

INTRODUCTION

If you watch the ABC hit comedy *Modern Family*, you may recall the episode where Phil and Claire issue a decree that the entire family will forgo using personal electronic devices for one week.¹ Their kids are none too pleased.

Middle school student Alex complains, “How am I supposed to do my homework? I have a huge science paper due.” Fumbling about for viable alternatives, her mother comes up with, “What do you think the public library is for?” Bored, high school student Haley responds, “*I thought that was the bathroom for homeless people.*”

Taking ourselves lightly, we laugh at the exaggeration. Nonetheless, “bathroom for homeless people” underscores that our profession could benefit from an image transformation, and also that we have our work cut out for us.

Now for the good news. We have the power to dispel—permanently—all misperceptions, and be *fully* valued. How? By adopting a new approach: the “Three Pillars Philosophy.”

This book describes the philosophy, explains why it works, and, for those desiring to give it a try, offers some guidance for implementation.

Although developed for public libraries, tailored slightly, the concept works for all library types. It’s easy, effective, and costs little to implement. Neither does it require that we change anything we do.

What does it involve? Paying attention to *what we say*.

While there is no question that what we do and how we do it is critically important, how we *talk about* what we do can mean the difference between conveying partial or complete value.

Our choice of words can therefore mean the difference between receiving minimum and maximum funding, because what is valued gets funded.

In a nutshell, the Three Pillars Philosophy harnesses the power of language. The power stems from positioning all that we do under three, easy-to-remember “pillars,” and replacing typical library terms and phrases with bold, compelling, and descriptive terminology that commands value and *that people understand*.

The philosophy recognizes that the vocabulary we choose has the power to shape in others the perceptions that we want.

What is the reality we want? Picture a world where:

- *Everyone* understands who we are, what we do, and why it matters.
- *Never again* must we justify our very existence, or *explain* why we are “essential.”

- Respect and visibility position us center stage to *what the world values most*.
- We receive top funding priority.
- Disproportionate budget cuts are *relegated to history books*.
- Respect and funding *match our true value*.

Would this not be sheer paradise?

Again, some good news. The Three Pillars Philosophy can take us there.

ADDING WIND TO YOUR SAILS

Many library systems have achieved great successes with their current strategies in terms of stature and allocated funding. Others may be struggling.

It is also important to note that some library systems already incorporate pieces of this philosophy into their culture and marketing efforts. If you are in this category, the ideas that follow will seem more familiar and a logical next step.

For others, the approach might seem foreign and quite different from present practices, requiring some adjustments.

Wherever you fall along this spectrum, consider giving pieces of the philosophy a try. As you begin to achieve even greater successes, you will likely be convinced that, whatever your starting point, adopting a few more of the concepts will only add wind to your sails.

The approach has worked remarkably well for Howard County (Maryland) Library System.² Others who have tried the approach report similar results.

PRECISION

Librarianship is a proud profession, and rightly so. We know our full value. Yet others do not necessarily see it. There exists a disconnect between how we are currently perceived, and our true image and worth.

The Three Pillars Philosophy accurately communicates our worth so that others assign us our full value. It creates a connection by:

- aligning *everything* we do with what people know and value, education, and
- switching to a strategic, intuitive vocabulary that conveys the precise message we intend.

For external audiences (e.g., customers, funders, media), the Three Pillars Philosophy achieves:

- greater respect,
- heightened perceived value, and
- maximized funding.

Internally, benefits of the Three Pillars Philosophy are equally significant. For library staff, Board members, Friends and Foundation board members, and volunteers, embracing this approach

- establishes a distinctive sense of purpose;
- instills great pride in ourselves, our work, and our profession; and
- makes work more meaningful and fun.

The tremendous power, effectiveness, and simplicity of this approach is that *the very words we use* convey the true value of our jobs, work, and profession—even to the Hales of this world!

CURRENT IMAGE: MEDIA

As *Modern Family* illustrates, the media typically paint an undervalued—even derogatory—image of libraries.

A similar example occurred on *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*. In his opening monologue on May 11, 2010, Mr. Leno commented on the impending reduction to the Los Angeles Public Library's operating budget, deadpanning that the cut could affect "as many as nine people."³ Like "bathroom for homeless people," while an obvious exaggeration, this joke implies that few people find anything of value in or about public libraries.

How best to reverse this trend? Addressing misperceptions through smart use of language will result in the media's *accurate* portrayal of us because (1) they will know our value and it will no longer occur to them to write these types of lines, and (2) until such time, as audiences begin to fully respect and understand us, the intended jokes will no longer generate laughs, effectively teaching the script writers to omit them.

CURRENT IMAGE: ELECTED OFFICIALS—DISPROPORTIONATE CUTS

The media influences the general public, including elected officials, who determine funding based on the value they assign.

