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Stuck in the Bargain Basement

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by Joan Shear

Some states have those catchy sayings like "Virginia is for Lovers" or "Maryland is for Crabs." In Minnesota it should be "Minnesota is for Shoppers." It's no wonder the Mall of America was built there: The people of Minnesota are the best shoppers on the planet. Going to Minneapolis for AALL was quite literally a homecoming for me, and being a Minnesotan, I am an excellent shopper, too. But I didn't start out that way; I had to learn an important principle: It isn't the cost, but rather the value of the goods purchased that is the true measure of a great shopping trip.

Merriam-Webster's Dictionary online, at <http://www.webster.com>, defines "cost" as "the amount or equivalent paid or charged for something," and "value" as the "relative worth, utility, or importance <a good value at the price>". It is very dangerous to judge goods by their price tags rather than by their actual values. A great way to waste money is to assume that things that cost more are automatically better than those that cost less.

Many people still confuse cost with value. This is a problem that law librarians constantly face: People who don't really know how law librarians add value to their institutions judge them by their lower salaries. And yet, when people don't have a real understanding of the substantial benefits of the work law librarians perform, can we really blame them for relying on the only objective measure they know?

Consider the following examples:

In May I had the opportunity to teach for the second time an AALL Professional Development Course on Legal Reference Services. One of the biggest concerns expressed by newer law firm reference librarians was their difficulty answering legal questions posed to them in jargon they were unfamiliar with. Attorneys do this most often when they come to librarians for the librarians' lower billing rate rather than their information-gathering and handling expertise. These newer librarians feared that admitting their reservations or limitations would cause the attorneys to lose faith in their abilities.

I met another newer law librarian while on our family vacation this summer. She's still working on her M.L.S. and has trouble finding the time to take classes while employed full time at a busy law firm. What she loves most about her job is bringing information to the firm lawyers that they never could have found without her help. She knows that if she completes her degree, her course work will improve her effectiveness and efficiencies in her work for the firm. Yet she has not been completely successful convincing both her employers and herself that putting in the time to finish her degree or taking time out

experts, we provide faster access to quality information. While I was on reference duty last week, three different patrons within an hour thanked me not just for helping them, but for saving them hours of their time — and I had thought their reference questions were fairly quick, simple and straightforward. Other patrons have thanked staff for helping them find information that they wouldn't have otherwise found.

Our expertise is valuable even in areas of law in which we aren't fully conversant. I find it particularly satisfying whenever I help tax attorneys or tax professors with their research questions. I know they are much more familiar with the content of the documents they are seeking, but my superior knowledge of the structure and organization of information allows me to help even these legal specialists access the information they need quickly and efficiently.

Second, acknowledge that our information expertise is the result of study, practice and years of experience.

It isn't just because we're more intelligent (although librarians tend to be highly intelligent people). I've had a number of opportunities to watch library employees develop professionally as they pursued their M.L.S. degrees. While all of them came to their library jobs with a strong service orientation, their ability to help people expanded exponentially as they completed their M.L.S. coursework.

The need for professional education doesn't end with the acquisition of a library degree. Especially in a field as rapidly changing as law librarianship, we need to constantly update our skills and knowledge to continue to perform highly valuable work in the future. We therefore place great importance on attending professional conferences, workshops and meetings. In addition to educational programs, these forums are invaluable for sharing professional successes with colleagues and for strengthening relationships among libraries. "The Competencies of Law Librarianship," approved by the AALL Executive Board in March, can be a useful tool for creating a professional development plan.



of the work day to attend library school courses not offered in the evenings will actually be worth it.

In both cases a little PR work is needed to educate the consumers of legal reference and research services about the value of law librarians. How do we clear up these misperceptions?

First, be totally clear about the nature of the job. We are specialists in legal information. We aren't bargain-basement associates. As information

Be prepared to make the case for the value we can add to any project — be it a course of instruction, a networking project or firm management. Never assume people are aware of our expertise in the principles of knowledge management, our ability to evaluate the need for new and evolving technology, or our understanding of the practical application of creating, accessing, and managing information. If the law librarian can add that they get all this value at such a low cost, that won't hurt the sale, will it?

This leaves me with only one question — *if we are so valuable, why are our wages are so low?* Not low as compared to public or school librarians (I often joke that as a law librarian I actually receive a living wage), but low compared to other law professionals, such as the law professors. I wonder if it's because we actually like our jobs. But enjoying our work shouldn't mean we don't get paid what we are worth. There ought to be a

way to make librarians' salaries fall in line with the Information Age benefits we provide to our institutions.

Hmmm. Maybe our employers are better shoppers than I've given them credit for — they're getting a great value at a lower cost. Could they all be from Minnesota?

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