JoAnne Sparks and Donna Gibson at Memorial Sloan-Kettering:
Knowledge Services Means "Just Say Yes"
by Guy St. Clair

Manhattan's far East Side is not exactly Gotham City, but there is definitely a dynamic duo at work there. JoAnne Sparks and Donna Gibson are working hard to bring a new level of knowledge services delivery to the customers who require information, knowledge, and strategic learning at the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center (MSKCC) Library. The two of them lead a team of enthusiastic and talented professional staff, all sharing their commitment to aggressively identify and serve the research and learning needs of students, faculty, staff, patients, and the general public. Sparks, pictured on the right, is the Director of Library Services at MSKCC and Gibson is Associate Director, User Services. Together they have successfully raised the bar for service delivery in their industry.

Over the past four years, since Sparks arrived with the mandate to re-think the library and its services, the entire operation has taken on a new role in its community. For one thing, the public relations/marketing operation set up for the MSKCC Library is definitely working, and it is noticeably successful. Service delivery is at an all-time high, which in itself is not unusual when there has been a determined effort on management's part to instigate and then carry out a major change-implementation effort.

In this case, though, it seems that everywhere you go people in the medical research field are talking about what Sparks and Gibson and their team are doing at the MSKCC Library. The amount of attention given to connecting all the pieces is exciting, and seeing that everything connects and that enhancements are not totally focused in one direction is a new slant on the change management process. Many organizations embrace change, particularly when seeking to develop a better or stronger customer focus. Others have some external reason for change, new regulatory legislation, for example, or a changing environment for the products and services provided by the enterprise. Others—for reasons we won't go into here—embark on change management so that a particular management emphasis can be realized, or a particular person or group of people can shine.

None of these is the driver at the MSKCC Library, for what is happening there is unique. Sparks calls it "structured serendipity" and after a few minutes with her, it becomes clear that her version of serendipity is based on putting it *all* together, to ensuring that every stakeholder—affiliated with MSKCC or not—has access to what he or she needs. Sparks wants library clients to be connected through whatever tool is best designed to serve those particular clients' needs. As she see it, connection is the foundation of successful knowledge services ("We'll connect you to anything," she says). Not surprisingly, that enthusiasm even shows up in the library's tagline: "make the connection."

Gibson, too, is an enthusiastic supporter of connections. In her responsibility for managing user services for the MSKCC Library, Gibson is positioned to oversee all client-facing services, including the library's marketing and communications function. It is a unique and highly rewarding responsibilty, Gibson says, for it permits her and Sparks to work directly with one another to ensure that their operation enables all library clients to "make the connection."

So there is a clear commitment to knowledge services at the MSKCC Library, a commitment that is made obvious when you hear Sparks and Gibson talk about some of their recent successes. While the two of them are refreshingly modest about their accomplishments, these library managers are at the same time very proud of how they and the MSKCC Library staff incorporate a knowledge services framework into their work. And, as is often the case, Sparks and Gibson and their team have put together a successful knowledge services delivery operation even without acknowledging it as such. That success says much about how they pay attention to their clients' needs and make every effort to see that those needs are met. It obviously doesn't matter what the process is called—the purpose of the effort is to meet their users' needs, however people in the management field describe that effort.

In their case, Sparks and Gibson want to manage an operation that establishes a "reliable relationship"—as they put it—between the library's information professionals and the library's customers. Appealing to their identified user group is a core principle at the MSKCC Library, one that these library managers want to apply in order to enhance the user experience. In the process they expect to improve and facilitate better workflow, and one route they have chosen is what they refer to as "relationship marketing.'"

"We like to think of it as 'the one librarian' concept," Gibson says. "We want all our relationships with all our users to be built around thinking of us as the one source to come to for all their information, knowledge, and strategic learning needs."

It is an idea that clearly appeals to Sparks as well, and she describes how they approach it.

"If we can build a relationship marketing framework on the idea that our users think of us as 'the one librarian,' we can reach our goal with a very simple functional application."

You can tell from the look on Sparks' face that she is up to something.

"We call it our 'just-say-yes' campaign," she says with a smile, pleased with the image. "We want our people to be able to do what our users need doing. If we are serious about supporting the users, in establishing and implementing an innovative, reliable relationship with them, then it's up to us to let them know we can do what they need."

And since knowledge services is noticeably about working with those knowledge customers, with knowledge management as one of the elements of knowledge services, an intriguing next step is to find out from Gibson and Sparks how they think about KM in their particular environment.

"We don't," Sparks says. "Not is so many words."

Echoing a reticence commonly abroad in the research management community, she comments that you can't manage knowledge.

"Here we don't use the term at all," she says. "From my experience, it seems that each person and each organization has a particular definition for knowledge management, unique to their specific environment. Our interactions with the people in our community just don't lend themselves to speaking about 'knowledge management,' *per se*."

