BUYING QUARTER INCH HOLES: PUBLIC SUPPORT THROUGH RESULTS

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ABSTRACT: Archivists must learn, specifically and accurately, who uses their holdings; a few individuals and institutions are now examining this question. Archivists must also learn what users produce with their research and how these products affect our personal and public lives. Four methods for ascertaining this information are suggested. Finally, armed with information about clients and results, archivists can reach new user constituencies, affect the general public's perception of the archives, and influence those who underwrite and support archival activity. The writer provides suggestions for undertaking this outreach.

Theodore Leavitt, a widely published and quoted professor of marketing at the Harvard Business School, reflects in his book, *The Marketing Imagination*, on why people buy. It is not things they buy, Leavitt says, but solutions. Or, as the storekeeper put it when he explained why people buy quarter inch drill bits, "They don't buy quarter inch bits. They buy quarter inch holes."[1] That premise informs this essay: people do not buy possibilities; they buy results. They do not want to know what an archives contains, or what archivists do. They want solutions to problems. They want quarter inch holes, not quarter inch bits.

As the Society of American Archivists Task Force on Archives and Society (TFAS) develops the techniques and literature we need to turn our faces outward toward the public, we must confront certain professional issues we have traditionally avoided. First, we must establish the technical and educational standards which any group calling itself a profession must have, and state these standards publicly. Is there anyone, for example, who does not know that doctors train rigorously, or that law schools are presided over by persons of character and intellect, like John Houseman? Second, we must let the public know, in language that *it* uses, that our work requires expertise and judgment. Do we not all know that architects build for the future and that engineers train in the mysteries of physics and the higher calculus? Third, we must join the information age, cheerfully, willingly, and vigorously, lest we find our information replaced by less reliable information, and our staffs replaced by clerks and technicians. Finally, we must learn to view good publicity and informed public relations as life necessities, not as expendable functions. Specifically, we

must treat public programming, which we have had enormous difficulty confronting as a professional issue, as a necessary part of archives administration. Public programs should not come at the end of the administrative process, though we often mistakenly put them there, and they most certainly should not be thought of last. For public relations and public programming to permeate all of our archival work, we must acquire new skills and change old attitudes. Developing an appropriate mind-set requires us to consider the outcomes of archival research, that is, its products, and to exploit these products to encourage increased usership and public support.

In the present literary flurry over management techniques, we hear a good deal about process- versus product-oriented businesses. We learn that the larger an organization is, the more likely it is to focus on how a job is done, rather than on what is produced. We learn that the most successful businesses show, among other characteristics, bias toward action, not technique; remain close to their customers; and emphasize autonomy and entrepreneurship. Archival management, as a field, does not share these characteristics. We concentrate, for example, on perfecting standards for guides, not on producing a publication that researchers will read. We pay little attention to who our users are, how they operate, and what they create. We stress uniformity over individual productivity, and we regard the entrepreneurial attitude—"I have more researchers writing popular articles and producing films than you have"—as beneath us. These are dangerous attitudes in a competitive information world, but they can be changed.

The nature of our work makes publicizing outcomes difficult. While the results of archival research often contribute to significant events or products, they do not comprise them. Research in primary sources may be used in writing an influential book, but it is the book that is palpable and visible, not the research. A historic building may be saved from the wrecker's ball through research in the records , but the building enriches us, not the research behind it. These examples illustrate the point that we are at a disadvantage when compared to other professionals. The librarian does not need to tell a nation of self-helpers the value of a book. At the simplest level, who has not used Fanny Farmer, or Drs. Reuben or Spock, or Nathan Pritken or Jane Fonda, or Amy Vanderbilt or Miss Manners? In the same fashion, the doctor does not need to tell the patient the value of medicine, nor the lawyer, of the law. And though one is unlikely to live through appendicitis without a doctor or to win a lawsuit without a lawyer, one can write a history, restore a bridge, or make a film without an archivist. Our services enhance and improve a product, but are not always essential to it. If this were not so, why our outrage at the historian who writes the book without our help, the planning commission that plans the neighborhood without us, or the environmentalist who writes the impact statement without our services?

