

## **Kristin McDonough at NYPL's SIBL (2): An Entrepreneurial Focus for Knowledge Services**

Leadership at the Science, Industry, and Business Library of The New York Public Library Research Libraries envisions SIBL as “an engine of the local economy.” This vision has been well realized, not least when the city’s Department of Small Business Services chose to open its latest Business Solutions Center (BSC) at SIBL. And the library’s leaders are pushing themselves to take knowledge services to a new high, embracing a philosophical sea-change in library management that is paying off in spades. Of course efforts in these directions are being made in other libraries throughout the United States and Canada, and in much of the rest of the world as well, but not many public libraries have the critical mass and the level of patron enthusiasm that characterizes what goes on at SIBL.

And not many have taken on the challenges that face the local citizen seeking to run a small business, or to figure out whom to contact to determine which permit or license is required, or to identify whom to turn to for an accurate response to one of the many critical issues facing the owners of a small business enterprise. These businesspeople come to SIBL, for that’s where they know they’ll be well served.

How well?

Hear Kristin McDonough: “The library becomes a business assistance service,” she says, “and here’s the kind of thing I’m talking about. Right now we’re beta-testing a class that we expect to launch this spring. It’s aimed at the property management community, and if you think about it, it’s a natural for a place like New York.”

That comment couldn’t be more accurate, for it is definitely a “natural.” No other city in the world is as defined by buildings as New York. The class is called “Building Maintenance & Services: Managing the Built Environment,” teaching the use of the optimal information resources on such topics as building management, HVAC, electrical wiring, environmental compliance. . . . You name it and it’s there, and the targeted audience, which includes building managers and superintendents, housing associations, maintenance engineers, and residential property owners, will now have their own “in-SIBL university,” their own resource for learning where to turn for information. In another vein, one upcoming cluster of programs will offer professional training in personal finance literacy.

Truly, SIBL is living up to the old adage of the library as the people’s university. Is that how McDonough sees it?

“It’s part of what we do,” she says. “It’s our job is to give people access to high-end resources for practical, not just academic or scholarly, uses. Our high-end resources are more than print tools and online databases. They’re people—SIBL’s librarians, business and technology professionals at partner groups, on-site SCORE counselors and BSC staff. It’s a key integration of resources and expert knowledge delivered directly from the experts themselves. And when you get right down to it, it’s mainly a big job of synthesizing, a perfectly appropriate job for SIBL’s stellar staff, doing it in the heart of the busiest place on earth, where it will do the most good.”

It’s an entrepreneurial emphasis and it fits right in, just as it should. After all, if SIBL is going to be recognized as the place where New Yorkers come to learn to be entrepreneurial, shouldn’t it be entrepreneurial itself, and take its message out to its own market? That’s exactly what SIBL is doing.

From the knowledge services perspective, there are two clear reasons why the entrepreneurial focus works for SIBL. One is the already described customer-focused approach to programs and services. The other key to success, which every entrepreneur will recognize, is that you go to your market. SIBL’s Small Business Team, for example, does that regularly, traveling to NYC’s five boroughs to promote SIBL resources at partner locations beyond the library walls. Many SIBL librarians are active in library associations and, as would be expected, much of the learning and networking and knowledge exchange, particularly for knowledge professionals, takes place at this level. On the other hand, though, it is McDonough’s strong belief that successful knowledge services professionals must also know what’s going on in other fields, and make efforts to get out there and participate.

“For too long,” she says, “we’ve been talking to ourselves. As I see it, the way to underscore our skills and demonstrate our value is to interact with other groups of people to let them know what we can do, and how they can benefit from what we do. So we partner with, or “embed” ourselves into other groups beyond the library world.”

Look what happened when SIBL's assistant director for collections, John Ganly, worked on a project with three advertising groups, the Association of American Advertisers, the One Club, and the Online Publishing Association. The result was a stunning exhibit, *Opt In to Advertising's New Age*, which featured iconic print, radio, tv, and internet ads. It launched Advertising Week 2005, bringing industry insiders to SIBL, some for the first time (the entire marketing and advertising staff from Tiffany's spent two mornings exploring SIBL's incredible resources).

As for herself, McDonough is more than willing to practice what she preaches, even if all her outside activities do, as she says with a slight smile, "encroach on one's free time." She relishes her service on the board of the Financial Women's Association (FWA), heading up its undergraduate mentoring and MBA scholarship programs, and she delights in her work with the Execs on Campus Steering Committee at Baruch College. Both groups give her the opportunity to be part of discussions about issues she would be dealing with at the library, but there's an important side benefit: by participating she is getting SIBL's name out there to the management of financial firms and the faculty and students of a premier business school.

"With the FWA, for example, I interact with people who work in myriad roles—administration, HR, marketing, operations, IT—within NYC's vibrant financial services sector. Working with these executives gives me a chance to understand what some of their concerns are, with respect to information and knowledge sharing. There's a tremendous tie-in, and when I'm with them, or with Baruch alums, it puts SIBL out there, front and center."

For McDonough, success begins with a can-do attitude about helping staff rethink their roles as libraries evolve. McDonough supplies a good example as she describes how the SIBL staff experienced a major cultural change when they (and the library's users) had to deal with the onslaught of e-resources.

"We knew that we needed to support the work of the librarians and technical assistants who are on the front lines with the patrons," she says. "With information overload, public service staff needed more efficient ways to share their expert knowledge for quick and seamless retrieval at busy service points. Happily, the staff initiated the search for a solution themselves. Several years ago, three savvy librarians on SIBL's database team took on the task of organizing what we had been collecting and archiving in response to particular queries. They developed SIBLnet, a searchable database of archived, annotated websites that our librarians have found helpful. It rolled out as a desktop enhancement without a technical glitch but really did not become a useful tool overnight. The robustness of the databases was dependant upon distributed input and for quite some time even really engaged librarians continued to use long involved emails with anecdotal descriptions to capture reference transactions. The obstacle to adoption was not technological but cultural, with some staff staying with the more cumbersome, but familiar process. We spent a great deal of time promoting SIBLnet. Little by little we all (well, most of us) came around. We've learned, in fact, that if we all contribute to, and consult SIBLnet, it can make reference work more effective all around."

Clearly McDonough is someone who realizes that cultural change can't be imposed from above and she is gratified that staff have taken her focus on knowledge-sharing and run with it, developing the *Spotlight On* program where librarians train their peers in new e-resources. Her approach was recognized three years ago when Germany's Checkpoint Charlie Foundation and the Initiative Fortbildung für wissenschaftliche Spezialbibliotheken... (The Initiative for Continuing Education in Academic and Research-Oriented Special Libraries and Related Institutions) presented McDonough with the first John-Jacob-Astor Award for outstanding leadership in the management arena. Named for one of the founders of the NYPL Research Libraries, the award acknowledged McDonough's particular area of expertise, coming up with flexible solutions for energizing staff.

For McDonough, it is clear that SIBL's entrepreneurial focus for knowledge services works two ways, internally for herself and her colleagues and externally for the benefit of SIBL's customers.

"It's critical," she says, "to balance the partnering and embedding, all the alliance-building and outreach, with what we're doing internally, all the continuous improvement in customer-focused services, knowledge-sharing among staff, projects like developing SIBLnet. We're constantly thinking about how to provide better service, how to empower and support staff to give our users what they are asking for."

That's the whole idea behind knowledge services.

*[This is Part Two of a two-part profile. Part One was published in February.]*