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We Love LIBRARIES!

Hard Times = A New Brand of Advocacy

by Ellen G. Miller

For decades, the advocacy job for public library boards was simple: Grow our budgets and/or protect them from cuts. We told officials and voters about usage growth, inadequate space and aging collections. Then in about 2000, library Web sites and publications began urging that we prove economic value to the community. New measures showed outcomes (benefits seen by recipients such as improved job performance) along with outputs (those traditional statistics on usage, collection size, etc.).

Measuring outcomes wasn't easy, but the data have many uses:

- Proposals to foundations and funders require them
- Showing elected officials how their constituents — voters — benefited

Now advocates could coast along, right? Wrong!

Today's recession requires a new advocacy calculus. The shrinking tax base means budget cuts for virtually all tax-supported entities, not just libraries. We can't just stick to our knitting anymore. Why not? Because traditional library goals (more facilities, collections and hours) address *means*, not *ends* (helping achieve communitywide goals).

In this crisis, public libraries can target two huge ends:

- Communitywide goals such as boosting educational and literacy attainment and improving labor force skills.
- Community leadership status by initiating partnerships that benefit more folks than any one entity could do alone.

Is risk involved? Yes. Communitywide goals address the big issues — jobs, public health and safety, and long-term fiscal viability. The library director-board team must carefully discuss all aspects of tackling communitywide goals. But if they take the plunge, one huge benefit concerns joining the community leadership cadre. Unfortunately, too few libraries have done that in the past. As Kathleen de la Pena McCook

noted, "Libraries, like schools, are generally viewed as community services that are passive participants rather than proactive partners in broad visioning initiatives." (Kathleen de la Pena McCook, *A Place at the Table*, American Library Association, 2000, p. 4.)

How to reverse that image? Get trustees and the director appointed to leadership tables. Don't be shy! Invite yourself to planning meetings concerning the community's future. They could be sponsored by city hall, the courthouse, a chamber of commerce or a downtown council.

At those meetings, show what the library is doing in this crisis. Your goals? Being seen as a community leader and getting a permanent seat at civic decision-making tables. As Deborah Jacobs, former Seattle Public Library director said, "Each community should understand that no table is truly set without the library being at it." (Ellen G. Miller and Patricia H. Fisher, *The Library Board Strategic Guide: Going to the Next Level*, Scarecrow Press, 2007, p. 177.)

Crises demand unusual actions. Is your director-board team ready? ►►

A veteran trustee, speaker, author and facilitator, Ellen Miller is a founding and past president of the Kansas Library Trustee Association.

Three Emergency Steps

Show voters, officials, leaders and the public how your library helps everyone, not just patrons.

Jobs. Publicize using the library's computers for job hunting, applying online and unemployment benefits.

Facilities & resources. Invite the community to use meeting room(s), databases, computer lab, etc.

Current FY budget reallocations. Discuss the pros and cons of emergency reallocation of funds. For example, consider cutting the large-print materials budget while adding personal finance speakers.