The connection between archival research and results often appears unclear. Therefore publicizing the tie requires imagination, persistence, and a clear understanding not only of who our users are but what our relationship to them is. Our persistent, stated view that scholars are our principal users, when mounting evidence — as well as our own observations — tells us that this is not so does us damage. So do the attitudes that archivists are and should remain detached conduits for information rather than active disseminators of it, and

that archival administration concerns the management of objects called records, not information linking past events to present circumstances. The first of these views, that scholars are our principal users, in importance if not in numbers, harms us most. Our isolation from our own administrators and other professional colleagues — our budget analysts, public relations officers, museum educators — and from organizations in our communities such as schools, businesses and churches, which have many of the same interests we do, does us damage as individual professionals.

Fortunately, there are increasing efforts to find out who our users are and how they approach records. Of these, three should be noted. The first study, done by Edward Oetting between 1981 and 1983, examined three groups: college and university archives in New York State listed in the NHPRC directory, all university archives in member libraries of the Association of Research Libraries, and members of the SAA Section of Reference, Access, and Outreach. Oetting asked archivists in each of these groups to list their users by type and to rank them in order of frequency of use.[2] His survey relies on a traditional approach, which defined users by their occupation or status, not by what they produce. In the first two groups surveyed, undergraduates and administrators led all the rest as users. In the New York survey, scholars and the ubiquitous "other" vied for the bottom rung on the use ladder. In the ARL survey, "other" won the bottom spot, only slightly preceded by scholars. Combined, the two surveys gave top use to administrators, but in listing the objectives of their archives, both groups of archivists cited "service as a repository for scholarly research" as their highest objective. Such a statistically significant gap, Oetting felt, raised questions about the priorities of university archivists. Not to mention, one must add, our grasp of reality, and the relation between the direction in which one runs and the location of the goalposts.

If we look at usership in terms of products, using researchers' own descriptions of what they produce, rather than categories of users (genealogist, historian) we get another picture. Arthur Breton, Archives of American Art, conducted an informal survey of 441 users of that very specialized collection of the records of American artists and art institutions.[3] Breton found that when asked to define the purpose of their research, that is, to identify a product or an outcome, most of the users indicated that they were working on publications ranging from course papers and dissertations on the one hand, to articles for local newspapers on the other. Of the remaining group, one third were engaged in such activities as producing a film, writing a catalog, developing an exhibit or documenting institutional holdings. But an astonishing 27% of this group were doing research for entirely personal reasons, including tracing family members in the art community, documenting personal art holdings, or simply satisfying their curiosity. Intellectual curiosity, that precious ingredient of learning, linked these non-academic, non-professional users with their academic and professional peers.

Finally, Paul Conway, Gerald Ford Library, has recently produced an excellent study of the users of the Presidential Library system which suggests that the fields of inquiry at the Libraries, if not the backgrounds of the clients, are broader than had been supposed.[4] Though the most striking of his conclusions deal with users and the reference process, he also produces new information about usership. Formerly thought to be bastions of traditional research

in political science and political history, the Library system does in fact boast 51% usership in these categories. But 49% of its users are working on projects relating to social history, economics, law, and other disciplines, some in academic fields, others in applied fields. Most significantly, Conway's study excluded users of audiovisual holdings, which undoubtedly would have skewed the results heavily toward the sector of public consumption.

These three studies, deriving from three very different sources, tell us a good deal about the real use of archives. First, they tell us that while we talk to each other about our service to scholarship, a few of potentially many users, whose only connection to that world is intellectual curiosity, have found us, without our help or encouragement. Second, they tell us that with help, this usership could be increased and our materials used in ways that are profitable to the general public and to us. Third, they tell us that the products of archival research can be identified, even seen, heard, held, touched. They include, but are clearly not limited to, a range of products that are practical, publicly oriented, accessible to large numbers of people, and significant in an open society. Let us consider some of these.[5]

We each know instances in which records have been used to create an art form: a play, a novel, a documentary or fictional film. We can each cite an instance where records have been used to establish a claim to inheritance, to trace the use or ownership of land, to restore or protect old buildings, to locate old transportation routes and develop new ones, to provide individuals a link to the past via their nationality or cultural background, to plan a rally or promote a cause or get an initiative on the ballot, to reinforce evidence in a court case, to develop strategy for an environmental issue. These products have an impact, because they touch us in daily ways. They inform us with a better understanding of our own work, and they can generate better understanding of our own work, and they can generate better understanding of archives and archivists. They are potentially usable as we seek support either from specific or general publics. They are the quarter inch holes of archival consumption.

