Leveraging Narratives: Communicating Value with Qualitative Content

Five practical strategies for communicating your library's value to key stakeholders.

BY ROGER V. SKALBECK

The contemporary law library is embodied by its information resources, physical space, technology infrastructure, and the people who make it all happen. Each of these elements can change dramatically with new information tools, shifting organizational demands and emerging service models. What doesn't change is the need to exhibit how the library provides value. S. R. Ranganathan's fifth law of library science is helpful to consider here: "The library is a living organism." Organisms adapt to their environments, expanding and contracting as needed to survive. The same is true with libraries.

Law libraries need ways to exhibit value in an environment of recurring organizational evolution, shifting budgets, and evolving user needs. Following are practical strategies to communicate value for resources, people, and physical features essential to legal studies, scholarship, and service. Examples are presented in the context of an academic law library, but should be applicable to other types of institutions as well. These include ideas to develop meaningful narratives relevant to our faculty, students, law school departments, alumni, and public users.

Contextual Quality Metrics

Metrics play a central role in demonstrating library value, with quantitative data driving decisions more often than qualitative evidence. Quantitative library metrics include anything you can count, such as reference transactions, circulation evidence, and price per use/user for a given resource. Quantitative signals are essential for data-driven decisions. For continuing expenses such as an annual fee for a database, a library should have utilization metrics. Ideally, the database providers will supply this information and support it through tracking tools in an integrated library system.

Quantitative data can be essential for internal decisions, but some compilations are opaque or meaningless to people without a sufficient grasp of what libraries do. To oversimplify things, this may include everybody who is not a library employee. Gate counts or volume counts are irrelevant without comparative context or connection to the activities they support.

Qualitative information can play a bigger role in communicating value. For example, consider reference desk statistics. Quantitative data can show timing and scope of questions answered. These signals are helpful in deciding whether to provide weekend or evening coverage. However, administrators probably don't care about the balance of directional versus reference questions. Additionally, academics don't bill their time, so service duration may only have an opportunity cost, with no revenue potential.

Further, the qualitative context for reference service can exhibit value that administrators appreciate. For example, it is valuable to know if faculty members routinely call the reference desk to meet deadlines, such as preparing for a press interview, developing testimony, or spot-checking facts in a footnote for a law review deadline.

1 COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

To track contextual quality metrics at the reference desk, a library should record specific activities and reference them with faculty names. Some strategies to communicate the qualitative context of a service might appear as:

- "This week, we helped Professor Smith verify facts for an interview with the legal press on Friday afternoon."
- "On a weekend, a reference librarian provided citation research for five students in the Jurisprudence seminar for a paper due the following Monday."

In communicating this context, naming librarians is useful to connect the people to the process. The library as a living organism includes potentially all library staff. Using names should be done to illustrate who provided and received the service.

Library Surveys

A classic tool used to solicit feedback from law students is done through a library survey. Invite all current law students to complete a survey that includes a variety of satisfaction and demographic metrics together with open-ended questions. If your library is considering services or resources that may compete for funding, offer the ideas for group input. For instance, you might perceive a need for improved carrels, new reading room furniture, or updated equipment in group study rooms. Presenting these as alternatives can help explore perceived value and context for student needs.

By asking the recurring questions each year, you can develop a baseline to compare student feedback over time. In constructing the survey, anonymity is a good option, but it's helpful to associate student responses to their year in law school. This helps identify the duration of a student's past experience.

Simple satisfaction assessments can help identify possible concerns with things like building security, scanning or printing options, or circulation services. With open-ended questions, students will often provide comments that can help create a narrative that reflects library impact.

2 COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

In communicating survey results, consider providing information in two phases: immediately after a survey concludes, and after the library has acted on survey input. With most survey tools, it should be easy to produce qualitative charts to show satisfaction or participation rates immediately after a survey concludes. To demonstrate a library's responsiveness to survey input, consider publishing a narrative description of new services or resources after responsive action has been taken.

If you run a survey in the spring, all students will have had a full semester of experience at the law school. A library can publish charts after the survey concludes and release a narrative update for the beginning of the following fall semester. This approach puts quantified results first and quality of response second, in two distinct phases.

Questions in a survey provide a way to promote services or draw attention to library features that may be overlooked. For instance, you might ask students about features of a group study reservation system. Students unaware of this option can discover it through a link or description. Also, if students can select the option "I didn't know about this," it will help identify opportunities to promote resources or services.

Promotion Through Narrative ("Call to Action")

A peer library director once commented that her library's online catalog is a great tool for library inventory, but it can be a horrible way to discover the value and purpose of resources when needed for research. A library may subscribe to more than a hundred databases and electronic texts across many platforms. If a law library is part of a larger university, the number of nonlegal sources can far exceed those developed for the legal market. The challenge is to get overworked students and self-sufficient faculty to discover sources other than Lexis, Westlaw, and Google Scholar.

