

How Much Is Enough?

by Kenneth Marks

Anyone who has ever raised a child has had the experience of dealing with a never ending series of requests for money to do all the things that children feel they must do. Never mind that they receive an allowance; they always come back asking for more. For some reason a child believes the parent has a bottomless pocket full of money. Of course, parents know the pocket is not bottomless. When a parent finally draws the line and holds firm, providing no more allowance, it is amazing the resourcefulness that children will demonstrate. Sometimes they even find jobs.

Libraries are analogous to children in many ways when it comes to the library's relationship with a parent institution. Libraries are always asking for more resources. Libraries never have enough resources. Libraries are always living at the edge of financial insolvency because they are convinced their "parent" will tide them over to the next regular allowance. Those few times when the parent institution draws a line, it is equally amazing what a library can do.

The fact of the matter for libraries is that they have lived at the edge of "genteel poverty" for so long that they have become reliant on the whimsical generosity of their parent institutions. Libraries have been allowed to live with just enough to sustain life, but never enough to develop into the full-fledged adult organizations they could become if they took the initiative to be financially self-reliant.

The question that has to be asked is why have librarians allowed themselves to be trapped in this relationship? It is a "fact of life" that no individual or organization can survive if they try to be all things to all people. Librarians have ensconced themselves on the off-ramp from the information rich world of the future by trying to be all things to all people and not being willing to place an accurate value on the work they do and the services they provide. Until librarians are willing to differentiate between the various services they provide by placing identifiable and quantifiable values upon each one, libraries will not move beyond their "poor relation" status in society.

Why is it that librarians have been unwilling to place a price on the various services they provide? A review of any segment of city government, state government, or public education (K-12 or higher education) reveals an established practice of levying fees for an ever-expanding array of services. These agencies do not seem to have any inhibitions in charging these fees simply because there is some concern about a portion of the population being disadvantaged by not being able to pay the charge. What is so sacred about libraries that librarians should hold their organization to be different? Perhaps, librarians are afraid that their clientele will discover how little value the services really have if they are faced with having to pay for them. Perhaps, librarians are afraid they will really be held accountable for performing in a measurable manner if their clientele have to pay for certain services.

There are librarians who say that putting a value on services and levying charges will create a "have" and "have not" environment. The answer to that concern has to be, so what! Continue to keep the library's doors open to its clientele and let them have access to the book collection. Once a patron's need moves beyond the general collection, why shouldn't there be a fee charged for services provided and information delivered? What is so fundamentally wrong with recovering the cost of providing these services that go beyond the original mission of the library? If a library's patrons believe there is value in these specialized services, they will be prepared to pay for them. If the patrons aren't willing to pay then, perhaps, the services aren't as important as the librarians have tried to convince themselves they are.

One important factor that librarians need to keep in mind is whom the library is for. It certainly should not be for the librarian although, all too often, a telling argument can be made that a library is nothing more than a monument to the librarian or librarianship. If a community finds that starvation-level library service is satisfactory, then why should the librarians try to move that community where it does not believe it needs to go? If print collections provide a satisfactory level of support, why should librarians aspire to an electronic alternative if the community does not need it or want it?