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# The Four E's of Experience and Leadership; or How to Plot a Future Course for RUSA

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**I**n this column in the previous volume of *Reference and User Services Quarterly (RUSQ)*, Diane Zabel, then-president of Reference and User Services Association (RUSA), took a look at the issues facing reference librarians as they plan for the future, followed by a great review of the *RQ/RUSQ* literature that highlighted the exciting reading we've brokered throughout our existence as an organization. So, as the torch passes from Diane to me, and as she moves on to become both past-president and the editor of *RUSQ*, I wish her the best.

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## THE FUTURE FOR REFERENCE AND RUSA

Currently my library—and probably a lot of yours—are examining reference services in our libraries and asking, “What now? Where can we look for guidance?” At Iowa State University, we have begun anew the process of examining the trends that have occurred within our services to help us rethink the way we are delivering reference services. In 1992, Virginia Massey-Burzio changed the way we did reference at Iowa State with her article, “Rethinking the Reference Desk,” and as a result we created a tiered-reference service.<sup>1</sup> In 2002, the white papers presented at a RUSA workshop on the future of reference challenged us to look at various future scenarios for the future of reference service.<sup>2</sup> As a consequence, we implemented e-mail and Web-reference services at Iowa State, and later, chat reference. Now many libraries of all types (academic, public, corporate, and school) are again examining how they deliver reference service and how the new technologies of the new millennium will drive change. As the old Bob Dylan song says, “the times, they are a changin’”; (perhaps we should include the word “again”?) As we think about the future of our services, what would we do without Google? We don't necessarily like how much our students and patrons depend on Google, but we all are using it, and depend on it in those times when all else eludes us. So how can we move to the future of reference without selling out? What will be our roles in five years, or ten? What will be the role of RUSA in creating this future role?

In April 2006, Cathleen Bourdon (RUSA's executive director) and I attended a leadership symposium in Chicago, along with a hundred or more people representing other nonprofit organizations. During our two days together, we spent time examining the challenges to our organization's focus in the twenty-first century. In the course of contemplating where to go next—Diane is a hard act to follow—I began by examining some of the organizational issues that the literature indicates are affecting the ways in which we choose our leaders and the values our organizations have come to represent. I have combined

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this information with insights from the Chicago symposium, the results from a May 2005 RUSA needs survey, and the findings from a *RUSQ* survey also conducted in 2005. Some of my thoughts about what this may mean for RUSA as an organization and for our membership frame my musings. I began by asking questions that many have probably asked before: What do our members expect from RUSA as an organization, and how can we meet those needs? Where are we now, what are the challenges ahead, and how do we meet them?

As I reflected on the symposium, I realized that RUSA's development could be adapted to fit into a couple of models called the four E's, one developed for the business community, and a second framed in the perspective of organizational leadership. Both perspectives offer the opportunity to encourage the same goal—the growth of RUSA as an organization. In the world of business, the four E's are defined by Pine and Gilmore as the “experience economy” that occurs “when a company [organization] intentionally uses services as the stage, and goods as props to engage individual customers [members] in a way that creates a memorable event.”<sup>3</sup> Therefore, I would propose that this line of thought works for nonprofit organizations such as RUSA as well. It is the little things that make the difference and pull each of us to select one section or division of the American Library Association (ALA) over another. Pine and Gilmore note that experiences have two dimensions—their level of participation can be either active or passive, and their connection may be one of absorption or immersion. The four E's of the experience economy are:

- entertainment—attending a program and our level of enjoyment;
- education—taking a class and the benefits anticipated;
- esthetics—viewing a thing of beauty such as art or a new Web page; and
- escapism—acting in a role, becoming a leader, or presenting a program.

The level that any of us become involved in an organization such as RUSA can also run the gamut from passive to active and from absorption to immersion.

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### ENTERTAINMENT

As a member or prospective member of RUSA, you may be watching from afar; you may be observing the ways we interact with our members and considering what is available for you as an individual. You may notice that RUSA is the only organization within ALA that is specifically for reference librarians regardless of library type. You may attend a program or peruse our Web pages but still feel safer at arm's length. You enjoy our services and entertainment but opt to remain outside.