Libraries often compile research guides and tutorials to collect and annotate diverse sources on discrete topics. These serve as good supplements to a library catalog or discovery platform, offering opportunities for annotation and explanation. The challenge lies in getting people to find and use them in their time of need. Some resources, such as digitized collections of journals or books, will span several topics, creating a need to balance repetition and selectivity.

3 COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

Consider developing a systematic schedule to promote resources, creating sample research scenarios and describing them with a strong "call to action." This concept, which comes from the world of marketing, simply means creating headlines and links that give a visitor a reason to click or read more. As an example, consider the following headlines that might appear in a newsletter or blog promoting a hypothetical judicial database:

- "New Judicial Database Now Available"
- "Explore Judge Biographies and Past Rulings and Prepare for a Possible Clerkship"

The second example describes database scope as well as multiple research scenarios. The first part of the headline shows that the source covers directory information as well as possible judicial statistics. Adding the adjective "possible" can promote this for people considering clerkships.

Additional narrative value can come from adding an example search or showing platform features. In the judicial database example, this might show results of a search displaying the number of judges who graduated from your law school.

Reference librarians are good candidates to develop this content. In addition, acquisitions staff and subject specialists will likely have insights into a platform's unique features or suitability to a school's academic strengths. If this promotion is done in a structured format, repeating the process requires less time. Also, a predictable format is good for a consistent user experience.

This strategy ties back to exhibiting value—helping people discover a library's resources, many of which can be one billing cycle away from cancellation if underutilized or undiscovered.

Form and Function

Law school deans and administrators regularly request or require information about the library's profile, demographics, and financial features. Such requests and requirements can arise in budgeting as well as through recurring statistics reporting, such as information provided to the American Bar Association or *U.S. News & World Report*. Requests can also come up when administrators meet with a law school's advisory board, alumni, or entire student body.

Libraries should be prepared with a core set of statistics, but they should also be prepared to research, synthesize, and package information about the law school and its peers, as well as the legal industry as a whole. For example, this could involve alumni demographics, data collection for a law school event, or documenting trends in higher education.

4 COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

When asked to provide information, a library should know the audience and context for every request. The form of the information collected should follow the function it will serve for the audience. For instance, a dean may have to give a presentation to a community of lawyers. In this case, the best form of delivery might be PowerPoint slides using a law school template. The function recognizes that the audience of practicing lawyers can understand legal terms and appreciate authority citations.

COMMUNICATION STRATEGY SUGGESTIONS

Connect Names to Numbers:
Enhance numeric charts with the names of people receiving and providing service.

Communicate Survey Results in Two Phases:
1. Produce quick, quantitative charts when a survey concludes.
2. Provide narrative comments later to show actions taken in response to input.

Provide Inspiring Calls to Action:
Promote resources with headlines that demonstrate specific scenarios achievable with the featured service.

Create Content to Encourage Repurposing:
Create reports containing discrete elements suitable to be repurposed. A report delivered in PowerPoint can be easily excerpted for a senior executive's report to the Board.

Anticipate Annual Occurrences:
Every organization has a cycle of activities. Find predictable, recurring events, and anticipate actions to promote services relevant to a user's time of need.

In the web design book *Don't Make Me Think,* Steve Krug updates the *Strunk and White* style composition principle "eliminate needless words" to simply "eliminate words." Krug offers this suggestion specifically when writing for the web. However, it is sound advice when composing an email, a PowerPoint slide, or a narrative report. It's too trite to say "less is more," but "less is faster" seems fair. It takes less time and effort to read and contemplate shortened content. Here, the library should follow Ranganathan's fourth law of library science: "Save the time of the reader."

As a final communication strategy, consider using photos, charts, and annotations in formal documents such as budget requests or analytical reports. In a budget, a library uses terms such as "serials" or "alternative formats," if that's how they're tracked. The terms should be explained, and a library may choose to illustrate some categories with photos. If a budget tracks anything related to services, a photo of the person providing the service helps to show where staff are active and adding value.

Cycle of Law School Activities

Law school activities are often seasonal and recurring. Each year, the calendar is marked with predictable events, including orientation, on-campus interviews, mock trial competitions, exams, summer employment, and graduation. With each event, there are opportunities to promote library value and services. By mapping out a list of recurring activities, a library can anticipate needs, repeat successful initiatives, and adjust to evolving organic demands.

5 COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

At various points in the year, students, faculty, and staff can have different information needs. Consider creating a framework for recurring communications, coordinating activities with departments outside the library.

For instance, at the start of each semester, students will need to find assignments, discover books on reserve, and generally get oriented to the school. Assignment and reserve texts can be coordinated with the bookstore and academic administrators. As another example, a school's career services office will have a schedule of timing for interviews, job searching, and application cycles. A library can partner to promote job search and legal employer intelligence tools.

Libraries need to continue to explore how value is tracked, quality is emphasized, and information is delivered in a way that reminds people what librarians do and why we do it. Librarians need consistent, deliberate, and thoughtful strategies to move things forward. Here's hoping that the present contribution and accompanying voices provide meaningful strategies for all of us to showcase our value, and in turn be valued.

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