

USING A PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT MODEL TO CREATE NEW EMBASSY PUBLIC AFFAIRS SERVICES FOR BUSINESS

By Nancy Rajczak

Public Diplomacy

For the past 50 years, the United States Information Service (USIS) has "been telling America's story to the world". As the public affairs section of American embassies and consulates, USIS is responsible for public diplomacy, which means communication between people as opposed to governments. Public affairs tools include media placement, cultural programs, professional and academic exchanges, publications and information services or libraries. Open libraries have often been the most tangible expression of American public diplomacy. In Germany, a network of America Houses was established in the late 1940s, under the auspices of the United States Information Service. Small reading rooms, which later blossomed into lending libraries modeled on American public libraries, were the core of cultural centers which helped to fill the void created by the devastation of World War II.

The traditional American public library is however no longer the model for USIS centers in Germany and around the world. Information technologies and the knowledge that ideas, products and activities can be delivered in digital form are fundamentally transforming the way governments, corporations, educators, media organizations and individuals live, work, govern and communicate. Reflecting these changes, libraries are no longer repositories of materials but rather access points to information sources, more and more often in electronic formats. The information revolution, combined with political and economic changes, challenged USIS libraries to reinvent their services to match the new world of the 1990s.

Business Information Centers

It was in this context that USIS libraries in Germany embarked upon a process of re-defining and reengineering traditional services. Business Information Centers were established in all Amerika Haus USIS centers in 1994. The transformation to information resource centers was part of the U.S. government's reinvention

program which encouraged government agencies to work together more efficiently and to integrate electronic information processes into standard work routines. In a new partnership with embassy and consulate offices of the Department of State and the Department of Commerce, the United States Information Service was charged with the task of developing a range of new business information services.

Product Development

The first Business Information Center in Germany was officially inaugurated in January 1994 in Frankfurt. The time period allocated for this fairly radical transformation of the library, symbolic of the major changes that were taking place in government and society, was very short. We decided to approach the project from a market research point of view. Using a product development model, "information products" were created to represent the services and resources of the new Business Information Center, which would provide both walk-in research facilities and remote access reference and alert services.

Our first step was to define our customer base. Our new consular and embassy partners in the reinvention process were high on the list. We would provide these offices with updates on U.S. and European business issues and policies, as background for their activities at trade fairs, in government negotiations and in their regular dealings with business contacts. Another new customer area was the multinational business community, as represented by international and local chambers of commerce, economic development agencies, international banks and professional organizations. We discovered that local government officials and journalists, traditional USIS customers, also had an interest in policy information from a business and trade perspective. One of our biggest worries was how to deal with more general business audiences - private investors, exporters, job and internship seekers - who would understandably be attracted by new business resources and services.

Our next step was to define possible products for these targeted audiences - products that were realistic in terms of our short-term startup skills and resources. The products were to be fee-based, an element that we felt was necessary both to control demand and to partially recover costs. We analyzed standard guides to business literature and found that much of the information categorized under general business conditions - political and regulatory issues, economic indicators, social and demographic trends, regional surveys and background on media and professional organizations - was already available in traditional USIS libraries in print, CD-ROM and online sources.

Our first product idea was a ***Regulatory/Legislative Profile***, a demand-driven document-delivery service for the texts of federal legislation and regulations. We also had ample information resources for two other products - ***Regional and Industry Profiles***. Drawing upon in-house collections of print government documents, subscriptions to government databases and an increasing number of websites, we had access to extensive background and statistical materials that provided information on demographics, regional economic indicators, trade statistics, international market research, export control regulations and advice to small business. We also had good background information on trade associations and publications, lobbying and special interest groups, and research organizations.

In the areas of company and product information, we devised ***Company Lists***, a two-tiered, fee-based system to identify companies in specified branches. This was also a demand-driven service. At the first level of service, basic print and CD-ROM sources were accessed for a standard fee per page and per industry sector. At the second level of service, commercial business databases were accessed to provide customized industry lists on a cost recovery basis.

Company Profiles were also devised on a similar two-tier system, depending on the source.

Document delivery services for journal literature were also instituted.