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### EDUCATION

At some point, you may decide to reach out and become involved by enrolling in a continuing education course such as

the one RUSA has now offered several times, “The Reference Interview,” or the newest one, “Business Reference 101.” You may decide to attend a conference program like the one this past summer, “What You'll Read Next: The Buzz of Books,” or the one planned for next June on reference and user services librarians of the future. Some of you may have attended the pre-conference in New Orleans, “Reinvented Reference: The Integration of Digital and Traditional Reference Services,” and are already applying what you learned in your home library. You may decide to fill out a Volunteer form on the Web page and become involved in one of hundreds of RUSA section- and division-level committees. The next round of committee appointments will be made in spring 2007, with terms of service beginning at the close of the 2007 Annual Conference.

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### ESTHETIC

The esthetic nature of RUSA may encourage you to get involved by attending a committee meeting or program, allowing you to observe the decision-making process at various levels. You may like what you see and be prepared to contribute your ideas. During the past year I had the pleasure of making nearly one hundred committee appointments to committees ranging from Professional Development to Access to Information. These don't include the numerous committees available if your interests lie in membership within one of the six sections of RUSA: Reference Services, Machine-Assisted Reference, History, Collection Development and Evaluation, Business Reference and Services, and Sharing and Transforming Access to Resources.

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### ESCAPIST

As a member or chair of a RUSA committee you now have the opportunity to escape from the library where you work every day. This may not be what Pine and Gilmore had in mind for this category, but think of it as an opportunity to escape from what you do every day and join others to discuss similar needs, enabling you to return to your library invigorated by new ideas. According to the 2005 RUSA member survey, one of the primary reasons that librarians choose to join a professional organization is networking.

In like manner, the Web site LeaderValues examines the four E's of leadership; the opportunities to extend benefits to members in various categories.

- Envision
- Enable
- Empower
- Energize<sup>4</sup>

A vision varies from person to person, but is something that an association needs in order to identify with some focus, to *envision* its future. The stated vision for RUSA is that “RUSA is the foremost organization of reference and information professionals who make the connections between people and the information sources, services, and collection materials they

need.”<sup>5</sup> This vision enables us to assist you to see how the RUSA vision can help your library create its own vision.

*Enabling* is realizing that tools make each and every part of the vision a reality. RUSA believes that:

- universal access to information is important;
- high-quality collection and information sources are necessary;
- reading is fundamental to quality of life;
- innovative services and programs meet the changing needs of diverse populations;
- the management and delivery of collections and services must continually be evaluated and improved;
- professional growth and development is important for librarians and library staff;
- the role of reference and user services staff as educators is in creating lifelong learners; and
- unique contributions of librarians and library staff further the process of connecting users and information.

These values can create the foundation to enable libraries to create their own tools to make their vision a reality and to better serve their clientele.

*Empowerment* is the involvement of the membership with this common vision and goals. The RUSA Board of Directors has just completed the process of identifying the Association's goals and objectives. Primarily, these are:

- to provide leadership in professional development for reference and user services librarians and library staff;
- to work toward equity of access for all patrons;
- to seek ways to increase participation in RUSA by reference and user services librarians and library staff;
- to ensure the effectiveness of RUSA in meeting its goals and those of ALA; and
- to increase the visibility of RUSA within the profession and society at large.<sup>6</sup>

*Energize* is pulling members together and making them excited about working with each other. I guess that makes me chief cheerleader, and I hope that some of my enthusiasm can rub off on each of you, allowing us to work through our differences in order for RUSA to realize its full potential as an association. In some ways, RUSA has already begun this process with your help. Many of you have participated in one of the two surveys that RUSA has undertaken in the past two years. The first, in May 2005, looked to identify the needs of RUSA members, and the second, in fall 2005, to understand the readership of *RUSQ* and the journal's success or failure in meeting readers' needs. As RUSA planned and executed these surveys, RUSA leaders began to realize some of what's important to our members. However, additional elements we hadn't expected were also made clearer during the Chicago leadership symposium. During one exercise, Cathleen and I were asked to map the trends within our organization. Thanks to these RUSA surveys, we were able to outline several

things about RUSA and identify areas we want the association to work on. At this symposium, we also learned that the following association trends are applicable to RUSA:

- one size doesn't fit all;
- members want return for their dues;
- information is important but knowledge is more valuable;
- virtual members want personal relationships with the organization; and
- differences in positions and locations are continuing to diversify our needs.<sup>7</sup>

What does this mean for the future of RUSA as an association? First of all, we must recognize you (our members) as the owners, consumers, and workforce of the organization. So what is an association? An association is, by definition, “a group of people who voluntarily come together to solve common problems and meet common needs and accomplish common goals.”<sup>8</sup> And what do our members and consumers want and need?

