

Editorial: Our Professional Image

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Those of us in the library world are too concerned about our image, and too obsessed with what others think. Like a constantly-repeated mantra, the question of librarian professional image resurfaces in library journals again and again. It is an obsession. We won't let the subject die. The June/July 2007 issue of *American Libraries*, for instance, featured a Will Manley piece that detailed the persistence of the traditional stereotypes – the introverted cleric, the conservative spinster. Elsewhere in the issue, the editors included an opinion section on “How the world sees us,” cataloging an assortment of comments about librarians and libraries, some positive, some very much less so. On a speciously favorable note, an action toy and gift purveyor, Archie McPhee, quipped that, “nowadays you're as likely to see your local librarian driving a Harley as a Honda Accord.” I seriously doubt whether librarians are really as likely to drive a Harley as something else, but that isn't the issue. One has to ask: what difference does it make anyway? Who is keeping track?

Librarians are keeping track. Manley's comments and the editor's notes betray an unhealthy preoccupation – one that is rampant among librarians. We have a fascination about how we are perceived. We have an unwholesome curiosity about our image. We are the anorexic fixated on weight; the politician obsessed with voter polls; the coach worried about sportswriters and their take on the team. Our mania reflects insecurity – a neurotic preoccupation with what others think about us.

How should we overcome or escape this malaise, or at the very least, restore our sense of balance about the question? I have a suggestion. We should take our cue from other professionals. Many of our colleagues in other fields have disconcerting labels applied to their professions, and work in an environment where perceptions are anything but flattering. The difference between them and us, however, is that most of these other professionals recognize that such perceptions go with the territory. Such public stereotyping is part of the job. They take the image in stride.

Let me give you some examples. A North Carolina senior judge recently disbarred and suspended Michael B. Nifong, prosecutor in the Duke Lacrosse case, for lying and withholding evidence. Within the same week, *Time* magazine profiled Bill Gates of Microsoft. The article portrayed him as brilliant but socially inept. The reinforcement of the stereotype of a lawyer as dishonest and ruthless and a famous IT guru as a socially awkward geek occurred with little or no comment from their professional counterparts. Neither of the two unflattering depictions resulted in an uproar from honest lawyers or a wail of protest from extraverted IT staff. No legal journal lamented the disparaging stereotype. No computer periodical argued that the “nerd” image had to go.

On the contrary, both groups endured these depictions – shall we say – professionally. They kept their cool. They went on with their work in the midst of bad press or foolish popular images. They remembered that the best way to counter a bad image is to live out a better one. They reckoned that reality is more important than appearance, substance more valuable than spin.

Librarians must follow suit. We must get on with our jobs and stop caring what the world thinks of us. Yes, some librarians may ride Harleys to work. Some may ride an SUV or BMW for all I know or care. We must get to the point where we refuse to make a big deal of what we ride or how we are perceived. Moreover, we have to remember that we aren't the only professionals with a sensitive image. On the contrary, we may simply be the only ones who refuse to accept that image something we have to live with. IT professionals and lawyers have led the way. They have a job to do, and they are doing it. We should do the same.