Rebranding and the evolving roles of Information Specialists in a Knowledge Society

Tokwe, H
Midlands State University, P Bag 9055, Gweru, Zimbabwe

Corresponding author: hoseatokwe@yahoo.co.uk,*tokwe@outgun.com*

Abstract

Rebranding has changed the way many institutions operate. Libraries, archive and record centres, museums, NGOs and Information Resource Centres are embracing rebranding of their services in response to the impact of the knowledge society. The knowledge society involves the use of networked information technologies, the Internet, and electronic resources such as e-journals, e-books and e-commerce. All these have transformed the information specialist's role. This paper is conceptual one and it considers rebranding in the context of the library. It goes further by clearly defining rebranding as it relates to the Information Specialists. The paper attempts to answer the question, who is the Information Specialist? The new evolving roles of the Information Specialists are described in greater detail. The paper concludes by finally bringing out the challenges that the Information Specialists face in a bid to deal with the challenges of the knowledge society.

Introduction

Today we live in a knowledge society. Knowledge is now our society's driving force, and information in various formats is fueling this kind of force. Libraries, museums, archive and records centres and Information Resource centres are feeling the impact of new technologies, such as the Internet, electronic databases, and on-line resources such as e-journals and e-books. Faced with these new digital technologies, subject librarians in universities, also now perceived of as Information Specialists, find themselves at the hub of information. They are the interface between the service and the user, and their role expectations are dedication, commitment, integrity and, above all, professionalism. For the Information Specialists to perform their expected roles, they are supposed to assure the widest and most equitable access to information for their clientele. To achieve this information specialists need to rebrand the service points in their respective institutions. Rebranding is the repositioning the service to ensure that it appeals to its users. Information Specialists are there to play a rebranding role and, in institutions of higher learning, their role is now seen as changing to that of educators, computing experts and knowledge managers, and also as professionals endowed with good managerial skills capable of increasingly and speedily facilitating access and providing knowledge to all potential clients. But in their bid to take up these new roles, they are faced with challenges that are

now peculiar to the knowledge society, viz, poor connectivity, low bandwidth, lack of infrastructure and furniture, lack of the necessary hardware and software, and the ever-frequent power cuts that bedevil many institutions in developing countries, and Zimbabwe being no exception.

Rebranding in the context of the Library

Rebranding or repositioning a brand is an issue that every successful organisation or institution is now facing, the world over. Professionals in various organisations are now being called upon to be articulate and vibrant and to delight the customer in an effort to help portray a good image of their organisations and their professions. The library cannot be left out because it is an institution that exists to provide value in its services. Add to this the increase in the use of new technologies and the opportunities offered to libraries to deliver products and services to library users and scholars across the globe calls for Information Specialists to change the image of their libraries. Jennifer Rice believes that libraries have image-changing work to do.

What then is a brand? To quote the American Marketing Association (AMA,2003: p.45), a brand is "a name, design, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers."[1] Brands serve a variety of roles "as the interface between product, design, customer relationship and marketing

communications."(Rowley, 2000: p.97). In theacademic literature, McCaugham (1991) advocates for the application of branding to information services. In library branding, therefore, the ultimate aim is to portray the unique nature of the service and library products, with the objective being to make them appeal to library customers. In fact branding helps to refocus a service on to its goals and objectives and make the user feel valued. In this respect a library brand should definitely be one that gives a new look to its service provision, to ensure that it mirrors the true image of the library to all those who benefit from its services. In other words in attempting to brand its services the library will be breaking from its traditional outlook to embrace the current and present day information technologies

Chris Olson of Chris Olson and Associates (2000: p.53) rightly says it all as he states that, "If libraries want to break out of the traditional library pigeonhole and successfully compete with self-service Internet competitors, a branding program is the ticket for repositioning services."[2] So libraries need to rebrand for them to remain competitive, but it is also important to acknowledge the role played by the information professionals who make rebranding possible. Rebranding in the library is possible through the effective role played by information specialists. The information specialists blend all the functions that help to build the image of the library. Information specialists blend library functions with information technology so as to achieve good

marketing techniques that make the brand appeal to library users. In the context of the library, the information specialists play expertise role. For instance, with the availability of the Internet, information specialists no longer embark on user education that comprises library skills and library instruction but instead now use the new technologies to carry out information literacy sessions by giving users the requisite knowledge and skills for accessing, for example, a variety of on-line journals provided by on-line journal publishers.