Gibson agrees.

"For us," she says, "the concept of KM just falls into place. Here KM is part of a rich organizational context in which research, information, libraries, service delivery and scientific results are all brought together to accomplish our larger goals."

And what one does with that concept is to use it as the basis of a team effort for working with customers to ensure they get what they need. Indeed, in this case an intellectual egalitarianism seems to connect the information professionals and the users, again pushing the MSKCC Library's key management concept—connecting people. It is a point Sparks is happy to make.

"Don't assume you're not the expert," she says. "The users have their expertise and you have yours. The system works when both sets of experts come together, Then the customers get what they are looking for."

Well said. And from all appearances, this particular connection is working and in the process building a healthier and more collaborative workplace environment for all the library's stakeholders. It is, as would be expected, a collaboration that naturally links to information management, another "piece" of knowledge services and one often recognized as the foundation on which many health sciences libraries build their success.

This approach to enhanced collaboration was recently demonstrated at the MSKCC Library between July and September of last year. As it had been about a year since the library had launched its re-designed Web site, library staff wanted feedback from the users, not only to help them understand the users' experiences with the new layout but, at the same time, to provide information about overall library operations. So a user satisfaction survey was conducted during that time frame, with more than 300 respondents.

The results were extremely gratifying, demonstrating, as Sparks put it, "widespread interest in what we are trying to do," a sure sign that they and their users were interested in collaborating with each other. Over 65% of the respondents indicated that their use of the Web site had increased or greatly increased since the re-designed MSKCC Library Web site had been launched, and 74% reported that having the site available made them more productive in their work. Indeed, with respect to this latter statistic, a so-called "what-if" question was presented, asking respondents to imagine that if the MSKCC Library and its Web site were not available for one month, how much time would be required to obtain the same information. The results clearly desmonstrate the value of the services provided: 24% of the respondents indicated that they would need to spend 20+ hours seeking information they needed for their work, approximately three days per month per individual, and another 42% estimated saving between 5 and 15 hours if they did not have the services of the MSKCC Library and its Web site available to them.

The library's most recent success with respect to its information management function is SYNAPSE, a new self-service Web interface and database maintained by the library. Rolled out in mid-January, the development and implementation of SYNAPSE once again demonstrates the library's commitment to connections. The new tool provides access to an inventory of the output of Sloan-Kettering's researchers and clinicians, its success building on one idea: users are key. The product is framed totally around the concept of usability, on understanding the needs of the stakeholders and establishing that the tool was usable before it was launched.

Such success does not of course come automatically, even with a good idea. Testing was key as SYNAPSE was developed, and it was through the testing process that Sparks and Gibson realized just how effective the product could be.

"We couldn't do enough testing," Sparks remembers. "Not just testing the product, but testing ourselves, gathering data about our users, who they are, what they think about, what their needs are. It all had to come together to make SYNAPSE work."

From the beginning of the project, Sparks and Gibson involved users in the process, a step that seems obvious from this perspective but one not always taken with new products, particularly in terms of knowledge services delivery. In this case, though, as Sparks and Gibson describe the development of SYNAPSE, the team at the MSKCC Library was determined to use the product to break through the silos that had become part of the organizational picture, and they were successful.

"We did that," Sparks says. "We found widespread interest in what we were trying to do, and I think we've been able to help our users cut through the silos. Even though the prototype was pretty ugly, the concepts were very welcome, and we just kept working from there."

Obviously they knew they were were moving in the right direction, and Sparks emphasizes that confidence when she speaks about SYNAPSE.

"It's our 'point of connection,'" she says, "and it means that the client can get a listing of publications to browse, print, export, or connect to the full text. Using the word 'synapse' is just one more way the library 'fastens together' (from the term's Greek origins) the different elements our customers need to see, and it is a perfect term for describing what we want to do."

Gibson joins in, invoking the now-common designation for this kind of service function.

"We hear a lot about how knowledge development and knowledge sharing, as a connected activity, is fundamental to knowledge services," she says. "This is it. SYNAPSE is a prime example of KD/KS for the MSKCC Library's customers. It links together what they themselves have created, and in doing so positions the library staff to function literally as the connecting point for the entire organization."

