
This is Our Time to Shine

Opportunities in a Recession

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As I begin my first presidential column, I believe what is upmost on everyone's mind is the state of the economy. This recession officially began in December 2007, but according to the *New York Times*, it wasn't officially declared a recession by the National Bureau of Economic Research until December 2008.¹ Unfortunately, the effects of the recession will still be felt as you read this column.

In this column I will

- describe how librarians are helping users during the recession and why users need their libraries;
- explain the affects of the recession on RUSA and how your leadership is responding to the current economic conditions;
- show how libraries are being portrayed in the media and what professional resources the American Library Association (ALA) has created to help librarians face the increasing demands of the public;
- conclude by reviewing the importance and value of being a member of RUSA today; and
- remind you why you joined a professional organization in the first place and why it is important to stay a member.

Last fall we saw the stock market crash. Even if you did not lose a huge amount of money and you still have a house and a job, the current economic crisis affects you. Businesses are closing, including my favorite vegetarian restaurant. People have not only lost their nest eggs, many have lost their jobs and some have even lost their homes. By the time you read this article, I hope things will have turned around. I imagine you do, too.

The recession has changed our work, no matter what kind of library we work in. I work in an academic library, and I am seeing many more students searching for information about the economy. Just yesterday, I had a student who wanted to look at Texas newspapers to see what effect Texas's budget has on the state's economy.

HOW IS THE RECESSION AFFECTING ALA AND RUSA?

RUSA is not immune to the current economic situation. ALA is projecting a shortfall of 1.6 million dollars in the general fund, which does not include the divisions. RUSA is predicting an annual deficit as well. RUSA's traditional funding sources—membership dues and advertising revenues—are declining. These two areas represent 71 percent of our in-

come. According to the February 2009 membership report, our membership has fallen by 7.78 percent. Registration for preconferences at the 2010 ALA Annual Conference in Chicago was also down.

This year it also has been difficult getting volunteers for committees in RUSA's sections. RUSA has 140 committees spread across its 6 divisions. One vice-chair told me that she had only had eight volunteers for her very large section, which has more than twenty different committees. Even the committees that have traditionally been considered plum appointments are falling short.

There is uneasiness among our members about how they will be able to fund their conference attendance, especially two times a year. They question if they will receive any library support to attend conferences or preconferences. Our vendors are scaling back on their donations, advertising, and exhibit space at conferences as they face the realities of the changing economy. While overall ALA membership is up, members are thinking twice about continuing with multiple divisions. All of these factors affect our ability to achieve our goals.

On a positive note, our continuing education offerings are growing, including registration for our online continuing education courses. We provide cost-effective means for our members to take quality coursework without traveling long distances to keep up with the current trends in our field. We now offer Genealogy 101, the Reference Interview, Business Reference 101, Readers' Advisory 101, Marketing Basics for Libraries, and another course is in the making from our Sharing and Transforming Access to Resources Section (STARS).

HOW IS RUSA RESPONDING?

RUSA leadership has been seeking member input to help us become more responsive to your needs. This year we contacted you to share your ideas on two important issues: our redesigned website (www.ala.org/rusa) and electronic committee participation.

Early in 2009 we conducted an online campaign called 14 Days to Have Your Say about how to improve the new RUSA website. We received many comments and then quickly acted on the most pressing issues. Improvements included better access to common volunteer resources, sections, and roster information.

Last spring we also asked our members to provide feedback about electronic committee participation.² Our intention is to facilitate committee work and encourage participation for those members whose financial and/or time budgets do not permit attendance at two conferences each year.

We received many comments about members' desires to move to a more virtual participation organizational model. In response to your concerns, we have established the RUSA E-Participation Task Force to make recommendations about the best methods of moving our division from an exclusively face-to-face model of participation to a more flexible mix of face-to-face and electronic participation. The task force's final report is due at the 2010 ALA Midwinter Meeting in Boston. If

you would like to provide additional comments, please contact Celia Ross (caross@umich.edu), the task force chair.

Most members are supportive of a move to electronic participation, although many commented they would miss the face-to-face discussion of current trends and issues. Others were concerned whether available software could meet their needs and if different time zones would create problems setting up virtual meetings.