Who is the Information Specialist?

Various studies have been carried out to determine the terminology, Information Specialist. A search of the library and information science literature reveals several important points. First, it appears that there is no generic definition of the term information specialist. One scholar, Jane Spiwack in *Careers in Information*, provides some definitions and an attempt to differentiate between information professionals, information scientists, librarians and information specialists. Spiwack(1990:p.76) defines information specialists as "a broad category of information professionals that includes people who are not generally in traditional library settings, although they may very well be using library skills in their work. They are primarily processing information using new technologies, and they are more concerned with transfer, analysis and use of information than with the storage and protection of collections.

Information analysts, information searchers and information managers come under this heading."[3] On the other hand, Hjorland (2002) defines the competencies of information specialists. Hjorland (2002: p.422) observes that the specific competencies of information specialists are "producing and evaluating literature guides and subject gateways, producing and evaluating special classifications and thesauri, research and competency in indexing and retrieving information in specialist knowledge about empirical user studies in subject areas, and producing and interpreting bibliometric studies".[4] From the above definitions one can conclude that information specialists is an umbrella term given to multi-faceted information professionals who deal with information in different formats, and able to analyse, evaluate and interpret a range of information in various disciplines. As such, the information specialists should be perceived of as information professionals capable of satisfying the diverse needs of information consumers, bringing about new knowledge, and introducing new ways of gathering, analysing and interpreting information.

However, another authority in the field of information science who finds the term information specialist difficult to define is Margaret Slater. Margaret Slater (1994: p.46) says: "As people allegedly in the communication business, library/information workers have not created the necessary definition terminology, nor the mutually exclusive occupational labels to enable themselves

or others to discuss this topic properly." [5] An information specialist is therefore a specialist who "provides expertise in acquiring, evaluating and searching information resources in all formats" (www.foodinforquest.com).

So, in order for institutions to properly market their services, information specialists' role is to be that of the cutting edge between the service and its customer.

The New Evolving Roles of the Information Specialist

In universities, public libraries, special libraries, community libraries, museums, archives and record centres, documentation centres and the voluntary sector, for example NGOs, the need to meet the specific information requirements of customers is becoming felt more and more now that information technology is being embraced. Rebranding the services of these institutions is now the only solution in order to continue to retain customers. Even here in Zimbabwe we are seeing higher institutions like University Libraries acquiring new library management software to help them attain good customer relationships. Information professionals such as the information specialists are being factored in to be the vital cog in the information chain so as to transform the image of these University Libraries. We are all aware that library resources have changed from books and audiovisual resources to resources that include new technologies. For instance, libraries have automated their book collections and have added computers that students can use to search the catalogue, CD-ROM databases, or the Internet, or to work with presentation and word processing software. So the question is, what are the new evolving roles of the Information Specialists in this knowledge society? In university libraries we have subject librarians, and these are the new information specialists. Their skills are now the basis for a new breed of support people who can filter their information skills and web expertise to support the learning process in more practical ways. These new professionals are essentially learning support personnel with weakening links with the traditional library structure.

In recent years we have seen that University Libraries in Zimbabwe have developed their Information Technology and we are seeing librarians becoming specialists who complement academics. This view can be supported by a point made by a legal documentation librarian by the name Court, who said "The move from hybrid library to electronic library will entail more user education by library staff. With the growth of information sources available, faculty and subject librarians in particular are becoming specialists within their fields and increasingly complementary to academic staff whose subject specialisms are becoming narrower" [6] (Court, S,2001: pp. 234-5).

There is now a growing acceptance by academic staff that library professionals have an active role in the learning

process. Academic staff are increasingly showing interest in the transfer of their course material to the Web, through e-learning. Many interact electronically with students, and they appreciate the support they get from subject librarians and IT Personnel in their institutions.