With these ideas for a palette of services, we evaluated available information resources and identified new resources for acquisition, both print and electronic. We started subscriptions to a number of UMI ProQuest CD-ROM databases which provided full image text access to over 1,000 journals and to the full ASCII text of the Wall Street Journal and the New York Times. These and other CD-ROM databases were available for public independent usage.

Additional funding was provided to cover some of these new resources; however, priorities were shifted in our normal acquisitions budget to cover the costs of collection development in the area of business and economic policy. Staff access was also extended to additional commercial online services (now including Dialog, Legislate, Lexis and the Dow Jones News Retrieval Service in addition to various subscription-based Internet databases). Through online databases, we could provide current information as required or "just in time", instead of "just in case" second guessing what we might need by purchasing expensive print resources that were not used on a regular basis. The concept of set format, demand-driven information products was also more compatible with electronic information sources. The emphasis on online databases and „information products“ reinforced the concept of fee-based services in USIS libraries. The fact

that people were willing to pay for government services was a concrete indication of their usefulness. In this new virtual environment, one of the most important management issues was training.

Staff members received additional DIALOG training in business searching. Regional workshops were held with information consultants Marydee Ojala and Barbie Keiser on issues ranging from basic business reference to analyzing information processes.

The next stage of our product development process was marketing. The products that we had devised were meant to communicate and define our goals to our customers - telling them what we could do and what our resources included. Brochures describing these new services were designed and distributed to the audiences that we had identified earlier. The new Business Information Center also started actively programming business speakers and working with groups such as the American Chamber of Commerce in Germany, U.S. and German economic development agencies and professional organizations. The programs were designed to focus on the public affairs and policy issues which were the basis of the new Business Information Center. The programs created a framework for dialogue which helped us to continue the process of developing services and resources in areas where the needs and interests of the business community were the greatest.

Evaluation

This product development process was not a theoretical exercise. We were planning and learning while we were doing. It was a difficult process and a great deal of personal initiative was required. The idealists among us were rewarded by what could be interpreted as increased prestige and respect, but also by a lot of extra work. In terms of public acceptance, the Business Information Center was an immediate success. The American Dream seemed to have arrived in Germany via the Business Information Centers. We received deluges of requests from entrepreneurs with ideas for doing business in the United States. Our "success" was however turning out to work against us. Our goal was not to provide inexpensive consulting services but to provide background on public affairs issues relating to trade and economic policy. We were spending too much time reacting to questions that were not relevant to our main goals.

In 1994, we started the first Business Information Center in Frankfurt. In 1997, we were ready to make some major changes. We had been successful in transforming our traditional libraries to electronic information resource centers. The transition however was not complete. In our initial product development

phase, we had focused too much on demand-driven services. A more proactive concept of knowledge management became the guiding principle in a second generation product development phase. Business Information Centers had been our vehicles onto the information superhighway, taking us away from circulating collections and traditional libraries to electronic sources and information resource centers. We had however been too successful. We could not supply the demand for some of the products that we had created. Rather than trying to provide customized answers to all requests received, we decided that we would start to focus on developing information solutions; to anticipate questions with source and referral guides on issues relating to government policy, entrepreneurial opportunities and management. We would not necessarily be able to provide access to all of the sources listed in the guides but we would be able to enable serious users to satisfy their own research needs by providing them with a map of the places, both virtual and physical, to go for further information. Edward Stear¹ of the Gartner Group, a leading provider of information technology advisory and market research services, advises information resource managers to think heretically about priorities and external expectations. He asks, "Is a focus on providing incredible service in an Information Resource Center's best interests? Does this attitude guarantee a future role for the IRC or does it actually work against the IRC's participation in an organization's strategic planning?" Successful heretical thinking is a continual development process which constantly challenges the implied beliefs and goals of the information resource center.