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## ONE SIZE DOESN'T FIT ALL

One doesn't fit all isn't only for clothing sizes anymore. The readers of *RUSQ* helped us see this in a number of ways, both with the answers to the readership survey and by participating in focus groups at the 2006 ALA Midwinter Meeting in San Antonio. As a result, we know who *RUSQ* readers are and what *RUSQ* readers want:

- *RUSQ* recipients tend to be women forty-five years or older with advanced degrees;
- the median professional tenure of *RUSQ* readers is seventeen years, with only 16 percent being in the profession for five years or less;
- only 46 percent of readers say they read half or more of columns and feature articles in an issue;
- ninety-one percent of the respondents consider the information in the journal to be credible; and
- eighty percent of the respondents rated the practical and how-to information as the most useful type of information<sup>9</sup>

As the membership of RUSA gets younger, the elements that are most important will change with the average age, but it seems fairly obvious that the journal must remain relevant for all readers.

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## MEMBERS WANT RETURN FOR THEIR DUES

The 2005 RUSA member survey indicated that some of the most important tools provided to RUSA members include:

- guidelines developed by RUSA to help members improve services such as the 2004 “Guidelines for Implementing and Maintaining Virtual Reference Services”;

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- *RUSQ*, the quarterly journal that publishes research on reference and user services as well as practical how-to articles and book reviews;
- continuing education in a variety of formats, including Web-based and conference workshops;
- networking and other opportunities to interact with professional colleagues;
- awards that recognize and promote outstanding work and contributions to the profession; and
- sections, membership in sections that focus on specific areas of reference and user services<sup>10</sup>

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## INFORMATION IS IMPORTANT, BUT KNOWLEDGE IS MORE IMPORTANT

Continuing education and professional development opportunities have become increasingly important to the membership. In addition, the opportunity to develop leadership skills through service on boards, committees, and other volunteer activities rated very high in the 2005 member survey. Networking opportunities were second in importance overall.

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## VIRTUAL MEMBERS WANT PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH THEIR ASSOCIATION

ALA and RUSA are continuing to develop online communities, blogs, discussion lists, Web pages, and other online services that are important to members. According to the 2005 member survey, members depend on the access they have to these virtual services to perform their everyday work. All five of the issues most important to the respondents in the survey—*RUSQ*, networking, guidelines, a useful Web site, and continuing education—have an online presence via RUSA Web pages ([www.ala.org/rusa](http://www.ala.org/rusa)).

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## DIFFERENCES IN LOCATION AND SITUATION ARE DIVERSIFYING MEMBERS NEEDS EVEN FURTHER

Diversity—in terms of ethnic, gender, or age—is good for the entire membership. The new committee chairs have been oriented to the importance of being inclusive in their committees. The 2007 RUSA President's Program will focus on the future of reference and user services and the librarians and staff that will be providing those services. It will also address how to develop future RUSA leaders, providing, we hope, insights into nurturing this new generation of members.

## SO WHAT'S NEXT?

During my time as vice president, I attempted to get to know the leaders of the sections and to discover their issues. I began the process of building a foundation for the future by inviting new librarians to become active in RUSA. Each RUSA committee now has a new librarian as its intern for terms beginning in July 2006 and continuing through June 2007. I am confident that this will serve to give them an invitation and an opportunity to get involved in planning the future of RUSA. As the next generation of reference librarians begins their careers, I look forward to the culmination of mine. As Albert Einstein said, "I never think of the future. It comes soon enough."<sup>11</sup> If so, it truly is important for us to plan ahead and strategize for the future so libraries and RUSA will continue to be viewed as important components of that future. Please join me in summer 2007 for my program focusing on the next iteration of reference and user services, and the next generation of reference and user services librarians. I hope public services librarians accept the challenge for change and welcome this latest group of librarians. Watch for the results of my interviews with new entrants to the profession in a future president's column. I look forward to meeting and hearing from many of you.

## References and Notes

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