RUSA staff is trying hard to help both members and staff use new technology to become more efficient and effective. In April 2009, ALA launched *ALA Connect*, a resource that provides a common virtual space for committee members to share documents, survey members, and participate in chats and discussion forums to facilitate committee work and networking. These types of tools will allow our organization to become more flexible. I encourage all of our committees to try it out at <http://connect.ala.org>.

We are trying to promote membership. This spring we created a brochure to encourage individuals living in the Great Lakes region who have never before been members of RUSA to attend our programs and preconferences at the 2010 Annual Conference in Chicago.

WHAT MORE CAN WE DO?

A lot—but we can't do it without you. We need to expand our membership. We need to grow our online continuing education program. We need you to use the new ALA Connect for RUSA business. We need to provide more content for RUSA programming and make that content available in a more timely fashion. As we move forward, we are trying to be sensitive to your financial situations. We want you to be able to participate, network within RUSA, and stay current in the field. RUSA purchased audio and video equipment to record and tape programs, awards ceremonies, and discussion groups. These recordings will be freely available to our members on our website (www.ala.org/rusa). I hope you will take advantage of these offerings.

PRESIDENT TO PRESIDENT

In March, ALA President Jim Rettig wrote to U.S. President Barack Obama outlining what ALA members believe the new president and his administration need to know about libraries. The letter was based on a discussion at an ALA Membership Town Hall Meeting on January 24, 2009, at the Midwinter Meeting in Denver. Jim reminded the president that

libraries are perfectly positioned to disseminate information relevant to the issues and challenges that face us as a nation, the same key issues which your Administration is seeking to address. Libraries disseminate healthcare and government information. They offer literacy programs, assistance for non-English speakers, as well as access to computers, the Internet, and the

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wealth of library resources. Libraries serve and support all diverse populations.³

LIBRARIAN AS LIFESAVER

People are hungry for information. Libraries around the country have seen increased use. More users than ever before now have library cards.⁴ This is our time to shine, because we must. People need us more now than ever, and we have an extraordinary opportunity to show them how we can help. Providing information is what we do really well. We are compassionate professionals whose priority is helping people find the information they need. The questions have become a little different and the users are understandably more desperate for the services and resources we provide, but this is what we are trained to do and we do it well. The recession has changed the type of books people want to read and the DVDs they borrow. We have become part job counselors, part life coaches, and part lifesavers.

My first paying job was as a lifeguard. I sat in a high chair watching over all the people in the water below prepared to jump in and help them if they needed it. I prepared for that job over many years by taking swimming classes beginning at the age of six offered by our local American Red Cross until I finally attained a Water Safety Instructor's certificate.

Today at my library, I am still a lifesaver, but a different kind. I help save people every day. I bet you do, too. I help save people's lives by guiding them through fields of information. Often in an effort to move on to the next person, you sometimes become oblivious to user's compliments. Lately I have been hearing them—they go like this: "Oh you are just a lifesaver," or "You are my new best friend."

Librarians have become true lifesavers for people during this recession, and libraries have become a bulwark for many people. Libraries are the place where people are going for help with their job searches. People can browse newspapers. People socialize. People also are coming to the library as a refuge from the effects of the recession. Many are getting library cards for the first time. They are borrowing "free" books instead of buying them at their local big book stores. They are borrowing DVDs to be entertained and educated, instead of renting them. They are coming to libraries because they need free Internet access after they have had to cancel their own.

Most importantly, people are coming to libraries because they perceive they will get help *and they do*. We proudly serve the needs of our communities. Just today as I was at the reference desk, a user literally came up to me and said: "I know for a fact any question I ask you, you can answer it."⁵

LIBRARIES IN THE MEDIA

The news media has played a very important role in highlighting the value of libraries during this recession. Out of pure curiosity and because I am a reference librarian, I did a quick search of newspapers in the Access World News database using the terms *librar** in Lead/First Paragraph and *economy* in

Lead/First Paragraph and limiting it to North America. Here are the results from the last three years:

By the end of April there were already 438 hits for 2009. This number already exceeds 2008 (326 hits). In 2007, there were only 135 hits using these terms.

