



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“Libraries improve the quality of the question and the user experience.”

-Stephen Abram, “Future of Libraries,” March 21, 2007.

I recently attended a “Future of Libraries Workshop” at the beautiful new Alameda City Library. The speaker was Special Libraries Association president-elect Stephen Abram, a man who seems to be always in an airplane, on his way to yet another speaking engagement. He spoke for more than two hours, using PowerPoint and an increasingly fast delivery. I think all of us – the meeting room was full of librarians from across the Bay Area – were impressed, overwhelmed and unable to take in any more facts or statistics by the time he finished.

One of the first points he made was that “in general, the majority of your users are coming in virtually.” That is, people are using our websites and not actually coming in the door of the library. This was a surprise to me and I wondered if it true for my library system. He went on to say that given that fact, librarians must figure out who these users are and what they

want – without actually meeting them. To do this, we must go where they are, to places like MySpace and other online meeting places. He gave examples of libraries that do this – setting up library blogs or MySpace accounts, so when someone is looking for information, the library is there to provide it. He didn’t forget the importance of the human interaction, though. For the people who do come into the library, he asked: “How do we improve the quality of the experience? Talk to them at the reference desk.”

Abram also compared libraries to search engines, like Google. The biggest difference is that libraries provide quality information that is not biased. Since advertisers influence the order of search results on Google, it is the advertisers who are the customers. On the other hand, library users are our customers; as Abram put it: “We’re biased toward quality and not biased toward mani-

pulations.” Not that he doesn’t appreciate Google. “Google answers who, what, where, when really well,” he told us, “but it doesn’t answer why and how as well.” This is where libraries come in.

The challenge for libraries is to help our public use what we have to offer, what Abram calls “interfacing with how people learn.” We must ask how people want to get information and how can we be the ones they turn to when they’re looking for it. Abram made a good point when he compared Amazon to a library catalog. He told us that people go to Amazon to find out what to read and then search our catalogs to see whether or not we have it. I do exactly the same thing when I am helping someone in the library. With a vague description of a book, I know I can search Amazon and probably find it. Once I have the title, I can then look in our

library catalog to see if we own it.

Abram spent the last part of his speech talking about technology and social networking online, meaning how people are using the Internet to exchange ideas, photographs, music, videos and information. He emphasized the importance of providing Instant Messaging (IM) as a way of interacting with our virtual users – he called it “one of the chief investments you can make in your community.”

Although I may only use a small portion of the vast amount of information Abram gave us, I am glad I attended this workshop. As Gail McPartland, assistant director for services of BALIS (Bay Area Library Information System) said in her introduction: “We are so busy doing our day job, we forget why we’re doing what we do.” So true.