To become successful purveyors of solutions, we first must find out, specifically and accurately, who uses our holdings. Second, we must begin learning what users produce with their research, and how those products affect our personal and public lives. One could consider four methods for ascertaining products. The first is the reference intake interview, in which we not only work with the user on specific reference questions, but also seek to know what he or she expects to result from this research, what its impact is likely to be, and how one can stay in touch to see what actually results. The questionnaire is a second device. The one produced by Paul Conway, for example, is a multipurpose tool, which asks users not only what they hope to produce from their research, but also how they learned about Presidential Library holdings, how they approached their research, and how finding aids and reference practices helped or failed to help them. The third method is the exit interview, which focuses on what the researcher has learned by using the records, and what he or she hopes to produce in light of new information. The exit interview differs from the intake interview by concentrating on changes in anticipated results which develop each time a new question is asked of the records. This is particularly the case in practical, publicly oriented projects where the question is often, Did or did it not happen? Will it work this way? or Is it there in the first

place? Finally, there is the direct callback, in which the archivist chooses a sample of intake interviewees and tracks them to determine the results of their research: for example, Was the deed found and the township annexed? Was the building destroyed or saved? Has the film been produced or the play opened?

These are only four devices at the institutional level; others will suggest themselves. This process, in marketing called "customer input," tells us a great deal about our institution's level of service and usefulness, and provides us with ammunition for local support. Collected nationally, such illustrations can be used in a variety of media to improve the public sense of what archival institutions are and what archivists do.

Once we grasp this concept and then learn about the products of research, how can we use the information to generate support? At the local level — your office and mine — the first step is to identify the publics or constituencies we want to reach. The second step is to find out how best to reach them. For example, if the constituency we seek is the public body that funds or otherwise supports us, illustrations of use that are publicly oriented, enhance public perception of the way the government operates and show how public resources have been efficiently saved or used are the most likely to succeed. One correspondent to the Task Force on Archives and Society put it succinctly: "ego, turf and votes." How this information is conveyed is often as important as what is conveyed. While it is possible to bury it in an annual report, it is wiser to observe the rule that peers influence peers and search out another public official willing to talk to your target audience about results. The same TFAS correspondent describes an incident in which the name of a western joint-city airport was changed without the permission of one of the cities. The mayor was outraged (ego, turf) and set the archives staff to searching for the original agreement. It was the city attorney, long a user of the archives, not the archivist, who told the mayor that the archives welcomed such searches because only thus could they persuade the city to improve the archives. Archivists should also persuade their peers to work for them by carrying success stories to the mayor, the comptroller, and those minor but powerful figures who control budget. Let users be our emissaries, as another TFAS correspondent put it.

Armed with good examples of publicly oriented research projects that have yielded results, archivists can approach architects, lawyers, businessmen, preservationists, planners, and others either individually or through their organizations. Archivists should make use of each group's printed media or their other accepted routes of information, to point out value and offer service. Targeting here is essential. We must know what groups or individuals we want to approach and by what means they are best likely to learn. Robert Wheeler, in his excellent leaflet, *Effective Public Relations: Communicating our Image*, talks about this rifle approach, in which a specific group is targeted for a purpose — fundraising, donations, other support — then reached in person through direct appeals, service, or by whatever means is most likely to affect them directly.[6] General appeals to cultural and humanitarian values, those entreaties that ring of You Ought, may have effect in certain instances, but they are less effective than the presentation of evidence that archivists can produce results.

