off-line and over the line, the increasing confusing quagmire of contradictory and irrelevant information the newcomer- system has generated among library users can be overwhelming. The challenges to the Nigerian Library Association and the profession at large have never been greater than in these times of limited budgets emerging from the so called system expansion in the library technology and the expanding responsibilities for library professionals. The next question is: how do librarians cope?

Nevertheless, the digital age has created significant opportunities for the profession. One clear evidence is the advancement of the status of librarians and their workplaces. The Nigerian Librarians are Information Communication Technology (ICT) conscious. They are fast becoming ICT experts who can enrich the learning process of their library users.

Let me digress a little to answer one of the most bugging questions other professionals pose to librarians, namely:

Is the Internet taking the job of the libraries and librarians?

The response is no To start with, without the library and librarians, people are on their own without credible and reliable information. Libraries and Information centres are important because they bring people together in a community; they help people to discover their communities, to understand their differences. A library is not just a collection of books. It is not just an electronic or virtual set of information, it is an embodiment of our past, present and future recorded in print and digital format. Simply put, the library is the intellectual centre of the society. People who say the library is not necessary or is no longer needed and who think they can find information better with internet are wrong. They should know that with internet, their world of

information is smaller. For example, they may have internet access but they may not have access to the serials the library has been collecting or the diverse publishers' titles. They may not even keep pace with the fast changing internet portals.

No doubt, behind every quality education and research is the library. Libraries are the soul and mind of their communities and the librarians are the soul and mind of the library. Libraries work because librarians make them to work. Librarians are experts in helping patrons to find the information they require in books, archives and on the web. They save time and money by helping people to find the best, most accurate and complete information whether on-line, books or video.

In school and university libraries, librarians teach bibliographic instruction and information literacy skills that students need to succeed throughout their academic pursuit. In a world that is information rich, Librarians bring valuable expertise. They connect patrons with relevant information and save their time and money by help them to find the exact need and repackaging this need for useful purposes.

As educators, researchers and advocates, librarians have led local, national and international efforts to enable people have better access, evaluation, use and appreciation of information from the various media. For example, some of us are well informed about the role of FAIFE (Free Access to Information and Freedom of Expression). FAIFE defends and promotes intellectual freedom as basic human rights within the library Associations and Institutions. It co-operates with other international human rights organizations and responds on behalf of IFLA and international library community to violations of information rights. FAIFE has established a reputation as a reliable and authoritative source on issues relating to freedom of information and expression in relation to libraries and information services.

Another notable societal function of librarians is their involvement in the CLM (Copyright and other Legal Matters). Copyright and related aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (IPRs) have been a vital issue for librarians and information workers world wide. IFLA's CLM core activity works to ensure that the perspectives of profession and the users of libraries are effectively represented in the international arena where policies and legislations on IPRs are determined. In these fora, CLM strives to ensure that a balance is maintained between the rights of IPRs' owners and information users, especially in the increasingly digital environment. These are prospects in applauding the job of a librarian for there is no greater calling in life than the onerous duty of bringing people and books together. Therefore, while our big aim is

to express the hybrid library in the physical library, we need to continue to focus on the citizens and offer to them dedicated, individualized service with high professional touch.

At this point, it is pertinent to reveal noteworthy library readers' comments and praises on the libraries and librarians based on the services they received. From Jorge Luis Borges (2005),

'I have always imagined that paradise is a kind of library.'

From an architect and poet Willard Scott (2003)

'Librarians have always been among the most thoughtful and helpful people. They are teachers without a classroom. No libraries, no progress'

From author and film maker Michael Moore (2003),

'Librarians are subversive. You think they're just sitting there at the desk all quiet and everything. They're like plotting the revolutions, man.... I wouldn't mess with them'

From former First Lady Barbara Bush (2003),

'Libraries and Librarians have definitely changed my life and the lives of countless other Americans.... They deserve the support and the patronage of every single one of us who values education'.

In all the excerpts, the library users depict the librarians as very special people who are caregivers of the mind, the nurturers of dreams and the defenders of truth. The question is, do we truly merit the superlative descriptions? How do we gratify this position and make the campaign for our library services more contagious in our community and also become more relevant to the society we serve?

One major problem against the issue is that Nigerian Librarians often overlook and under-rate the power of 'Relevance' as an effective strategy for library support. They often think it is not their responsibility to promote library services to the public.

