

Kristin McDonough at NYPL's SIBL: KD/KS for Entrepreneurs

New York is a city about science, industry, and—above all—business, and New Yorkers are justifiably proud of the Science, Industry, and Business Library of The New York Public Library Research Libraries. Affectionately known simply as “SIBL” to New Yorkers (and, as it turns out, to people around the world), this unique library provides research support to those specialized communities, with distinctive customer-focused service delivery.

SIBL has succeeded beyond anyone's wildest dreams, so much so that that many New Yorkers find it hard to believe that SIBL is almost 10 years old. Hasn't it always just been there? Isn't SIBL just part of the fabric of life in New York City?

Not really, and that's what is so exciting about what goes on at SIBL, about what is on offer to benefit the citizens of New York. And not to put too fine a point on it, to benefit the many international visitors who come to New York to learn about how libraries can help jump-start small businesses in their own countries. All of which makes Kristin McDonough's professional life busy and exciting, to say the least.

McDonough is Robert and Joyce Menschel Director of SIBL, one of four directors with management responsibility for the collections that jointly make up The Research Libraries of NYPL. But SIBL isn't only a research library, despite the size of the collections and the level of services provided. And it isn't just a specialized library, either, because SIBL doesn't exactly fit the classic definition of a specialized library. A specialized (or “special”) library calls for a particular subject focus (no argument there) but the classic definition also calls for a specialized clientele and that simply isn't the way things are here. SIBL is a *public* library, open to anyone who comes in off the street with a question or a desire to learn more about some subject, or simply to pass the time. And with a circulating collection from which New Yorkers borrow when they need to work away from the library, SIBL does, indeed, function as a public library.

It was William D. Walker, then Andrew Mellon Director of the NYPL Research Libraries System (and now University Librarian at the University of Miami) who developed the concept for SIBL. McDonough delights in describing why SIBL exists, as she did when she spoke a couple of years ago at a business conference in Japan.

“SIBL was the product of nearly a quarter century of internal debate about how best to shape its pre-eminent technology and business collections for the public good,” she told Japanese business leaders. “The creation of SIBL was the single largest construction project the Library had undertaken since the opening in 1911 of the iconic Carrère and Hastings building, and the concept for SIBL was equally ‘big’—to merge the extraordinary collections and specialist staff of two Research Divisions—Science/Technology and Economics/Public Affairs—and to include the circulating collections and staff from the Mid-Manhattan Branch Library. These integrated resources in a high-tech facility would serve as an engine to benefit the local economy in New York City.”

SIBL may not have the famous lions out front (it is located in a former department store building eight blocks from the main library), but it has nevertheless become an icon of its own. The library is famous as a hub of entrepreneurial activity, an extremely successful example of the importance of knowledge development and knowledge sharing—KD/KS—in the world of knowledge services delivery. Of course, in a public library it's KD/KS with a twist. Confidentiality issues naturally make it impossible for SIBL staff to make connections among users who may be working on similar topics (the ideal KD/KS scenario in the usual specialized library situation) but in the larger framework of knowledge services delivery, SIBL succeeds. (And, as McDonough notes, SIBL's users *themselves* make key B2B connections when they network in SIBL's training labs and conference rooms).

At SIBL, the focus on the library's market is a given, almost a passion when you listen to McDonough and her staff describe their outreach activities. They recognize that KD/KS—as the driver for successful knowledge services—exists to serve a market, even if that market is the population of the greater New York metropolitan area! That fantastic community of people who live and work in Manhattan, with its financial firms, its so-called glamour industries, its famous “rag trade” (the apparel industry that has been part of Manhattan for a couple of hundred years), publishing, real estate. The list goes on and on, and these trades, plus New York's large number of service industries, revolve around one supreme topic of interest: business. It's business that keeps New York functioning

and it's business that McDonough and her teams of librarians and community outreach specialists pay attention to, in the process making this facility a very successful library, no matter how it's defined or categorized.

"What's happening," McDonough says, "is that we are bringing in a new type of user, one that had not been given much attention in the past. And in doing this, we are re-conceptualizing the research library. Up to now, a research library was thought of as a place for scholars, academic students and faculty, and professional researchers and writers. And certainly those patrons still make substantial use of the library. But we are developing services for new audiences, for entrepreneurs and aspiring innovators, for non-profit business support groups and students at specialized high schools and technical institutes."

Examples abound. There is the library's work with SCORE, experienced business people from the Service Corps of Retired Executives who counsel aspiring entrepreneurs 30+ hours a week about starting or growing a business. And the strategic learning "piece" of knowledge services is abundantly in place at SIBL, with a training curriculum of 22 classes taught by librarians as well as an after-work series of seminars offered three nights each week, when expert practitioners share their knowledge and their experiences in the business world. Ordinary (and that word seems slightly out of place in this context) library services are naturally available, with the library's high-end databases used daily by hundreds of library patrons looking for technical literature and patents, generating mailing lists from online directories, identifying their competition, and, of course, seeking jobs. Obviously SIBL is, in fact, nothing less than a "full-service" library for the businessperson/entrepreneur.

For the library's staff—McDonough's management team and all the front-line librarians who make the great ship run—a enormous source of pride was the selection of SIBL as the site for the "Gateway Event" to New York City's World Trade Week 2005. This kick-off for over 200 foreign trade representatives was the culmination of the efforts of one SIBL librarian, Peter Bengston, who had joined external committees and reached out to organizations, including the District Export Council of New York, to demonstrate that he could be a useful information provider to the local international trade community. This led to an even more international flavor for SIBL when the State Department invited SIBL to participate in a project to develop young business and economic leaders from 20 countries, and academics, entrepreneurs, government employees, and corporate managers from Algeria, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Libya, Gaza, India, Israel, Morocco, Nepal, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and other countries descended on SIBL for training and networking. SIBL, long a destination for delegations of international librarians, is becoming a destination for business developers from abroad. These kinds of activities are giving the library a truly global framework in which to function.

But it isn't all international. Remember, SIBL is a public library, a *local* public library and if the "local" is the diverse, multi-cultural, demanding center of the most sophisticated city in the world, so what? The library's high quality services are still designed so that local users, especially the local business community, benefit immensely. It's a service delivery framework you notice immediately when you come to SIBL to do some research; the business focus is there when you walk in. For would-be entrepreneurs just beginning their quest, or for the more seasoned businessperson simply seeking a solution to a business problem, there is an array of help at hand from consultations by appointment to a "Call Ahead" option that retrieves and reserves reference materials in advance of your arrival.

To be truthful, though (and to acknowledge the role of e-resources in our time and place), one of the most valuable services for entrepreneurs is already in place before you get to the door, and that's SIBL's user-friendly NYC Small Business Resource Center website, with a wealth of information for business people (smallbiz.nysl.org). It's a tool that McDonough likes to refer to "our most ambitious knowledge management project to date." It's a truly apt description, for even the casual user and the most uninitiated businessperson can't help but be impressed by what's there, from forms and an online manual for doing business in NYC to directories and a city-wide calendar of training and networking opportunities for entrepreneurs. U.S. Department of Commerce Technology Opportunities Program (TOP) grant funding has helped to enhance Smallbiz with the addition of "how to" workshops that were filmed at SIBL (including—and why not?—"Tips for Starting and Running A Restaurant in New York"). You'll find what you need. And from our perspective, isn't this exactly the kind of knowledge development and knowledge sharing that knowledge services is all about?

[This is Part One of a two-part profile, which will be continued in March.]