
Future ready: the Special Libraries Association's Annual Conference 2011

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Conference report by
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The Special Libraries Association's (SLA) 2011 Annual Conference & INFO-EXPO was attended by 4300 delegates, a 24% increase on the attendance at the 2010 conference. SLA 2011's theme was 'future ready' and of this Janice Lachance, SLA Chief Executive Officer, said:

'I was excited by the passion – and even the aggressiveness – that I saw from our attendees as they discussed how to do more for their organizations, with increased efficiency and greater impact.'¹

Doing more with less, providing innovative services and self-promotion were ideas I came across throughout SLA 2011 in various contexts. The conference was conducted on a massive scale and, with a packed schedule, sessions ran concurrently throughout the four days. What follows is a review of the key sessions I attended.

SLA 2011's keynote speaker was *New York Times* columnist and Pulitzer Prize-winner Thomas Friedman. Opening the conference, Friedman approached the 'future ready' theme from the perspective of a writer in a 'flat world': as more people are connected by technology, social networks and high-speed internet connections – even at the top of Mount Everest – the world becomes 'flatter'. As a result, Friedman argued, the information playing field is levelled. Much 'born-digital' content, driven by collaboration and creation, controls this shifting information landscape. Friedman's speech served to emphasise how information professionals must innovate in order

to compete in this 'flattened world'. We need to find our 'extra' and build on it. A resounding soundbite from Friedman's speech was 'average is over', and this appeared on the Twitter hashtag #SLA2011 throughout the conference. Hopefully, we knew that already.

SLA 2011 combined big ideas and practical sessions. In terms of big ideas, I particularly enjoyed Stephen Abram's spotlight session, 'Getting out in front of the curve'. Abrams challenged librarians to take the power we have and seek success. He also discussed the 'article-level universe', with chapters, paragraphs and articles being the order of the day – particularly in the context of education and research libraries. Information professionals must recognise that the future is not about books but content, learning and reading. Abram said: 'I'm not anti-book, it just doesn't do certain things well.' He also suggested that problems with e-book technical standards and licensing restrictions should not be a barrier to providing this format. Instead, librarians should work with those publishers who are willing to cooperate and find solutions. Abrams also described the value of self-promotion – tell people we're awesome!

Mike Linksvayer's (Vice-President of Creative Commons) session, 'opening the special library', in which he discussed the importance of open access as a social responsibility, was also thought-provoking. He suggested that businesses and corporations should support openness as a policy in order to increase equality, engage with more people and enable innovation.

From the perspective of an academic librarian, the 'Corporate library in turbulent times' session was useful for considering how academic libraries can learn from corporate libraries in difficult financial times. Jim Matarazzo and Toby Pearlstein discussed survival skills for corporate libraries. A key message from the session was the importance of demonstrating the value and worth of a service on a regular basis. US corporate libraries are evaluating, SWOT-analysing and benchmarking services in order to demonstrate their worth and avoid being outsourced. This session also illustrated the importance of marketing information services from the top. The speakers recommended recruiting a champion for your service at a senior level. If these people are advocating information services, it is more likely that this message will trickle down throughout the organisation. In the case of academic libraries, if the principal or a head of faculty is on your side, attracting more library advocates will be much easier in the future.

In addition, both academic and corporate libraries are fighting to pay for resources – be it databases or staff – with other departments within their organisations. It is vital that the library is a visible service to those who control the budgets.

One of the most practical sessions at SLA 2011 was ‘Elevator speeches: how to develop them’, with Mary Ellen Bates and Gayle Gossen.² This approached the issue of marketing your role and explaining to users what you do in an interesting and contextual way. Although geared towards special libraries, this session featured ideas that would be useful for any information professional explaining their role to users. Mary Ellen Bates outlined the key features of an elevator speech:

- It opens with a three-second hook.
- It is not a speech but a conversational ping pong.
- It tells a story in two sentences.
- It describes a problem and solves it.

Rather than meeting a user and reeling off a list of key tasks, the elevator speech should be a ‘ping pong’ conversation, which hooks the listener and encourages them to find out more about your service. It’s not a verbal dump or thirty seconds of talking at someone. Say something that sparks a conversation. ‘I’m in the information mafia’ was one example; ‘I make critical information findable’ might be more appropriate. You’re in a lift / management meeting / coffee shop, and a potential user asks you, ‘What do you do?’ Mary suggests a high-impact three-second hook: ‘I ensure my clients make smarter decisions.’ Not ‘I’m an information professional’ or ‘I provide high-end information services.’ How do we know our users understand exactly what an ‘information professional’ is?

In addition to the range of sessions taking place throughout the conference, SLA’s INFO-EXPO exposition featured 222 organisations, including content and technology providers and exhibitors. SLA 2011 was also available as a virtual conference for delegates who were unable to make it to Philadelphia. Online participants could watch the general sessions and this added to the international atmosphere of the event – particularly on Twitter. The opening general session also recognised exceptional members of the organisation. SLA Europe’s Sara Batts won an SLA Rising Star award and Kate Arnold was honoured as a 2011 SLA Fellow.

SLA 2011 demonstrated the importance of engaging with, contributing to and promoting the information profession. The ‘future ready’ theme helped focus many of the sessions on the importance of continuing to innovate information services, library marketing and avoiding complacency. This was reinforced by the range of engaged professionals I met throughout the event, working to advance developments in their field. I encountered dozens of librarians, including fellow Early Career Conference Award winners and SLA Europe members, who actively campaign and push boundaries outside their day jobs. I left the conference full of energy and asking myself, ‘What can I do to contribute?’

Natalia’s place at the SLA Conference was jointly sponsored by the Business & Finance Division and SLA Europe as part of the Early Career Conference Award. She blogged about SLA 2011 at nataliafay.wordpress.com

NOTES

- 1 SLA press release, 30 June 2011 <http://www.sla.org/content/SLA/pressroom/pressrelease/11pr/pr2011-08.cfm>
- 2 The slides for ‘Elevator speeches: how to develop them’ can be found at <http://www.batesinfo.com/extras/assets/SLA-elevator.pdf>