I'm sure you are aware of the headlines, but I wanted to share a few of the ones I found most fascinating:

- "Job Seekers Find Help in the Stacks—Library has Wealth of Information on How to Get Hired."⁶
- "Recession Fuels Readers' Escapist Urges."⁷
- "Looking Back: Economy Affecting Things that Touch Life—Golf Rounds Down, Library Use Up in 2008."⁸
- "Folks are Flocking to the Library, a Cozy Place to Look for a Job Books, Computers and Wi-Fi are Free, but Staffs are Stressed by Crowds, Cutbacks."⁹
- "When People Cry 'Help!' Libraries Answer."¹⁰

ALA HELPS

Librarians are responding to people's needs in these tough times. I want to point out all the great resources that can be found to help you on ALA's website (www.ala.org):

- Libraries in the News provides links to both print and broadcast news items. Here you will find videos from CBS, NBC, and CNN reporting on libraries and the economy and a link to Jim Rettig's op-ed in the *Huffington Post*.¹¹
- Advocating in a Tough Economy Toolkit¹²
 - This kit provides helpful talking points to help you advocate for your library and your users.
 - It also includes interesting data and statistics you can use to wow your friends and colleagues. Did you know: "There are now more public library buildings in the U.S. than there are McDonald's—a total of 16,592, including branches."
- A reference to an article originally published in *American Libraries* in 2005, when then Senator Barack Obama revealed that librarians from the Manhattan Branch of the New York Public Library assisted him with his job search, which resulted in him moving to Chicago to work as a community organizer after his graduation from Columbia.¹³
- Library Value Calculator, which I love, created by the Massachusetts Library Association.¹⁴ The calculator puts a dollar value on the library services that an individual uses. I learned that I receive more than \$500 of value from the West Windsor Branch of the Mercer County (NJ) Public Library. I have a long commute and am a big fan of audio books.
- *State of America's Libraries Report*. This annual publication is issued the Monday of National Library Week. This report contains a wealth of statistical information about all library types. Here is the first sentence in this year's report: "The importance of libraries in American life continued

to grow in 2008—and accelerated dramatically as the national economy sank and people looked for sources of free, effective help in a time of crisis.”¹⁵

- I Love Libraries website. This is a website created by ALA for the public to learn more about what is happening in our libraries. Its motto is “Supporting One of Our Nation’s Most Beloved Resources.” Here you can read inspiring stories of how using libraries have changed people lives in the Love your Library section. This is a fun place—tell your friends and families!¹⁶

THE IMPORTANCE AND VALUE OF BEING A MEMBER OF RUSA TODAY

In this difficult economic time, RUSA is a good professional value. Here are some of the many benefits.

Professional Growth and Leadership Development Opportunities

RUSA offers valuable opportunities for you to grow professionally and develop your skills through attendance at our conferences and preconferences. This is where you can learn from experts in our field and stay current about new trends and resources.

Taking one of our online continuing education courses helps you sharpen your skills (such as in the Reference Interview class) or develop new skills. RUSA offers classes on genealogical research, business reference, marketing, and readers’ advisory services for novice and experienced librarians alike. You can learn about a new aspect of reference work that might be useful to you in your current library or personal life or even in a new position down the road.

Committee participation can help you develop leadership skills, which may prepare you to advance your career. Certainly contacts made while working on committees can lead to other career possibilities. Taking an active role in committee work and participating in planning programs helps you develop new skills and expertise.

Networking Opportunities

RUSA helps you stay fresh and meet your professional challenges, and at our meetings there are always people who can help you. You have a place to come where everybody *does* know your name. RUSA held its first ever division-wide membership social at the 2009 Midwinter Meeting in Denver. This event was a great success and was met with enthusiasm. People discovered they really did know each other. Even though our numbers are large, RUSA has a nice hometown feel.

One of the many benefits of belonging to a professional association like RUSA is the opportunity to network with energetic and intellectually stimulating peers from across the country, or even around the world. Many say that it is the single most important benefit they get from attending conferences or working on committees.

I think one of the most important networking and programming opportunities we offer is our discussion groups. Everyone is invited, and librarians come together to talk about a specific concern. RUSA’s six sections offer fifteen discussion

groups, so there is always some topic to pique your interest.

