

34th IATTO Annual Conference, Stockholm, Sweden, 3-6th September 2008

The value of free information to exporters: the creation of the Export Library and Information Service (ELIS)

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Abstract

The issue of what kind of information exporters look for, its value and how this can be found is dealt with in this paper, which describes the creation of the specialist Export Library & Information Service (ELIS) at the New Zealand School of Export by a professional business librarian.

The paper provides information on principles, policies, practices and the stages of creating an export library and information service which will be of interest to other information professionals, librarians, export support organisations and exporters themselves.

Keywords: Information, export education, ELIS, information services, information research

Why information is important

While researching for this paper, the authors came across a source which eloquently described and found resonance with their own views (Porter, 2003):

“The achievement of business priorities ultimately depends on the information structure available and poor information management threatens the successful accomplishment of business processes.” (p.2)

“The value of a library and information service at the heart of an organisation and the skills and knowledge of the staff who work there lies in the fact that it creates an information infrastructure that can properly manage the information assets owned by the organisation.” (p.2)

The lack of awareness about the value of information (and related issues of Knowledge Management) for many organisations is unfortunately a defining feature of their operations, whether they are in the public or private sector. The authors of this paper suggest that the most successful exporters in the 21st century will be those who can gain a competitive advantage through the selective use of information available to them.

The value of free information to exporters

The separate problem of providing goods and services for free – especially to businesses – is one that is based on the issue of the actual costs of providing the services versus the benefits that such services provide in terms of adding value to their users, for example, most companies do not have an in-house library or information service for the purposes of collecting and mining information for its commercial value. A useful reflection on this from a business perspective is provided by Nielsen (2003).

This problem needs to be understood in the light of the value that such free information has to exporters. In the view of the authors, an initial analysis provides at least four values that are readily identifiable:

1. *Monetary value* for example, the principle of arbitrage rests on information about markets – such as currency exchange – which have a direct benefit to those who make use of the information.
2. *Competitive value* – using information for advantage over competitors, for example, knowing that digital photography will make traditional film and printing services largely obsolete. Therefore the need is to reposition a traditional company into the new era or to prepare for new business opportunities in domestic photo-printing.
3. *Cultural value* – understanding business culture, for example, the United Arab Emirates do not work on Thursdays and Fridays but do work on Saturdays and Sundays.
4. *Preventative value* – this prevents companies from making catastrophic, costly or foolish mistakes, such as having an entire shipment rejected at the port because the exporter did not know that Australia no longer accepts goods shipped on wooden pallets due to bio-security regulations.
5. *Other values* - there are no doubt many other values which should be added to this list and which the authors would be interesting in hearing about from their readers.

For those exporters without access to accurate and free information provided by their government or business support organisations - such as Chambers of Commerce - the search for information is a time-consuming task, and in many case is not done at all.

Exporters have a very real need to access reliable and current information especially on countries, markets, products, competitors and currency rates. This is usually met by ‘Googling’ for information on the internet from one’s desk at work. The subsequent mass of information of varying quality is problematic in terms of selecting appropriate resources but in the absence of a credible alternative is used as a last resort.

For example, using Google to search for the phrase *Foreign exchange* generates 27,200,000 hits. Reducing the search to *Foreign exchange currency converter* yields 162,000 hits. The problem is clearly one of information overload and finding suitable sites to meet the needs of the exporter. This sifting of information can be undertaken by the exporter themselves or by those who can best advise on which sites are most suitable to meet exporter needs, in other words, a 'one-stop shop' to assist exporters in the pre-selection of optimal sources.

In addition is the problem that exporters do not know what information is readily and freely available to help them make decisions about export markets. This situation of *'you don't know, what you don't know'* leads to significant gaps in understanding.

This access to free information should be contrasted to access to information which needs to be purchased such as the Datamonitor industry reports, for which purchasers need to make decisions about costs and benefits.