Knowledge Management

Stear's starter kit to heretical thinking lays the framework for a concept of knowledge management in information services. Knowledge management looks at matters such as access to knowledge; technologies used to house and transfer knowledge; the use of networks and teams to transfer knowledge; and the organization's ability to gather information as a value-added activity. Several converging phenomena have made knowledge management move to the forefront of business thinking over the last couple of years. These include the growth of information in digital forms; the implementation of uniform interface networks; and, the need to do more with less (in our case, less staff and less acquisitions resources

A combination of the above factors made us start thinking about the next step in the development of our business information services and policies. In rethinking our priorities, it became more important to learn how to say no, and less important

¹ Stear, Edward B. "Success Through Heretical Thinking." *Online*, v. 21, #2, Mar/Apr 1997, p.64-66

to provide complete answers to every question. At the same time, we decided to focus more exclusively on the public affairs issues that define international trade and business relationships, questions that were more in alignment with our goals in the public affairs framework of embassies and consulates. In our initial information analysis, we had identified policy and government information as one of our strong points. We decided to accentuate this emphasis with a new information product. *Dossiers* provide brief explanations of major public affairs and policy issues - negotiations on international certification standards, bilateral trade agreements, the global information infrastructure, electronic commerce, job creation and regional economic development. They include excerpts from U.S. and European government policy statements, identify important government, research and private sector reports, and provide links to Internet sites and other sources of information. As a second generation product and marketing tool, *Dossiers* convey a more accurate image of our goals, resources and services than our first-generation, demand-driven products.

Our information management skills enabled us to get our Business Information Centers up and running within a very short startup period. Marydee Ojala¹ defined the skills that librarians will need to become the linchpins, or the knowledge managers, of the new information economy.

Information management core competencies included the understanding of information sources and the ability to access them, to deliver information in a variety of forms, to evaluate the quality of information sources and retrieve answers, to organize information and to anticipate information needs. These skills are not far removed from the traditional skills of a good reference librarian and this is basically what USIS librarians brought to the table in the addition of business information to embassy public affairs services. Ojala² however also outlined essential organizational core competencies - understanding the strategic goals of the work environment, developing expertise in managing teams, honing effective communication skills, marketing and selling products, providing vision, and consulting and solving problems. These are the skills required for the second generation development of embassy information services. Interpretation of answers, working as a team to define the question, technical advising in terms of software and hardware become important components of our new job descriptions as information resource or knowledge managers. Government offices both in the United States and in Europe are transforming their public information services via

² Ojala, Marydee. "Core Competencies for Special Library Managers of the Future." *Special Libraries*, v. 84, Fall 1993, p. 230-234.

the Internet. Librarians and information resource center managers can bring a unique perspective to electronic public information services. This requires however a transformation from a demand-driven service concept to a knowledge management usage of information resources. In Germany, the process of transformation was begun three years ago with the establishment of Business Information Centers. The staff took on the challenge by coming up with their own model for the development of these new services. The same product development model can be used to develop a new generation of information services that will continue to re-define the nature of public diplomacy tools.

Bibliography

Campbell, Corinne A. „Product Service Strategies for Information Services.“ *American Society for Information*, v.22, #4, Apr/May 1996, p. 15-17.

Cummings, Karen. „FYI Means Business in LA County.“ *Computers in Libraries*, v. 15, Oct, 1995, p. 20-1.

Fisher, Brenda J. „Showcase Germany Program Aims to Revitalize Commercial Ties.“ *Business America*, March 1994, p.31-32.

Keiser, Barbie. *Marketing Library Services: A Nuts-and-Bolts Approach*. The Hague, Netherlands, International Federation for Information and Documentation, 1995. (FID Occasional Paper #9)

„Knowledge Management: A Basic Q & A.“ Knowledge Management Quarterly Supplement, v.1, #1. (Supplement to *The Information Advisor*, FIND/SVP)

A New Diplomacy for the Information Age. Washington, DC. United States Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy, November 1996. Available: <http://www.usia.gov/abtusia/ac/96rept.htm>

Ninkovich, Frank. „U.S. Information Policy and Cultural Diplomacy.“ *Headline Series*, #308, Fall 1994. New York, Foreign Policy Association, 1996.

Penniman, W. David. „Strategic Positioning of Information Services in a Competitive Environment.“ *American Society for Information Science*, v. 23, #4, Apr/May 1997, p. 11-14.

Nancy Rajczak
Information Resource Director
USIS Frankfurt
Phone 49 (69) 971-44830
Fax 49 (69) 174962
Internet: ncrfran@usia.gov