General public relations activities which do not seek a specific market or

target are not within the scope of this article, but it is worth noting that our efforts to reach out must go beyond those people who will actually use records to include those who are aficionados of history. If we seek support only from the research segment of the public, we cannot build a sufficient base to be sure of survival in difficult times, i.e., times that are either penurious, anti-historical, or anti-intellectual, nor even, to be sure, in good times. Our "public" comprises not only the researcher who walks in the door but the passer-by at the exhibit who will never do research, and the family that stays at home because exhibits are too solitary, museums and archives too daunting, and history too remote, except, of course, when one discusses one's own ancestry or grandfather's first car. How much of the resources of any given institution is allocated to each of these publics is decided by the institution, but attention must be paid to all of them. It is not necessary to have gone deep sea diving to know that "good things" come from it and to support research in it. Without having been to Baffin Island, one can have seen art that is produced there, and can urge the local museum to buy it. One can know in what ways coal mining should change without having been in a coal mine and can vote for legislators who make those changes. To forget that we are seen by everyone is to risk being seen by no one.

As a step toward facing the public, every archivist could do at least three things. First, read one or more of the excellent technical leaflets published by the American Association for State and Local History on reaching the public, such as Robert Wheeler's *Effective Public Relations.*[7] Alternately, read G. Donald Adams, *Museum Public Relations*, also published by the AASLH.[8] The topics are practical and of use to archivists: evaluating public relations, working with the press, establishing speakers' bureaus, developing slide shows, and using local television and radio.

Second, devote staff time to analysis of the face your institution presents to the public, and to how your institution is perceived. Among the questions to be considered as a staff are: What sort of user feedback do we get? How do we go about getting it? Are there patterns in this feedback? What needs to be changed? What can we strengthen? If yours is a historical society or library, staff sessions should not be limited to archivists; publicity and public relations are an institutional effort, and those who are concerned with it should represent a cross-section of institutional functions. Products and how to discover them may well be one focus of these sessions. The effect of such meetings can be regenerating for the staff.

Third, have lunch with your public relations officer, the institution's editor, the development officer, or any other staff person whose job it is to represent your institution to the public. Tell that person about archival research projects done or in the making — projects that link the past to the present in human terms. Think about what touches people: World War II experiences, life in the depression, ethnicity in the community, neighborhoods and the buildings and people in them. Ask your colleague about TV interviews or speakers bureaus, offer to help, or, at least, to be a conduit for information. Your media professional or development person knows the channels; you can supply information. Institutional activities have great public appeal too, provided they are news: discoveries in old attics or exhibit openings. Service programs available to the public, such as school projects, programs for the elderly, or workshops on preserving family papers at home, can strike a spark in the news professional as can a controversial speakers' series or a large or significant gift of records.

Well thought out public programs, vital to any public relations or educational enterprise, are best oriented around the results of research. The National Archives, a conservative organization in terms of outreach, runs two series of lunchtime talks, aimed at recipients of its *Calendar of Events*, office workers, passersby, and researchers in the building. The first series, Lunchtime Lectures, is based on research in progress, on work completed from primary sources, and on interpretation of sources. Topics have included a film on the Brooklyn Bridge, produced from photo collections at the National Archives and elsewhere; the evolution of a six-woman play based on Federal Writers Project Records; several talks on World War II research; and a series of reminiscences by women close to Eleanor Roosevelt, one of whom had just published her letters. The second series, Lunch with an Archivist, features members of the staff discussing their own research, their personal collections, or their travels. This series has included one archivist displaying his personal poster collection; a talk by a former journalist, now Archives manager, on his dissertation in progress called "The News from Harper's Ferry," a study of how the media treated John Brown's raid; and a talk-cum-reading of love letters from the 18th and 19th centuries, presented by an exhibition specialist preparing an article. None of these are academically oriented lectures, though they might be. They are aimed at a specific audience: the historically minded person who probably does not use the Archives but might, and who is available during the day. The atmosphere is informal, though the programs are carefully structured, and are intended to show that both the records and the staff are accessible. The Archives has also offered to the general public a performing arts series based on the preservation of traditional American folk culture, a film series, and a series on historic Washington buildings, many of them preserved with the aid of research in the records. In planning these programs, at least three imperatives must be kept in mind.