Our belief in the value of free information both as a public good and in commercial terms, informed the decision as to the structure of the organisations which would deliver export training - that is having an integral library and information service as a central feature. This is described below.

History

The formation of the New Zealand School of Export as a Charitable Trust in 2007 was based on combining traditional academic principles such as excellence, scholarship and collegiality, with pragmatism for the application of knowledge in the exporting firm. Coupled with this was the desire to have the work of the School informed by the needs of export practitioners in a relationship of mutual benefit both through an Advisory Council and feedback from exporters taking the IATTO accredited Diploma of International Trade.

The School was founded by the IATTO New Zealand member Export Training Services Limited (ETS), which was founded by Dr Romuald Rudzki and Dr Robin W. N. Smith, both of whom were teaching international business at a local university.

A strategic decision was taken at both ETS and the School, to place the Library at the heart of the organisation and it was fitting that the first employee appointed to either organisation was the Head of Library & Information Services, Graeme Siddle. He was given a free hand – within the budget constraints – to create a facility which would meet both the highest international standards of libraries and the needs of exporters for reliable information.

His response was the Export Library and Information Service (ELIS) which exists in the public domain and is available at no charge on the Internet.

The role of the Head of Library & Information Services

The role of the Head of Library & Information Services encompasses both the creation and ongoing development of ELIS (such as the design of 'Pathfinders' – signposts to finding the correct information) and the internal Knowledge Management (including archiving and file management system) of the whole School.

The role also includes responsibility for: the website as the webmaster (including management of the blogs); liaison with publishers;; ordering of resources; cataloguing and classification; answering reference enquiries from learners; and the operation of a newspaper clippings service of all references to New Zealand exports, international trade trends and other relevant information.

In addition, the role includes acting as the Specialist Adviser (tutor) on the International Trade Research module of the Diploma, which necessitates weekly contact with the exporters studying through distance education, as well as revision of the module materials on an ongoing basis to ensure they are current.

ELIS – creation of a new library

ELIS was created in order to support the needs of the students and staff of the School. (Note: we refer to the students as 'exporters' due to the fact that they are all working full-time and undertaking the Diploma of International Trade through workplace-based distance education. This important use of words is a constant reminder to us of the status of the learners as being engaged in professional development both personally, and through applying the knowledge gained to the development of their business).

As a new library, it was based on a number of traditional library principles and practices as described below.

The key principles are:

- Information and information literacy is paramount.
- Ease of access.
- A hybrid collection consisting of both virtual (accessible via the internet) and physical materials.
- Virtual library to be freely available within the public domain.
- Dynamic and up-to-date by responding to changing needs for example, the signing of the China-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement in 2008.
- ELIS reflects the fact that we are a wholly-owned New Zealand institution.
- Clarity and simplicity (which are also principles of the School) which leads to the idea of the creation of a 'one-stop shop' for exporters looking for information to help them in their research and decision-making processes.

The main practices are:

- Collection development policy document which guides decisions for acquisition.
- A classification system that is easily usable.
- Inclusion of all kinds of resources, for example, books, journals, newspapers, newsletters, videos, CDs, DVDs, photographs, and archives.
- Responsiveness to user needs including optimization of searching through the use of the ITC (International Trade Centre) Thesaurus, and additional Maori subject headings for New Zealand content. This allows the library to incorporate and be accessible to indigenous users.

The experience of working in other academic libraries over a period of some 30 years, allowed the librarian to incorporate library best practices such as the creation of a distance library service.

