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Could I See That Price Tag Again?

by Joan Shear

There are firm librarians who bill research hours to clients and independents who charge for their services, but academic reference librarians like myself often fail to recognize the value of our contributions to the institutions we serve — until we are given a glimpse of what others charge for the same services. I am reminded of the time, many years ago, when I learned exactly how much I saved my institution.

My first job out of library school was at my alma mater. When I went to work there, the library was busy reclassing the reading room collection into Library of Congress system from our own local call number system, which required frequent shifts and adjustments to the room. Giant maps — at least 4 feet by 5 feet — of both the reading room and the stacks were posted so patrons could locate the library's materials and resources. But as time went on, the maps became out of date.

I came up with a plan to recreate the map and keep it current during the reclass and shift. This was long before the Mac was invented, and personal computing, especially of a graphic nature, had not yet been developed. Using black line tape, I drew new maps of the reading room and the stacks with no location or call number information on them and had them enlarged for about \$45. Then I used our Kroy labeling machine to write out call numbers, location codes and materials descriptions that I could tape on to the maps. When something was moved and/or reclassified, I simply ripped off the old tape and pasted a new label on the map. So I was able to keep the map current as we reclassified and moved the collection.

After I left that job for my current one, I received a phone call from someone at my previous library. No one had updated the map since I left. A commercial graphics firm had given them a price estimate of \$10,000 to create new, updated maps, and the library was reluctant to spend that much. I said I'd be happy to show them my technique for

keeping the current map up to date. They insisted on paying me \$200 for my help, because I was saving the library a lot of money.

I hadn't thought about that for a while until I was solicited for a law school class 10-year gift. As a reference librarian, I didn't think I could really contribute at the same level as some of my classmates who had more lucrative jobs. Then I remembered the maps and suggested they look into whether or not our class can get credit for my recent contribution of services in the amount of \$9,800. I don't think they counted it in the class total, but I think they did include it in one of their fund-raising letters.

Do you know of an instance when you saved your library or parent institution a significant amount of money? How about the time when the fact you found won the case: How much were the attorneys' fees on that award again? How about the time you and a lawyer tried to research the same thing on a commercial service and you found the answer with \$200 worth of searches while the attorney spent \$10,000? You think I'm making this up? I know of a court administrator who gave his secretary a password to a commercial system and asked her to retrieve some documents for him. When she finally called the library for help, she had already run up a \$32,000 bill. And the librarians actually knew how to get the same information without charge. The librarians worked with the online vendor to eliminate the huge bill in return for a mutually favorable contract for future usage.

If you think about it, I'd bet there is a time when someone provided you with the ability to see the price tag for your services not at the markdown rate we are paid, but at the rate someone else would have charged. When you do, could you send them to the Public Relations Committee for its collection of success stories? The committee promises not to divulge specific names or embarrassing facts beyond the type of library, the activities performed, the amount saved, and how we know the real price tag. Send them to Raquel Ortiz at rmortiz@bu.edu or use the Web link at the AALLNET Public Relations Committee page.

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