First, have in mind a particular segment of the public as you plan your program. This can be other researchers, certain age or ethnic groups, visitors to the museum who do not do research but who are demonstrably interested in history, or specific interest groups such as businessmen, the arts community, or preservationists. Second, how you visualize or learn about these publics will govern the content and format of the programs you provide for them. Some will be reached by service programs, such as workshops on preserving family documents, or because they are volunteers or part-time archivists. Some will be reached by performances based on sources, including folk culture hobbyists, children's groups, and other members of the arts community. Others will be interested in programs that help them reconstruct their own past; among this group are senior citizens or retirees who respond to sessions of reminiscences, publicly staged oral interviews, or panel sessions that invite anecdote from the audience. Third, choose a promotional vehicle that is familiar to the audience you are trying to reach. People won't come if they don't hear about it. Some groups respond to direct mail; others have their own newsletters or dissemination networks; still others respond to word of mouth. The archivist-cum-public programmer must find the most efficient of these for any given public.

Service programs are often the most effective category of public programming. Sometimes planned, often spontaneous, these activities demonstrate that the archivist and the archival institution can respond to public need. They include programs designed, for example, to maintain regular contact with

schools and community organizations of all kinds, not just those concerned with history. All groups have records to maintain and welcome advice on the subject. Service programs can include links with other institutions that regularly do historical programs or provide educational offerings in which records can be used. These may be short or long courses given by archivists or other specialists in genealogy, preservation, or research methods; or they may be programs taken to shut-ins, children's homes, or the elderly. In each instance, the initiative must come from the archivist; often the act of offering itself enhances the person and the institution.

The existence of the Task Force on Archives and Society has brought to light examples of fascinating service programs devised by archivists. A regional center in Washington State helped found a Chinese historical society. An Illinois archives sponsors an extensive adult education program. A Texas repository produces a radio call-in show on history. Another repository writes a monthly column for a local AFL-CIO newspaper, which has helped the archives gain the sympathy of the labor community in acquiring collections and increasing use.

A professional colleague says that the will and the talent to do public outreach is instinctive. In part he is right but it also takes aggressiveness, self-confidence, and the willingness to fail occasionally. The will to reach out to the public is anti-passive, anti-elite. It is also regenerating. Talk to the audience after a good workshop or lecture, or after a zoning hearing, court case, or preservation hearing in which the holdings of your archives were used, and you will cease to worry about image, professionalism, or position in the community. Demonstrating how the use of records saves money, increases efficiency, promotes good causes, or gives pleasure constitutes public service well beyond the traditional and necessary-but-passive activity of reference service, and it is essential if we are to expect public understanding or support. While it may create some distress — we will have to see ourselves as others see us — it will also have rewards, among the best of which will be to say, when asked what we do, not that archivists acquire, describe, and make available records but that we help you find, restore, save, build. As a man said, we sell quarter inch holes.

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FOOTNOTES

1. Theodore Leavitt, *The Marketing Imagination* (New York: Free Press, 1984).
2. Edward Oetting, "User Demographics: What's the Use?" (unpublished paper, Mid-Atlantic Regional Archives Conference, Spring 1983 meeting, New Brunswick, N.J.).
3. Arthur Breton, Curator of Manuscripts, Archives of American Art, compiled these figures from user statistics between January 1980 and November 1982. They are available from him at AAA, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. 20560.
4. Paul Conway, "Research in Presidential Libraries: A User Study," (unpublished report done under the auspices of the Gerald R. Ford Library, November 1984.)
5. See *Toward a Usable Past: Historical Records in the Empire State* (Albany, N.Y.: State Historical Records Advisory Board, January 1984). Pages 19 - 24 of this excellent report list practical uses of records which suggest products. See also the unpublished TFAS report, "SAA Task Force on Archives and Society 'Action Track' " presented to the SAA Council, summer 1984.
6. Nashville: American Association for State and Local History. Technical Leaflet 3, 1970, 8 pp.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1983.