

Tech, Coffee and Grunge: the SLA Experience Ben Chan MSc MBCS FRSA



Introduction

I thought I'd aptly name the review of my trip to the (SLA) Special Libraries Association Conference in Seattle – Tech, Coffee, and Grunge. Tech, because of companies such as Microsoft, Boeing, and Amazon are headquartered there, Coffee – Starbuck obviously, and Grunge – Nirvana and the grunge movement started there. So perhaps elements of the former rather than the later will be the focus of this article. I'll let the reader decide.

Sub Group -> Group

Just to recap, the bursary award for this trip was made possible by Aerospace & Defence Librarians Group, with additional support from BooksExpress. The reason for the bursary was to celebrate Aerospace & Defence Librarians Group (ADLG) becoming a fully fledged special interest group of CILIP in its own right.

The Bursary: Caveat emptor!

When applying for bursaries, one must always check the fine print.

The first Bid

(Just the ticket)

The second Bid

(Planes, Trains & Automobiles)

The third Bid

(Domestics)

In this instance, the bursary included the

conference fee to the Special Libraries Conference, membership of Special Libraries Association, and a small amount towards expenses.

The second bid— I submitted a business case to my employer requesting help with the cost of travel and accommodation.

Perhaps one important consideration is the domestic bid! My second child was going to be a month old by the time of the conference. I checked with my wife if she was happy I applied. She indicated she was more than happy, knowing the ramifications. Her support for my application was imbued by the impression that she didn't think I'd get the bursary! So suitable domestic cover and support was arranged (grandparents). With my mind at ease, I was excited, I was on my way to Seattle!

Session Shortlist

The next challenge was to choose conference talks from the plethora of options available. Each timeslot could be filled from one of seven interesting choices. I consulted with colleagues to maximise best business value and included their suggestions.

OUT

Web 2.0

Social Networking

IN

The Next Information Revolution and Our Role as Revolutionaries
Microsoft Library (Portal and Library Visit)

Knowledge Management in Seattle
Embedded Librarianship: Background and Overview

Word-of-Mouth Marketing: Winning Friends and Influencing Consumers
Selling Yourself & Your Skills
Knowledge & Information Security

I omitted Web 2.0 sessions because I

felt I grasped the concept sufficiently having attended some excellent sessions at the Online Information Conference in 2006 and 2007. I understood the popular social networking technologies, both being an avid user myself, and having written an article last year for the NGLIS Journal (National Government Libraries and Information Specialists) on its potential for information professionals.

SLA



SLA President Stephen Abram (Sirsidynix)

In the United States, there are two main library associations. The American Library Association, which is more public library focused, and The Special Libraries Association. The Special Libraries Association was founded in 1909, and celebrates its Centenary next year with a conference in Washington D.C. Its conferences are on such a scale that they attract major keynote speakers, one of whom was former Vice President and Nobel laureate Al Gore.

As its name suggests, SLA includes a range of libraries and associated information professions from a range of specialisms. The vastness of Special Libraries is such that divisions range from insurance, information technology, competitive intelligence, knowledge management, law, amongst a few examples. The most relevant division to ADLG is the Military Libraries Division, and one of the proposals in my bursary application was to build bridges and links with this division for ADLG.

Conference Support: mingle, wikis, tags

The SLA conference is a grand affair – this particular one had 5000 delegates in attendance. Embracing collaborative technology, there was a conference Wiki that had useful information for the first timer, from which hotels to stay, reading list of Seattle associated fiction, the public transport system in Seattle, to FAQs. <http://wiki.sla.org/display/SEATTLEATTEND/Home>

I found it particularly useful and reassuring to attend the first timer session. It gave a friendly face to the conference, allowing me to meet fellow delegates whom I'd run into in later sessions. The conference used tags as conversation openers to facilitate networking. Tags looked like service ribbons attached to your name tag, and ranged from divisions, first timer, if you were an SLA fellow, past president, or award recipient.

Conference: the show must go on!