Subject Librarians possess many skills in information retrieval, also having pedagogic and tutorial skills, and are now able to advise students on how to learn and how to access information. The Subject Librarians or Information Specialists now have extended skills base, with experience and ingenuity in improving the skills base of students. In universities, Information Specialists have close and active contact with researchers. Thus Hymans (2001: pp. 164-5) says: "As in education at primary and secondary levels, the provision of 'facilitated' teaching and learning resources is blurring the distinction between 'subject teaching' and academic support services (such as those provided by librarians and information professionals)"[7]

Pedagogic skills
The roles performed by information specialists in university libraries are changing as they seek to augment their skills. The information specialists are now embracing pedagogic and computing skills and seeking to understand VLEs and MLEs. In today's information technology environment, Information Specialists strive to continue to improve their status and build their increasingly integrated position, namely that of being tutors who enhance the

learning process in the university. As Information Specialists become tutors they enhance their proactive role and contribute to the research needs of their universities. In order to attain the skills to teach, they are now enrolling on courses to acquire relevant qualifications for taking on new support roles. For example, in the UK the Institute of Learning and Teaching (ILT) came about with the aim of providing recognition and qualifications for teachers in the HE sector (http://www.ilt.ac.uk). Once information specialists are accepted as being eligible for associate membership, they can gain public acknowledgement of their pedagogic pedigree. So one can say information specialists are motivated or driven by the need to demonstrate commitment to the learning and teaching process by seeking membership of the ILT. Information specialists can now become educators with enhanced professional recognition. The aspect of education sends out signals of reputation, trust, confidence and ethical solidity. The effect of an educational qualification is on how information specialists behave and how they are perceived by users, teaching staff and administrators.

They have to pursue supplementary courses and training sessions in order to become an information specialists in a particular field; for example, with knowledge and skills in scientific information they can effectively assist the education and research processes in that discipline. In addition, information specialists' role entails having good

teaching skills, and by being good teachers able toe contribute positively to the educational process. Many universities are now creating large electronic learning environments. In their professional capacity, information specialists must be able to explain what the information networks of a particular field look like and show the students how to get around it, how to get best value from it, and how to deal with information.

Information specialist can help to ensure equity of information access by working with lecturers to help them and their students learn the necessary skills to identify, access and use the appropriate resources. Being a provider of teaching resources means anticipating needs and improving the quality of resources in the library. Baumbach,(1995: pp252) clearly states that "The role of the librarian as an information specialist and a technology resource is becoming increasingly evident as it becomes increasingly important)"[8] Resource-based learning is an educational model which, by design, actively involves students, lecturers and administrators in the meaningful use of a wide range of appropriate print, non-print and human resources. Libraries are no longer quiet places, they are centres of activity. The library is the centre for this kind of learning and information specialists are the facilitators. They are familiar with university resources and have the technology skills to expose students to resources in a variety of media. They can assist students in their

efforts to develop technology-enhanced products and presentations.

Computing skills

Apart from pedagogic skills, information specialists have now accepted the challenge to become proficient in many aspects of IT, such as word processing, Power-Point presentation and using databases. They manage and develop their computing skills through taking part in postgraduate courses, covering components such as database design, web design and the use of different types of library software, such as MANDARIN, INNOPAC and the latest ISIS-based ABCD. Subject Librarians undertake these courses to integrate their work with IT skills, thus ensuring that their users interact well with the information that they process. Acquisition of computing skills enables information specialists to cope with a multiplicity of information resources. In this regard information specialists have become knowledge management professionals. Today, the management of information in any form is becoming the central focus, irrespective of content, delivery and context. To information specialists, faced with the impact of computing, digital technologies and telecommunications, all these technologies offer radically new models of communication that they should adapt to. They must be professionals who are able to interact with information technicians such as programmers and web designers in the development of information systems. They are also now involved in specifying how the systems involved in searches,

navigation, classification and the storage of information should work.

Management skills

Information Specialists must also be experts in the management of the library, with knowledge of various business management practices. As a managers of information services, the information specialists should be able to organise their services. They have to negotiate the price of information with suppliers and only sign up to licences after taking note of the legal implications. They must also be good at drawing up collection development profiles and collection acquisition budgets, and decide on the best allocation model to use when deciding how to finance printed and digital information within their university.

Understanding of VLEs and MLEs

In well-developed libraries, information specialists roles are changing as they also seek to understand VLEs and MLEs. The development of Virtual Learning Environments enables information professionals to work closely with academic staff by using technology. Information Specialists support education by inputting data into the courses and also by helping to develop digital libraries for subject support. Digital information is changing the role of information specialists from being professionals whom students ask for assistance in finding information to those who need to provide services and instruction regardless of place, time and format. Porter (2002: pp. 4-6) points out that "VLEs are generally being used to

support traditional courses that are being carried out 'on campus' at universities and FE colleges. However, they are also being used to deliver distance learning courses to remote learners."[9] Thus VLEs (Virtual Learning Environments) and MLEs (Managed Learning Environments) extend and transform the learning experience of students in that they link them to information databases. E-learning and even m-learning (mobile learning) is now of growing importance, and information specialists are now slowly becoming part of the process.

