

# Academic BRASS

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## **Book Review: Making Sense of Business Reference**

If you became an accidental business librarian in 2013, fortune could not have picked a better time. Not only did you get the long-awaited update to *Strauss's Handbook of Business Information* (a standard text in business reference courses) in 2012, you also got the perfect follow-on companion piece in early 2013: Celia Ross's *Making Sense of Business Reference: A Guide for Librarian and Research Professionals*. *Making Sense* is a relatively slim volume but has been scoped with just the right amount, and type, of practical guidance to help new business librarians to quickly develop a working knowledge base in this specialty area. As a compliment to the many collections-focused reference texts on business information, *Making Sense* uniquely provides a welcomed emphasis on reference work, providing insight into the variety and nature of questions that arise in this area. The book begins and ends with reference, while brief discussions about relevant resources are integrated throughout the rest of the chapters.

The first chapter provides an introductory discussion of business reference questions, complete with "secret business reference tips" and "business reference sanity checks." The second chapter reviews major types of business information and the reference databases most likely to contain them. Chapters 3 to 10 each dive more deeply into a specific aspect of what Ross refers to as the "Core Four": the basic categories of business reference that most questions fall into (company, industry, investing/financial, and consumer/business statistics). Additional resources and tips are provided in chapter 11, as well as a very brief review and summary in chapter 12.

The best part about *Making Sense*, is that it reads as if you have an expert coach in business reference helping you each step of the way. Ross's tone strikes a balance between that of an instructive mentor and a high-impact personal trainer, easily providing insight, guidance and reassurance, as well as motivating the reader through fitness analogies and plenty of good humor: "For now, consider this the warm-up portion of your business reference workout and get ready to pump some business reference iron in the later chapter!" (Ross, 2013, p.7).

A particularly instructive feature is the “Start Making Sense!” section at the end of each chapter. Here readers are given a handful of very simple tasks to try out, so that they can take what they have read and start applying it to their emerging practice as a business reference specialist. The most valuable aspect of the entire work, however, comes as an appendix labeled “Stumpers.” Delivered in Q & A format, this section provides a collection of real business reference questions contributed by past students taking the online Business Reference 101 course, regularly taught by Ross, through the Reference and User Services Association of ALA.

Having spent the past five years making sense of business reference as an accidental business librarian, I certainly found myself wishing I’d had a book like this to guide me through the first year. Even with a few years of experience, I still found a number of unfamiliar resources to take a closer look at. I also found the “Stumpers” section a useful tool to assess my own expertise, seeing where I agreed with the suggested answers and approaches, where I could add to them, and identify areas where I needed to learn more about a certain business topic.

Becoming a competent business librarian means being a voracious learner, and *Making Sense* is a major contribution in this way, and highly recommended for accidental business librarians everywhere. It is also only one of many ways that you can feed your learning as a novice. Below you will find some additional options that may be useful in continuing to develop your subject expertise and understanding.

Business Reference 101, Reference and User Services Association, ALA

<http://www.ala.org/rusa/development/businessreference101>

Format: Online

Duration: 4 Weeks

Note: Delivered through an online platform the content and organization of the program closely matches the book reviewed above, *Making Sense*.

BRASS Pre-Conference Workshops, ALA Annual Meetings

<http://www.ala.org/rusa/sections/brass/brassevents/events>

Format: In-person

Duration: Half-day to full-day

Note: BRASS often organizes an 8 AM – 5 PM continuing education workshop as a pre-conference session to ALA Annual. Past sessions have included titles such as ‘MBA in a Day’. As a side note, using the BRASS events link above, it is very easy to turn ALA annual into a ‘business librarianship’ conference by attending many of the sessions organized by BRASS.

College & University Business Libraries Section, Business & Finance Division, SLA

<http://bf.sla.org/sections/cubl/>

Format: In-person

Duration: Half-day to full-day

Note: Since many of SLA members work in corporate libraries, there is usually at least one pre-conference session that provides a more in-depth take on business research, such as ‘Conducting Financial Analysis: An Introduction for Business Librarians and Other Info Pros’. The CUBL section also organizes a poster session during the annual conference where you can meet academic business librarians working on innovative projects.

Simmons, Graduate School of Library and Information Science

<http://alanis.simmons.edu/ceweb/business.php>

Format: Online

Duration: 1 Month

Note: Taught by experienced business librarians, course offerings change each semester but past sessions have included, U.S. Private company research: More sources than you think!, Business Research 101: Sources and Strategies, Investment Research 101’.

#### Regional/Local Business Librarian Networks

<http://www.nclaonline.org/blinc>

Format: In-person, Online

Duration: 1 hour – full-day, usually part of a larger meeting

Comments: Local groups are numerous and variable, so I only point to one example here that I’m familiar with. I was fortunate enough to get my start in North Carolina, where there is a very knowledgeable and supportive group of business librarians that meet fairly regularly to discuss all aspects of business librarianship.

#### iTunesU

<http://www.apple.com/education/itunes-u>

Format: Recorded video/audio lectures

Duration: 30 – 90 minutes

Note: An important aspect of being an effective business reference librarian is to be able to ‘talk the talk’ around business topics. Listening to recorded lectures in finance, economics and entrepreneurship, is a great way to learn more about your users’ needs, understand major concepts and use business terminology appropriately in a reference interview. Robert Shiller’s Financial Markets course from Yale is particularly good, if you are looking for something to start with.

#### Continuing Education Courses, Local Colleges & Universities

<http://learn.utoronto.ca/courses-programs/business-professionals>

Format: In-person, Online

Duration: 6 – 13 weeks

Note: Many working professionals turn to developing business related competencies on the job, which means that many continuing education programs offered through colleges and universities will have a healthy selection of courses on business topics. I provide a link to course offerings at the University of Toronto as a example that I’m familiar with. If you have very little business background, look for a basic course on accounting or understanding financial statements – it can serve as a very good foundation for all aspects of business reference questions.

#### Works Cited

Moss, Rita W., and David G. Ernsthausen. (2012). *Strauss’s Handbook of Business Information: A Guide for Librarians, Students, and Researchers*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Santa Barbara: Libraries Unlimited.

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