The keynote speeches and awards ceremony employed exceptional use of multimedia and theatrics. The experience can be best compared to a blending of a television studio, concert, the theatre, and the academy awards.



Teleprompters were used, big screen overlays, video stories of the award recipients complete with subtitles and sound bites, there was even a song written exclusively for the conference and accompanying dance to gear up for the centenary conference next year.

The Exhibition

The exhibition area was huge, the equivalent of twice the size of the exhibition space of Kensington Olympia. In today's information climate, getting people to use your services in a competitive market is a constant challenge. So I was impressed by the conference utilised some ingenious ways to keep you nourished, entertained and engaged.

- The Dow Jones stand was popular with queues waiting up to an hour for a free 10 minute graphology reading.



- Two sponsored \$1000 prizes in a draw when you had your conference 'passport' stamped from a minimum number of vendors.
- Coffee and tea tasting sessions with a Starbucks coffee master



- Hot buffet food (including Pacific Northwest Salmon)



How I benefited

Personally

Writing bids for the bursary, and for further resources, is a useful skill for the Information Professional. Applied to our information centres, we certainly have to bid and make justifications for further resources. In applying for additional resources, my bid was enhanced by a track record of previous achievement and its impact which I had continually communicated to management and the information community.

The experience made me reflect how our information services must similarly not only add value but highlight our successes. When the time comes for our information services to bid for more resources, our successes hopefully, would already be known to the budget decision makers, for we would have continually communicated the message of value and contribution to the benefit of the organisation.

Professionally

The conference was a great opportunity to network, not only with UK information experts but with colleagues from the United States. Some of UK's top information professionals and leaders attended the SLA conference. Because the attendance from the UK was about a dozen or so, we got to know each other fairly well. Those I had the opportunity to chat with included the Managing Director of TFPL, Neil Infield—manager of the British Library Business &

Intellectual Property Centre, SLA European Professional of the year, and David Gurteen, knowledge management guru and pioneer of the 'knowledge cafe'.

I talked to David Gurteen, about his Twitter feed, a service where one can microblog with status updates on what they are up to or thinking. Even though this was the first time I met David, I told him that I knew a lot about him already from subscribing to his twitter feed, I surprised him when I mentioned some information from his feeds – that he was at the Royal Society of Arts the evening before and had dinner with a particular family member. This discussion made David more conscious of the security implications of web 2.0 sites like twitter. And what a great experience it was, to influence the thinking of a guru!

I met expert contacts for Sharepoint Portals, very fitting to see the latest application of Sharepoint, as I with my team developed enquiry portals using the same technology two years ago.

Reaffirming your professional faith

The whole experience was a confidence boost, and I was imbued with infectious enthusiasm from a fresh perspective. Some pearls of wisdom from the various sessions I attended:

- Advocacy is of paramount importance
- Become collaborators, in partnership with your customers (not reactive, passive suppliers of a service)
- Have an understanding of the business climate in which you operate, the problems faced, leverage your information service to offer solutions
- Visibility within your organisation – high profile
- Ensure influential stakeholders use your service

I realised upon reflecting on the above, that I had the skills required for a librarian or information professional in the current dynamic climate. I felt positively and professionally reaffirmed, and enthused to effect change for me as an individual, my organisation, and for ADLG.

How ADLG will benefit

Each evening had various receptions sponsored by various SLA divisions. I made sure I attended the SLA Military Libraries Division reception.

As a result of discussions with the Military Libraries Division President, ADLG

- is now linked from the Military Libraries Division website.
- will publish articles in their newsletter, raising greater awareness and highlight the issues faced, best practice of our constituent members and services
- will work to cross publicise major conferences and seminars of our two organisations



By establishing close links now with the Military Libraries Division, "building bridges" between our organisations, ADLG will be foremost in their minds as an international partner, should likely opportunities arise.

.....to be continued

Ben wishes to thank the Ministry of Defence Information Services for its support and his family for their forbearance.