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Courtesy of
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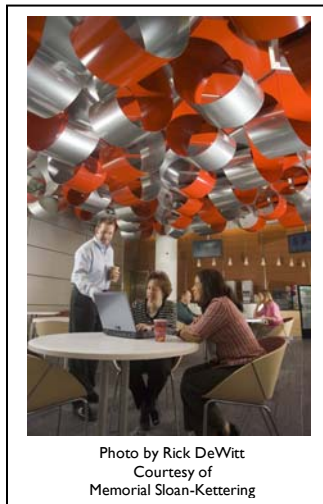
As it happens, Sparks and Gibson and their team do not limit their attention to internal efforts. Or to the four walls of the MSKCC Library itself. Early on they became aware that off-site service delivery can be as important as any other elements of research library management, so they began planning for an off-site service point. Opened in the fall of 2006, the CyberLibrary Café, pictured here, is located in the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center's new research building, on the main floor just off the street. With some 2,000 square feet of space, the CyberLibrary Café has enough space and facilities to entice any library user into its neat, clean environment. There is a coffee bar, of course, but there is more: wireless and wired computers, a reference librarian station, a small collection of print journals on wheels, a collaborative room with an electronic whiteboard, several study carrels, tables/chairs, and lounge chairs with table arms, all designed with the MSKCC Library's users in mind. Did someone say "just-say-yes"?

Still, despite the successes, you have to ask about the challenges. What are the conditions that get in the way? Are there barriers that prevent the MSKCC Library from being as good as it can be?

"It's not an easy question to answer," Gibson says. "We think we have a good idea of what we want the library to be, and we are certainly flexible and ready to change as change is required. But there are some times when we're a little stumped."

"That's true," Sparks says, "and I think there are a number of areas where we would like to move forward, but there is a stumbling block. What Donna is delicately referring to is the staffing situation. We are working hard to find the best people, but it is our biggest challenge. The people who apply to work with us are often not ready for this environment, and it's a problem for us, understanding their resistance to change. As you can see from what Donna just said, flexibility is

critical. In an organization such as the one we have here, there simply can't be any 'settling in,' so to speak, and sadly what we are dealing with—as we attempt to build up the right team for what we need to do—are normal human issues. Even though we've built methods into the selection process for helping us determine how flexible the candidates are, we sometimes just can't find the people. We even ask candidates to tell a personal story illustrating their flexibility, and what we hear often doesn't match what we need."

As Sparks talks about the issues, you learn that she and Gibson are definitely not speaking about maintaining the *status quo ante*. Not in this day and age and not in their shop. The candidates who apply to work with them must be willing to participate in the team—there are 13 people—and in fact all 13 people on the team take part in the hiring process.

"At the same time," Sparks says, "the candidates have to be up to speed with what their customers are doing, so we ask them, 'What devices do you use?' 'Do you do text-messaging?' that sort of thing. On top of that, we are interested in their approach to customer service. The candidates don't have to necessarily be extroverts—of course we are not asking for that—but they have to understand the role of getting out to the customer and understanding and working with the customer."

A good example of that level of customer service—and of understanding customer needs—is the MSKCC Library's focus on enabling its users to access and know what is being studied throughout the entire spectrum of biomedical research and cancer treatment. As with any important research library, the library's many resources—in every available format—are available for researchers, patients, and clinical staff, with the library's daily listing, for example, keeping everyone informed about the latest work in the field. Once again, we have a product that demonstrates the library staff's commitment to ensuring that their customers are connected with the information they need to do their work. And, not so coincidentally, providing the library with a mechanism for celebrating and promoting their Memorial Sloan-Kettering authors.

And if the list's title ("Today's Science Sparks") evokes some humor around Manhattan's East 60s, it still serves the library's larger marketing and communications purpose: people talk about it, remember it, and they access it.

Speaking about the title, Sparks states that while it was totally coincidental, she doesn't mind. It simply means, as she says, that "people think I have a lot of chutzpah."

To her way of thinking, that isn't a bad thing. Of course not. What in one environment might be thought of as chutzpah in another is nothing more than honest, nose-to-the-grindstone innovation, and Sparks and Gibson are nothing if not innovative. And in knowledge services, in the classic definition, one of the products of the function is innovation, with *accelerated* innovation the much sought-after goal of KD/KS. In speaking with Sparks and Gibson, it soon becomes clear that they have a passion for moving in this direction, and for moving *faster*. They want to connect people, connect them to each other and connect them to the information, knowledge, and learning they need to succeed, and Sparks and Gibson want to move the process forward as fast as it can be moved, so that the innovations that affect users' lives can be put in place as soon as possible.

So even without referring to them as such, the elements of KM and knowledge services are definitely in place at the MSKCC Library. Every effort, it seems, has been put into ensuring that the *product* of knowledge services, the development and support of a knowledge culture in which users and information professionals are working toward the same goals, has been established. These people—on an on-going basis and working closely with their customers—manage information, knowledge, and strategic learning at a level that ensures excellence in every transaction, and they do it with an eye to what is good for the customer and good for the institution that

employs them. And—not to be dismissed lightly—with no small level of gratification for themselves and their team in the MSKCC Library.

"It is such a joy to be doing what we are doing," Sparks says. Then you turn to Gibson and see her nodding in agreement, and you know that these are two people who are experiencing an impressive level of professional pleasure in the work they do.

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