Disproportionate budget cuts to libraries—even the elimination of funding—at local, state, and federal levels over the past several years point to the most serious result of being undervalued. These imprudent funding decisions provide the greatest motivation to quell misperceptions once and for all.

Consider the views of two elected officials who proposed steep budget cuts. Their comments reflect an image of us that is far from our true worth.

Bridgeport (Connecticut) Mayor Bill Finch was quoted in *American Libraries* in 2008 as announcing, "We are getting back to basics: police, fire, and education. We will not try to be all things to all people. Libraries are not essential services."⁴

Similarly, *The Washington Post* in 2009 included the following quote from Fairfax (Virginia) County Executive Anthony H. Griffin: "Parks and libraries are essentially discretionary programs."⁵

Likewise, Prescott, Arizona City Council member John Hanna, who supported charging a fee to use the library, is quoted in 2010 as asserting, "I actually consider this library as a luxury, because you do not need it to live. People need to realize . . . if you don't pay, you can't play."⁶

As to Federal funding for libraries, allocations were frozen in 2010 while "education" received a \$400 billion increase.⁷ A similar fate awaited us in 2011 and 2012.

Why such a grim forecast? In his 2011 State of the Union address President Obama again ranked "education" as his top priority, specifically mentioning schools and colleges (but not libraries).⁸ Correspondingly, his proposed Fiscal Year 2012 budget included a \$26.8 billion increase for "education,"⁹ and a 9.5 percent cut (\$20.3 million) to library funding.¹⁰

It is also important to note that Congress took this one step further, proposing to eliminate *all* funding for the Institute of Museum and Library Services.¹¹

Regardless of the eventual outcome of comments and proposals such as these (and, fortunately, not all came to pass), have you ever wondered why such short-sighted measures are contemplated in the first place?

In each of these cases, elected officials clearly do not understand our full value.

OUR PROFESSION'S RESPONSE TO DATE

How have we as a profession responded to date? Typical recommendations found in library literature as a means to refute misperceptions include:

- Tell them why libraries are important.
- Tell them that our programs and services are essential.

- Tell them we are the heart of Main Street.
- Tell them public libraries are one of the greatest tools our nation has.
- Tell them your story.

While this advice is not bad, neither does it immediately convey our full value. Note that each of the above suggestions requires further explanation.

NO EXPLANATION NEEDED

At Howard County Library System (HCLS), we became convinced that there had to be a simpler, more effective solution than continually explaining why we are “essential.” In 2001, we began delving into an idea.

It occurred to us that schools, colleges, and universities do not need continually to justify their existence and explain their value. Why not? Because everyone knows who they are, what they do, and why they are important.

They are what the world values most: education. The very word conveys instant value, receiving the highest funding priority. The word is self-explanatory.

We pondered, “Wouldn’t it be great if, like the schools, people simply assigned us our true value?” Our idea began to crystallize, and we thought, “Why not us? We, too, are education—education for all ages!”

We observed that while *we* viewed ourselves as education (after all, “lifelong learning” was our mission), we were not perceived by others as such. We were viewed as a “community service,” which is often understood to be a “social service.”

Additional misperceptions proliferated, such as, “With the Internet, we’ll need fewer library branches, not more.” (We noted that this inaccurate conclusion was not similarly applied to the County’s proposed public school’s capital projects.)

We realized that our everyday vocabulary might be the root of these misperceptions, and that if we wanted others to recognize our full value, we would need to modify our language.

Some quick research determined that “education” was not in our vision or mission statements. Neither was it anywhere on our website to describe what we then called our “programs and services.”

Thus commenced our quest to reposition ourselves as a vital component of education.

We began by aligning ourselves with the commonly understood definition of education (i.e., “formal” education that leads to a degree). We developed and launched A+ Partners in Education, a comprehensive partnership with the Howard County Public School System (HCPSS) and Howard Community College (HCC).

Once firmly established as partners with HCPSS and HCC, we began expanding our vision to position *all that we do* under the *complete* definition of education, teaching our community that everything about us is their highest priority. (This vision ultimately led to the development of the Three Pillars, a visual with three categories under which all that we do falls, and which comprises the complete definition of education.)

Simultaneously, we started analyzing our language, experimenting with replacing common library language that tended to trivialize our value. We replaced those words with smart, value-enhanced, and intuitive vocabulary that immediately conveyed our value to the listener and reader.

We were taken by surprise.

The approach worked time and again. Respect for HCLS began to grow. Visibility increased. Appropriate levels of funding followed.

SHAPING THE VISION

Results were so successful that I was invited to speak on the topic at more than 20 library association conferences and meetings throughout the United States, including Alaska, California, Illinois, Maryland, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and West Virginia from 2006 to the present.