A.K. Pace (2001: pp.49-51), in support of these new technologies, says: "The happy user is a happy remote user. Teaching distance learners means teaching technical competence just as surely as serving distance learners means being technically competent. This is the challenge for faculty, thrusting into this new market and making their experiences convenient and satisfying"[10] Electronic information and the explosion of the World Wide Web have brought new challenges by creating a vehicle to make information available to the world. Many universities are working to meet the needs of patrons and students; for example, Midlands State University Library in Zimbabwe has created the Library Electronic Resources Centre, a centre where undergraduate and postgraduate students as well as lecturing staff are provided with easy access to current on-line journals. The University Library is also crafting a new Information Literacy programme module for the teaching of users knowledge to utilise on-line e-resources. In so doing, the Library now

sees its role as encouraging independent learners and critical thinkers to meet the challenges of the new information age.

When one looks objectively at the new roles of information specialists, it is possible to see that there is a rewarding career development path. Once they have the ability to teach, information specialists will portray a positive image of the library and contribute to the educational process as part of the knowledge-based economy. Information specialists will be equipped to provide the glue of the educational world, making links and connecting ideas and individuals. Thus it is evident that the IT sector will make the role of information specialists grow as traditional libraries decline. The information specialists will also facilitate and provide the intellectual glue that ensure connections are made and solutions are found for our knowledge society. However there are many challenges to be faced.

Challenges to be faced in an effort to rebrand
There are numerous challenges that information specialists must deal with. In many libraries and information centres in the developing world, there are the challenges of hardware and software, connectivity, infrastructure and furniture, power cuts and professional expertise.

Lack of expertise
The pressure that a knowledge society exerts on information specialists hinders their efforts to rebrand library services. The information specialists may lack

expertise to maintain the appropriate hardware and software for ensuring that rebranding flourishes. There is great expense involved in recruiting experts to teach or give advice on, say, using library management software to carry out retrospective cataloguing and classification.

Connectivity
Another challenge is that of connectivity. Service providers are the key to Internet connectivity. But in most developing countries like Zimbabwe there is low bandwidth. This causes failures in the downloading of online-based resources such e-books and e-journals that are in high demand because of their currency. Hence there is slow progress in digitising university libraries and information specialists could therefore fail in their efforts to satisfy customer expectations.

Power cuts
The vagaries of climate change, and the inadequacy of generating capacity, are negatively affecting the development of IT technology in developing countries. Frequent power cuts affect Internet access, but most libraries and other institutions such as museums and archive centres are automated with all their services offered on-line. Power outages contribute to system breakdowns and poor service, leaving the users deploring the services offered by information specialists.

Lack of Infrastructure
Another glaring challenge is the lack of infrastructure and furniture to accommodate the computer technology needed to service the growing needs of

users who want to be part of the knowledge society so that they access a variety of on-line databases, journals and other resources that offer up to date information. Information specialists finds themselves handicapped when seeking to deliver good service; for example, in universities the stringent limits on foreign currency allocations makes it difficult to provide good service when these funds are competed for by other departments.

Thus the above challenges have greatly impacted on information specialists' attempts to bring about a new look to the service that they provide in the library.

Conclusion

The world of information is changing with each passing day. As information professionals we must adjust or we will cease to be relevant. We should be proactive and adopt rebranding as a survival strategy. We should be brave enough to face our new roles as information specialists. We also have to face the challenges that will confront us and overcome them.

In conclusion, the people who gave me this paper to write and present entitled it "Rebranding and the evolving roles of the Information Specialists in a Knowledge Society: Option or Reality?" I deliberately left out the part of the title that read:"Option or Reality?" I leave it to you fellow information professionals to decide whether rebranding is an Option or Reality. In this knowledge society we are all specialists in our own fields, and we will all continue to

become actively and intensively involved with digital information and digital services. Rebranding will forever remain the driving force for us to continue perfecting our services, in that we will be living brands. To sum up as one information professional by the name Fisher indicates, "the library staff would be thought of as a living brand because it is our personalized attention to information education that makes our service unique".

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