In terms of the actual establishment of the library and information service, the stages of development were as follows:

1. The writing of the library plan, the collection development policy and the website brief/specifications, and the identification of an Integrated Library System (including cataloguing software) (Siddle 2007a, 2007b).
2. Establishment of the collection through acquisition of resources (books etc) and information about what is available electronically (for example, Country Profiles held by New Zealand Trade & Enterprise on its own website).
3. Setting up of the website to include online access to the virtual library, which includes an information section which is central to the collection and dissemination of other sources which are freely available within the public domain ('signposting' and hotlinks).
4. Installation of the Koha cataloguing software system. This makes available to the library users, the collection held by ELIS.
5. The undertaking of normal daily library operations and development including for example, creation of a blog, and continuing professional development e.g. attendance at the 2008 VALA Conference held in Melbourne, which focused on Web 2.0 and Library 2.0 developments.
6. Ongoing review of the structure of ELIS, and evaluation of engagement with the services offered using both quantitative and qualitative data.

The future

Since the establishment of ELIS, various developments have occurred on the basis of customer feedback including the creation of two blogs: a restricted access one for exporters undertaking the Diploma, and an open-access blog for information professionals working in international trade organisations, such as transnational bodies (such as WTO, UNIDO, and ICC), national Ministries of Foreign Affairs & Trade, and local Economic Development Agencies.

The expertise developed in the creation of ELIS is now being promoted with TraLIS – a generic Trade Library & Information Service which is designed to be adapted to circumstances in each country. The issues of providing information within the wider field of international trade are being raised in the second known as TraLIS: <http://www.export.ac.nz/tralisblog.html>

The expectation of the authors is that as the budget for ELIS increases on an annual basis as projected, we will increasingly participate in the New Zealand library community, for example, we hope to join the New Zealand Bibliographic Network to enable access by other libraries through inter-library loan to access ELIS's specialist and unique collection. We also hope to take out subscriptions to New Zealand databases such as Index New Zealand, which will allow us to access newspaper and other archives, and plan to participate in the EPIC database community hosted by the National Library of New Zealand. This will give our users access to the databases which are made available to members of the consortium

In addition, at the international level, we will also seek to subscribe to global database and information providers such as Datamonitor and Euromonitor although the high costs of these prohibits subscription at present. This will mean that we will be making 'paid' information available, but only following the successful exploitation of the value inherent in 'free' information.

Respondents to the OCLC survey (De Rosa et al 2005) overwhelmingly felt that 'library' is synonymous with 'books'. It will be an added task for the Export Library and Information Service to extend that brand not only so that it encompasses all types of resources we make available, but that it is equated with service and quality information which can be transformed by our exporters into knowledge of immediate value.

The future of library and information services is one that is greatly misunderstood both through ignorance of their value, and a misunderstanding of how they can add value to users. It is the hope of the authors that the commitment to the central role played by information within our organisation will be a source of innovation providing overwhelming evidence of success as an example to others.

Invitation

Both authors would welcome the opportunity to communicate with colleagues about how sharing of knowledge about library services and export information might lead to mutual benefit.

About the authors**Romuald Rudzki**

Dr Romuald Rudzki is the co-founder and Director of the New Zealand School of Export. The other co-founder was Dr Robin Warren Smith who died prematurely from cancer in 2006. Rom's career has included roles in local government, overseas economic development, university teaching and multiple business start-ups. In 1996 he won the *Financial Times*' David Thomas Award for his work on education for entrepreneurship. He has published over 70 books and articles on a variety of subjects and his most recent work is concerned with the development of a new trade-based political economy he has named 'domism'.

Rom can be contacted at the School via e-mail on: rom@export.ac.nz

Graeme Siddle

Graeme is the creator of ELIS and has been responsible for its development from the start. Graeme is a professional librarian who has worked at the Universities of Otago and Massey, as well as private education providers such as the Japanese-owned International Pacific College. He is an active registered member of the national professional librarian body known as LIANZA and also has a teaching qualification. In 2007 he was awarded the Hydestor Professional Development Award and used it to attend the VALA 2008 Conference. Graeme can be contacted at the School via e-mail on: graeme@export.ac.nz or via the blog which has been specifically established for information professionals and librarians interested in knowing about how to establish or develop their services: <http://www.export.ac.nz/tralisblog.html>

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