Discussion groups provide forums for you to discover what other librarians are doing and how they resolve many of the same challenges that you are facing. The absolute best thing about these groups is the opportunity for librarians to speak their minds and share their experiences! Discussion groups give you a chance to problem solve in a large room of people who are concerned about the same issue. Also, it’s something akin to group therapy. I know I always feel refreshed and energized when I leave the room!

For the first time, at the 2009 Midwinter Meeting in Denver, we podcasted several discussion groups for you to enjoy, especially if you were busy at another meeting or were not able to attend the conference. The podcasts will help you stay informed with current trends and topics. We hope to continue recording discussion groups at future conferences. Many RUSA sections put up discussion group notes and handouts on their website for your future reference.

Publication Opportunities

RUSA has two regularly issued publications: *Reference & User Services Quarterly* (RUSQ) and *RUSA Update*. RUSQ is devoted to important issues in our profession and provides an opportunity for you to share your research findings. *RUSA Update* is an online newsletter that keeps members up-to-date about conference activities and section opportunities. Each RUSA section also provides members with opportunities to serve the profession by becoming involved with unique publications. The Business Reference and Services Section (BRASS) maintains a continually updated webliography called the Best of the Best Business Websites, and the Machine-Assistance Reference Section (MARS) produces the Best Free Reference Websites.¹⁷ And these examples are just the tip of the iceberg.

Development of Standards and Guidelines for our Profession

As a professional association, it is our obligation to develop standards and guidelines. Many of these have been adopted and are used around the world. Recently, the Reference Services Section (RSS) updated the definition of reference services to conform more to current trends. Some of the most used guidelines include Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of

I welcome your ideas as to how we can best make RUSA more responsive to your needs. Please feel free to e-mail me with any concerns, suggestions, or solutions at susan.beck@rutgers.edu.

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Reference and Information Service Providers and Guidelines for Library Services to Older Adults.¹⁸ If you haven't looked at our guidelines recently, I encourage you to do so. I always believe that all reference librarians should be required to review the Behavioral Guidelines annually to remind them of good service standards and discuss them as a group to see how they will be applied in their library.

Awards

RUSA, as a division, is proud to offer two types of awards: achievement and media. We offer fifteen personal achievement awards. The oldest and most prestigious award is the Isadore Gilbert Mudge Award, which is given to an individual who has made a distinguished contribution to reference librarianship. RUSA also gives out book and media awards. The Dartmouth Medal honors the creation of an outstanding reference work, the Notable Books Council recommends Notable Books for Adults, and the Reading List highlights exceptional genre fiction. We videotape the awards ceremonies for all to see on our website (www.ala.org/rusa).

What a Deal!

While everyone else is talking about the value of libraries in today's difficult economy, I want to remind you of RUSA's value. RUSA's annual dues are \$60 for a regular member and \$25 as a student member. Do you realize that is only 16.4 cents per day for a regular member and 6.8 cents for students? What a deal! Think of what you pay for your Internet or cell phone service each month, or your daily espresso.

If you are not a member, please join us. You may join all of the RUSA sections for just the regular member fee. We have six diverse sections in our division. Each one has its own flavor. Find some that suit you!

- Business Reference and Services Section (BRASS)
- Collection Development and Evaluation Section (CODES)
- History Section
- Machine-Assisted Reference Section (MARS)
- Reference Services Section (RSS)
- Sharing and Transforming Access to Resources Section (STARS)

IN CONCLUSION

The state of the economy has profound effects on our everyday life. There is certainly no time in my memory that a recession has been quite this bad and has such far reaching effects. I am proud to be a librarian. I am proud to be a member of ALA, and I am especially proud to be president of RUSA. I love what I do. Just as libraries offer good value to our citizens, RUSA offers good value to our members. We offer opportunities to grow professionally, share experiences, and recognize great achievements. I hope you agree with me

that participating in a professional organization is important. There is no better place for you to share in shaping your profession than by continuing to participate in RUSA, *the foremost organization of reference and information professionals*.

In the *New York Times* Books column on April 7, 2009, Mokoto Rich reminds us, "In a recession, what people want is a happy ending."¹⁹ Me too.

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