Wisdom from the trenches

Having reviewed numerous literature, local, national and international and also from conversational point of view, the following are improved library advocacy tips to pass

along to you, for it is my humble conviction that with coordinated efforts, we librarians can make significant impact on library advocacy at the grassroots.

1. Emphasize library business as library and information services and strive to deliver both diligently. How to do this includes:
 - a. Review policy on library services, facilities and equipment in line with current technology demands, (e.g. If in public library use Edict. If there is no policy in other types of libraries, try and make a useful one).
 - b. Guide the Board of Trustees to accept and approve services and funding.
 - c. Expand library programmes.
 - d. Extend library hours.
 - e. Take stock of community needs and respond to them.
2. Market yourself and the library for recognition. The awareness creation is essential to sustain the profession. Do not give the impression that all you know is to read books. This gives the public the wrong impression of us as book worm. With this, it is difficult to convince people that what we do is important and useful. Remember, the erstwhile nomenclature of the librarian as a bookkeeper is no longer acceptable. Librarians research, analyse, document and disseminate information as contained in any media of information and communication, the wrong impression of us as bookworm.
3. Become a productivity expert; The librarian works hard to earn a living and the library is about creating hard work and technology know-how. The library is not only a cultural institution, it is also a critical infrastructure of the society that advocates intellectual energy dissipation.
4. Maintain a competitive edge over other professionals through continuing education.
5. Keep a regular eye on the activities of other public services like restaurants, banks, grocery stores, transporters etc., Try to learn how customer services in these areas are carried out. This is because you want to make your library facilities more customer friendly, more inviting and expeditious. Notice that transporters and restaurant managers, for example, do not stay away from their customers. They stay by them attending to their needs. In like manner, the librarian should stay by the library user and attend to this demands. Library users, just as their counterparts prefer to stay by the staff for many reasons, whether to interact socially, emotionally or intellectually. If this is not possible, the human contact aspect of the library as a social institution may be lost. Therefore, if we want to increase the population of our library users, we need to study other public institution that know how to serve clients better and learn

from them. The world market today, is customer a..J Total Quality Management (TQM) driven. All the Nigerian library and information specialists are called upon to join the bandwagon.

6. Make sacrifices and monetize services. The library and information work can be quite engaging, challenging and respected by people. These are the gains of the profession which can be quantified in monetary terms, a reason for some people engaging in library work.
7. Organise yearly fund raising activities in your library. Any of these activities can be undertaken, football match, dedication of the library, foundation day celebration car or motor-cycle raffle or a raffle of any other item. Posters can be produced with pictures showing the governor or any of the top government functionaries like the Commissioners or the LGA Chairmen (mostly those who can influence decisions of public interest) holding and reading book. The caption of this poster may read "READ". This campaign can be done by first obtaining the consent of the individuals to be showcased. The effect of this strategy can really be contagious. Other strategies may include: auction sales of used books on household utensils, T-shirts, artwork or any other item. A follow-up with appeal letters is also recommended. One of the benefits of fund raising besides the money collected, is the unique opportunity the librarian has to create and tell endless stories on reason for embarking on such mission. For example, one of the reasons may be that because the state provides only a marginal percentage of the amount the library needs to run a good library, it has to raise the rest. So many of such convincing excuses and solicitations can be advanced to the funding public to make them raise funds for the library.
8. Read, Research and Publish. These are ways of sending your ideas to the market place of opinion where they compete with others for relevance. You can do this by writing biographies, bibliographical guides and indexes, sponsoring and publishing association journals, newsletters, contributing articles for editorial publication, being a columnist in popular magazines or newspapers, etc.
9. Evaluate your library by measuring the value of library programmes to users. This can be done by assessing the effects of library programmes on the users in the community. Today, the evaluation result may be poor. This is the point to carry out a survey to find ways the library can be more useful to the people.
10. Maintain a good relationship with colleagues. Discuss, exchange ideas on all matters. By so doing you may find or reveal to one another respect or misgivings. Take the initiative to reconcile differences and to amend relationships rather than to break them among associates in your work place.

With the above ten steps, we librarians can effectively make impact in our communities and our advocacy programmes can also be more contagious and wide spread. I welcome your thoughts and suggestions on the strategies and look forward to hearing your success stories.

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