

Impression management: the art of visibility

By Kathy Ennis, held in Central London on 25 October 2006

A very good meeting that was well attended and which provided some very positive and encouraging feedback.

Kathy started with a 'health warning', that during this session we should not expect to be told:

- that library and information workers are great
- that employers should take more notice of their information staff
- that you do not need to constantly reassess yourself, your skills, your competencies and your perceptions

(the reason should be obvious).

We were warned that during the session we would be challenged to:

- think about the impact of first impressions
- think about the importance of visibility within your organisation
- think about how express the 'real' skills and competencies of a library / information professional

We were also asked to bear in mind that when the term librarian was used that evening (and in this report) it includes all types of library, information and knowledge professional.

We were shown a slide with pictures of 14 people and asked to say what we thought they did for a living, their salary level and where they lived. A number of diverse and eclectic suggestions were offered, ranging from Accountant to Life Guard via Banker and Politician, living variously in Europe, Asia, the US and in South America. All 14 pictures were of library and information professionals.

Kathy pointed-out how well this illustrated that first impressions are far more important than we usually give credit for, that within three seconds of seeing a person for the first time we will have decided their:

- social status
- politics
- education
- religion
- sexuality
- friendliness / approachability
- aptitude

That with first impressions there is a 93% rule. That 55% of a first impression is based on appearance & body language, whilst 38% of a first impression is based on tone, pitch & pace of the voice (55+38=93), which leaves just 7% being accredited to what is actually said. Quite staggering when you think how much we usually assume people are actually listening to what we have to say.

At work 90% of the impression we give of being capable is based on perception:
30% - presentation of work
30% - presentation of self
30% - being seen to be *doing a good job*
Whilst actually doing a good job accounts for just 10% of the impression you give.

Next we had a 'draw a librarian exercise' in which the drawing took shape based on how important each aspect was, so for instance if listening skills are important then rather large ears will be appended to the face etc. This enabled us to see a visual representation of the relative importance of each of our five senses in our chosen line of work.

Kathy then introduced us to Erving Goffman's work '*The presentation of self in everyday life*' (1959). Goffman outlines impression management as a process by which people in social situations manage the setting and their dress, words and gestures to correspond to the impressions they are trying to make or the image they are trying to project.

Kathy then explained that reason stereotypes occur is because they have at least a grain of truth in them. This was demonstrated by a quote from '*Behind the bun, or Batgirl was a librarian*', by Alison Hall in the Canadian Library Journal 49, No 5 (October 1992): pp 345-347. "In the public psyche, a librarian is a woman of indeterminate age, who wears spectacles; a person with either a timorous disposition or an austere disposition, wearing a long sleeved blouse buttoned to the neck; someone who loves silence, likes books and suffers people. Librarians don't laugh. They are covered with a thin film of dust. They have pale skins, which, when touched (as if one ever could) might flake and prove to be reptilian scales".

Then from <http://www.leatherlibrarian.com/>

In Your Dreams: You're a Librarian who tracks down missing books
In Your Dreams: You're a Librarian who raps knuckles with a metal-edged ruler
In Your Dreams: You're a Librarian who won't take guff from anyone
In Your Dreams: You're a Librarian who takes vacation - and enjoys it
Stop dreaming and become the librarian you've always wanted to be!
Ditch those cat glasses, take down that bun & release the surly vixen inside!

Then from Stupid white men, by Michael Moore (who thinks librarians are great), "Most people think of them [librarians] as all mousey and quiet and telling everyone to 'SHHHHHH!'. I'm now convinced that 'shush' is just the sound of steam coming out of their ears as they sit there plotting the revolution".

How do you think of yourself? Do you recognise any aspect of yourself from any of the above descriptions, or even in any of these famous librarians...

- Pope Pius XI
- Thomas Bodley (Founder of the Bodleian Library and English diplomat)
- Philip Larkin (UK poet/womaniser)
- S. R. Ranganathan (Mathematician)
- Zenodotus (First superintendent of Library of Alexandria, and noted scholar from 3rd C. BC)

- Lewis Carroll (Author)
- Giacomo Casanova (yes him)
- Pierre François le Courayer (Theologian)
- John Dee (Renaissance magician)
- Benjamin Franklin (US President)
- David Hume (Philosopher)
- Mao Zedong (Chinese revolutionary politician)

Not forgetting of course that there are positive as well as impossible images of librarians in the media...

Rupert Giles (Anthony Stewart Head) was the multi-lingual librarian and mentor to Buffy the Vampire Slayer whose research skills help defeat all manner of 'baddies' in the long-running Warner Brothers TV series.

Evelyn Carnarvon (Rachel Weisz) was librarian and Egyptologist whose knowledge of mummification proved essential in the 1999 film *The Mummy*.

Alice White (Amanda Ooms), a British academic librarian..and er..werewolf. Despite this 'slight' handicap Alice still presented a positive image of the profession in the 1996 British TV min-series *Wilderness*.

Gloria Mundy (Goldie Hawn) is targeted by assassins when a micro-film showing a plot to kill the Pope is left in her library and she becomes involved in the investigation, showing that librarians do have lives outside of work in the 1978 film *Foul Play*.

This is not confined to film and TV, the internet too provides many 'larger than life' librarians...

Snarky librarian <http://www.sarcasra.net/snarky/>

Rockabilly librarian <http://www.rockabillylibrarian.com/>

Barbarian librarian <http://www.angelfire.com/scifi/barbarianlibrarian/>

Street librarian <http://www.geocities.com/SoHo/Cafe/7423/>

Leather librarian <http://www.leatherlibrarian.com/>

Lipstick librarian <http://www.lipsticklibrarian.com/>

Bellydancing librarian <http://www.sonic.net/~erisw/bdlib.html>

Whilst at least some of the above can be seen as certainly amusing and sometimes entertaining, and may indeed hold tips and/or clues in how we can improve our image and ability to manage the first impressions we give the real challenge is to manage your image to demonstrate your:

- contribution to the organisations aims and objectives
- value for money
- impact on learning abilities, skills levels and employability
- wider social issues and government agendas – social inclusion, community and civic values, digital citizenship

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