In addition, it was my privilege to present webinars on the approach for the Urban Libraries Council;¹² the Public Library Association,¹³ where colleagues representing 42 of our 50 states attended, as well as the provinces of Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario; and a New Hampshire Library Association Conference.¹⁴

Participant feedback from each of these venues, combined with responses to a *Public Libraries* feature article, “Transforming Our Image Through Words That Work: Perception is Everything,”¹⁵ has shaped and strengthened the vision tenfold.

The result? A philosophy that can be adapted by any library system, large or small.

STRAIGHT LINE

The pages that follow aim to impart the “what,” “why,” and “how” of this simple, effective strategy so that your library system can benefit from implementing the concepts, in whole or in part.

While it has taken HCLS 10 years to develop, implement, and refine the Three Pillars Philosophy, it is likely that you can attain similar results in far less time, as you can learn from our trials and errors.

Furthermore, you will have the advantage of seeing where the vision leads, and can therefore take the fastest route (i.e., a straight line!).

Although many examples included in this book reflect HCLS’s experiences with the approach, also included are the remarkable successes of several other library systems that have begun applying the concepts.

INDISPENSABLE

It is not merely fortuitous circumstances that moved HCLS from “Community Services” to the “Education” section of the County’s Operating and Capital budgets, or allowed us the opportunity to win the Howard County Chamber of Commerce “Educator of the Year” award.

Neither is it coincidental that HCLS has been allocated generous funding in good economic times and has received relatively minor cuts in more challenging times.

Rather, these, and the following successes that transpired over the past decade, are the direct result of what we do, how we do it, and how we talk about what we do: the application of carefully selected words that enhance our perceived value. For recognizing that we are education, and for the operating and capital funding allocated to us, we express our profound gratitude to our tremendously supportive elected officials.

Here are some recent statistics for HCLS. Between 2002 and 2012:

- Items borrowed *doubled* (3.6 million to 7.1 million)
- Physical visits *tripled* (934,000 to 3 million)
- Classes and events attendance *tripled* (73,190 to 250,000)
- Research assistance interactions *doubled* (759,650 to 1.8 million)
- Operating budget funding from the County nearly *doubled* (\$8.8 million to \$17 million)
- Friends of HCLS experienced a *500 percent budget increase* (\$15,000 to \$100,000)
- Capital budget: *142,000 additional square feet* of building space in our Master Plan (up from zero), with the first project—a new \$28 million, 63,000 sq. ft. branch—opened in December 2011

This book illustrates that by choosing smart, self-explanatory vocabulary that people understand and value, we have the power to transform our image, positioning ourselves as indispensable.

Without changing anything we do, we can be viewed precisely for what we are: *education*—a timeless, economic imperative that merits immense respect and maximized funding.

NOTES

1. *Modern Family*, “Unplugged,” season 2, episode 5 (ABC), October 20, 2010.
2. Located in central Maryland’s Baltimore–Washington metropolitan area, Howard County Library System’s six branches deliver high-quality public education to a culturally and socioeconomically diverse population of 282,000 residents.
3. *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* (NBC). May 11, 2010.
4. *American Libraries*, June/July 2008, p. 26.
5. Derek Kravitz, “Fiscal Outlook Grim for 2 Fairfax Agencies,” *Washington Post*, November 15, 2009, [washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/11/14/AR2009111402355.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/11/14/AR2009111402355.html).
6. *American Libraries*, April 2010, p. 24.
7. Norman Oder, “Federal Library Funding Frozen, as Expected, in President’s Budget,” *Library Journal*, February 1, 2010, <http://www.libraryjournal.com/article/CA6717179.html>.
8. Remarks by the President in State of Union Address. January 25, 2011. The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, Washington, DC. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/01/25/remarks-president-state-union-address>.
9. The President’s Budget for Fiscal Year 2012, Office of Management and Budget. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget>.
10. Michael Kelley, “Obama Proposes \$20.3 Million Reduction in Library Funding,” February 14, 2011, http://www.libraryjournal.com/lj/home/889254-264/obama_proposes_20.3_million_reduction.csp.
11. FY 2011 Continuing Resolution for the FY 2011 budget. Amendment #35, would eliminate all funding for the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), including Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) funding.
12. Urban Libraries Council Webinar: “The Power of Strategic Language in Education” (February 24, 2010).
13. Public Library Association Webinar: “Transforming Our Image: No Explanation Needed,” November 15, 2010 (Chicago: American Library Association, November 15, 2010), repeated on May 18, 2011 with an added “Implementing the Vision” segment.
14. New Hampshire Library Association Fall Conference Webinar: “Transforming Our Image—Part I: Building Our Brand: The Education Advantage; Part II: Implementing the Vision” (November 4, 2011).
15. Valerie J. Gross, “Transforming Our Image through Words that Work: Perception is Everything,” *Public Libraries* 48, no. 5 (September/October 2009), pp. 24–32.