

## Southwest System Member Librarians Are Seriously Considering the Future

by Emily Sitz, Director, Southwest Kansas Library System

The Southwest Kansas Library System (SWKLS) staff and member librarians came together to talk about the future of our System libraries just last week. To initiate a strategic planning process, system staff and member librarians discussed several questions. The first was, “What is the purpose of the library in the 21st century?”

Our thoughts focused upon access to information, service to the community, and the library as community—as both a physical and a virtual “place.” We recognized these as foundation concepts, upon which a library of any type or environment can be set. The challenge is to fulfill those ideals by being relevant to today’s clients.

Our discussion of purpose was peppered with comments on:

- the need for excellent, responsive, and personalized customer service and for value-added services;
- the need to meet changing customer needs; and
- the importance of evaluating these services from the perspective of the library in the life of the user, not the user in the life of the library.

We also acknowledged our position as a trusted institution with trusted resources. The public’s perception of trust in, and even a nostalgic fondness for, the library has been a benefit for libraries. However, according to OCLC’s 2005 report, *Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources* ([www.oclc.org/reports/2005perceptions.htm](http://www.oclc.org/reports/2005perceptions.htm)), this trust is equated with books. The report concludes that books are widely recognized as the library “brand,”—a brand which is familiar, trusted, and considered to be of quality.

Are we strengthening the book brand when we focus on web-accessible library catalogs and patron-driven borrowing of materials? Or are we strengthening our position as an information provider by providing access to “our” information, and ideally our unique local resources, within the larger pool of Internet resources through federated searching? We are striving for the latter. And, of course, our collections truly do extend beyond our walls—and our books.

Yet, only 50% of the respondents surveyed for the OCLC report associated the library with information, rather than just “books.” How concerned do we need to be about this issue? The survey did have some limitations. It was a lengthy online survey completed by a relatively small sampling of people who were predisposed to access information in an electronic environment.

Nonetheless, the findings offer a sobering insight.

Those of you who heard Alan November (<http://www.novemberlearning.com>) speak at Tri-Conference will recall his comments on the shift from the printing press to the Internet, from reading to publishing. As technology advances, libraries and librarians must keep pace, creating useful information for our profession and for our customers. We must position ourselves to be the most proficient users, creators, evaluators, teachers, and providers in this information-saturated era. Futurist Thomas Frey (<http://www.davinciinstitute.com/speakers.php>) believes that increasingly more complex search engines will offer opportunities for a reinvigorated role for librarians as information gurus.

The last question posed during our planning meeting was “What can the Southwest Regional Library System do to ensure the success of our member libraries?”

Our librarians see ongoing consulting and convenient training programs as important methods through which the System can assist each member library in defining, refining and fulfilling its purpose in the community. Providing training, however, is relatively easy when compared with the tasks of evaluating resources and making tough decisions about meeting the needs of the baby-boomer generation while planning for those of the born-digital generation.

SWKLS librarians want to be a part of the future. They want their institutions to have a vital, growing role within their communities. The future of our system libraries does not depend only on how well the System anticipates change. It also depends on how we measure success.