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Brian Holda
Cornerstone University

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How to Identify Your Impact:

ACL 2013 Preconference with Joe Matthews

*Brian Holda
Instructional Librarian
Cornerstone University
Grand Rapids, Michigan*

“It was like eating a jalapeno pepper,” said one of the attendees at the 2013 ACL Preconference with Joe Matthews. The description fit: like a jalapeno pepper, Joe’s talk was exciting (to consider the possibilities), painful (to know that many things in librarianship should be fixed), spicy (because he pulled no punches in his assertions), and the flavor had a way of staying with you (as I found myself talking about this session more than any others).

Joe Matthews works as a library consultant nationally (and sometimes internationally). He has written numerous books and articles, routinely offers presentations and workshops, and teaches at San Jose State University School of Library and Information Science. During his preconference session, Matthews offered a straight lecture with a simple PowerPoint. The presentation was not flashy, but his ideas were riveting, as he unpacked what libraries should and should not do to increase and “sell” their value. He made a number of poignant assertions regarding library practices and resources, among them:

- Libraries should not have a reference desk;
- Libraries should not focus on information literacy instruction;
- Libraries should have an ILS “in the cloud”;
- Academic libraries should befriend their school’s assessment office; and
- Libraries should use a combination of data and anecdotes to communicate their value.

Of course, he admitted that these were generalizations. He also carefully explained his rationale while providing alternative solutions (for instance, embedded librarianship could substitute for traditional library instruction). Even more, he admirably backed up his claims with facts and figures, and he spoke honestly about which of his ideas lacked current research.

Titled “How to Identify Your Impact,” the 3-hour session addressed several areas relevant to the ways in which libraries can both consider and articulate their value. The material was broken into the following foci:

1. Performance measures to use (and not to use);
2. The concept of value – what it is, how it is measured, and how it is communicated to and perceived by users;
3. The value of information in today’s market;
4. The value of information services in today’s market; and
5. The personal, organizational, and financial value of a library.

Consistently, Matthews used research and stories as a sort of “one-two” combination that drove home his points and provided an example to participants of how to articulate our libraries’ value using research and stories. But probably the greatest strength of Matthews’ preconference session was the experience and library wisdom he offered. He clearly has thought long and hard about a range of library-related issues and, as a library consultant, has had diverse experiences with libraries worldwide. This combination of reflection and real life application resulted in a presentation that was not abstract theory, but rather offered actual solutions that Matthews has implemented effectively.

Of all the sessions I attended at ACL, I can confidently say that this was the most thought-provoking and probably has caused the greatest change in the way I approach librarianship. The ideas covered only briefly in this recap of Matthews’ session merit further investigation, so I encourage you to learn more about the presentation by visiting www.slideshare.net/jmatthews/the-value-of-libraries-acl-2013 to view Matthews’ presentation material or www.joemathews.org to learn more about the breadth and nature of his work. †