

# Academic BRASS

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## **From Corporate Liaison to Academic Liaison – Lessons Learned**

There are obvious differences between corporate and academic libraries, though the concepts of patron, customer or client are primarily viewed in the same way. The types of resources and modes of delivery of information are diverse in both areas. However, in my opinion the greatest disparity is principally cosmetic. In the past I have worked in corporate libraries whose space would easily fill a ten by twenty foot storage unit. While the academic library where I currently serve could probably compare its square footage to that of a New York City block. Differences aside, there are parallels in the ways outreach efforts and liaison work is carried out in both settings. At the heart of those efforts lies the goal of achieving continued awareness of the resources or services provided by the library or the librarian. Both types of libraries aspire to be acknowledged as value-added resources, though they may differ in opinion as to why it's important to be viewed as a purveyor of value. In a corporate environment, individual departments know that their continued existence hinges on how their operations affect the company's bottom line. A corporate library's goal to establish the perception of being a value-added resource is the central part of an ongoing struggle for survival. In an academic setting, the library has the established reputation of being an authoritative resource, with collections portrayed as assets. Marketing of these resources will focus upon linking the concept of value to the library, with the objective of getting students to make it their destination for research.

My first experience as a liaison occurred before I became a librarian. As a computer operator for a major data processing firm, I was selected to be the operations liaison to the programming department. It would prove to be a daunting assignment. The initial meeting with the department consisted of me and twenty somewhat angry programmers who wanted to know why their work was not being processed in a timely manner. During the encounter I came to the realization that both departments were not aware of each other's work-related responsibilities. Before the next meeting I asked that a representative from the programmers be selected and that future meetings consist of just the operations and programming liaisons. After several sessions with my programming counterpart a series of plans were forged. But that was only the beginning; communication was key in assuring that both sides had faith in the process and that each of their concerns were being addressed. That position would be my introduction to what a liaison is

and does, as well as the understanding that perceptions can make or break your efforts if not carefully cultivated.

Case in point: For several years I worked as a librarian/information specialist for a major petroleum company whose library was in serious need of an image overhaul. In the past, it was highly regarded as an integral part of the corporation, but over the years something changed. The employees were more likely to patronize the library for recreational purposes instead of using the resources for work-related research. In the hope of changing the way the library was being perceived, our director hired a consultant to assist in the re-evaluation of the library's mission and to help restate its goals. The strategy created to move the library forward required the development of a liaison program and an aggressive outreach campaign. Our liaison efforts involved partnering with various divisions within the company. We attended department meetings with the intent of finding out about current projects, looking for signs of what may impact the company in the future. Using that intelligence in order to ensure that resources needed would be available, often before the requests were even made. The outreach campaign consisted of regular open houses, where we did more than just show off our resources. We used the opportunity to demonstrate how the collection and our expertise with a variety of proprietary databases could be valuable components in the research process. The library was able to re-establish itself as a value-added resource, but the liaison program and outreach campaign were not the sole basis for its success. This library had supporters who had the power to open the doors we needed to walk through in order to re-vamp our image. And these advocates proved to be valuable allies when things needed to get done.

What I've taken from my corporate experience and used in my academic role as a liaison are two basic rules:

1. Evaluate perceptions of the library and
2. find out who has the power to make things happen.

The latter proved to be crucial once I met the liaisons in my subject areas. They were relatively new to campus like myself, and had not established themselves within their departments. They were often too busy trying to find their own way, with little time to listen to my plans or even provide assistance. For one department, the liaison was not even in the country and had just begun a yearlong sabbatical. So I took the steps to retire them all from service; and surprisingly, it wasn't particularly hard to do. As in the case of the assigned department liaison that was out of the country at the time, I looked at the situation as being an opportunity to find someone else in the department who would be interested in being a contact for the library. Using past experience as my guide I decided to reach out to department heads or faculty members who were respected among their peers. My strategy called for alliances with individuals who had enough clout to pave the way for establishing direct lines of communication between their colleagues and their students. What I've done in my quest to find individuals who strategically could best serve as liaisons, instead of accepting existing liaison assignees, would in some circles be considered a serious breach of protocol by academic standards. However, establishing these types of tactical relationships makes it much easier to go to administrators

and build the case for change. Having the head of a department agree with your need for a new liaison should be more than enough evidence to get the action ratified. If a liaison relationship is not working, it can adversely affect your efforts to provide service to faculty and students. It takes strength and courage to go against the status quo. My advice to liaisons present and future is, if you have a system in place that works, by all means use it to your advantage. However, if it doesn't throw it out and try something new.