

Professional Edge: The Changing Face of Membership Law Libraries

By Regina L. Smith

Founded in 1802 as a small room in Independence Hall, the Law Library Company of the City of Philadelphia is the nation's oldest law library. Since then, the library—now occupying a 40,000 square foot space in a Philadelphia office building and renamed the Jenkins Law Library—has changed tremendously. Jenkins has a tradition to maintain, but in order to meet the ever-changing needs of its members, it has had to adapt to the times.

For the past 26 years, I have been privileged to be the library's executive director. Jenkins is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation governed by a board of trustees to which I report and serve as corporate secretary. Membership law libraries are similar to small businesses in that they are freestanding and responsible for meeting financial obligations such as payroll, accounts payable, and employee benefits. We maintain a line of credit for financial crunches and are audited annually by an accounting firm. Jenkins does not have a permanent home, so we also lease space and are responsible for monthly rental payments. Our staff is also diverse in its job responsibilities: We need people to handle accounting, human resources, information technology, purchasing, and facilities management.

When founded, the library had 71 attorneys, each of whom purchased a \$20 share in the company and paid annual dues of \$2. Today, the library has approximately 8,000 attorney members, but they are no longer shareholders. Annual dues are \$150 per attorney. In addition, Jenkins supplements its dues income with revenue from trial court filing fees, investment income, fund-raising, and fees for services.

Jenkins employs a staff of 11 librarians and 17 support staff to provide a wealth of services to its members. We are a one-stop shop for information and provide an "out of house" document delivery service, whereby we obtain business, medical, and scientific and technical books and articles for members and nonmembers.

We have been an entrepreneurial organization for many years. Our Catalog Processing Center catalogs books for area law firm and court libraries. We offer consulting services to law firm and public service agencies. We have an online research product (www.palawlibrary.com) and offer a variety of continuing legal education (CLE) classes. We rent out conference rooms; a computer learning center with 20 workstations; and a multipurpose room for classes, seminars, and events. We even have a café where members can meet over a cup of coffee to discuss a case, read the newspaper, or have lunch.

Our members use us differently than they did 25 years ago. Back then, 100,000 visitors came to the library annually and 25 book carts overflowed each day with materials that needed to be reshelved. (We had an army of part-time students who spent hours shelving books.) We currently have an average of 22,000 annual visitors and only six book carts that need to be reshelved daily. However, our Web site receives visits from more than 400,000 unique users.

Our goal is to bring Jenkins to our members' desktops. We offer a number of members-only databases that can be searched 24 hours a day, seven days a week. These include a Pennsylvania legislative history database that has more than 1,000 histories compiled by our staff, as well as periodical indexes, congressional materials, case law, statute and administrative databases, newspaper collections, and more.

Of course, we face many challenges. Funding is difficult to predict as filing fee income has declined over the past few years, and we have to be prudent with respect to increases in dues income. Space is another challenge; as law firm libraries are shrinking, law firm staff expect Jenkins to maintain materials that support their firms' practice areas. Leasing more space is not an option for us because of the cost.

Licensing challenges are ever present. Jenkins is not an academic law library, a law firm library, or a government library. However, we have a defined membership base and are able to control access to our database products. This is a new concept for some online publishers, and each agreement that we enter into has a different twist.

One of our biggest challenges is changing technologies and trying to maintain a balance in how we offer information to our members. We serve three generations of practitioners with different needs: the all-book crowd, the mixed-use (book and online) patrons, and the Google generation. Maintaining this balance is expensive.

We have a strategic plan in place and refresh it every three years. We need to know what our members want and how we can best meet their needs. We evaluate where we are in the planning process on a quarterly basis to keep us on course.

Jenkins is fortunate to have a supportive board of directors, a team-oriented hardworking staff, and members who value our services. We will continue to evolve, embrace change, and do our utmost to be the best practitioners' law library in the nation.

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