

# Ten Commandments for a Professional Librarian

LIBRARY

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## THOU SHALT-

- master thy craftsmanship.
- always think thou art a professional to serve.
- read a wide variety of literature, in addition to thine own.
- keep thyself abreast of recent developments and contemporary issues.
- strive to upgrade thy qualification and constantly engage in teaching and writing.
- not stop expanding thy vocabulary.
- never abstain from sharing professional information.
- globalize some part of thy professionalism.
- get associated with professional associations and intellectuals.
- above all, be guided by professional code of ethics.

## Introduction

Librarianship was declared as a profession by H.R. Tedder at the 1880 annual library association conference (USA). And about the same time Melvil Dewey had said- "*...To my knowledge, a great librarian must have a clear head, a strong hand, and above all, a great heart*". Dewey had known what it means to be an ideal librarian. And if he were living today he would, I think, certainly add two more points- 'strong legs' to go extra miles and 'inner eyes or the sixth sense' to perceive

how to survive and thrive in the IT age. Due to the exponential growth of knowledge, the advent of IT, E-publications and also because of tough competitive environment, traditional libraries and librarianship have become nearly obsolete. Most of us, the librarians of developing countries, are not familiar with the new technology nor can we evade this phenomenon by sticking our heads in the sand. Now the librarians, information professionals have to be self-made, well-prepared, and conversant with



new technologies in order to guide the users according to their taste and their constantly changing demands. All of us have potential for growth. With a clear vision, determination and perseverance a professional librarian too can realize his/her potential if there are some guiding rules, i.e. commandments as the following.

### 1. Thou Shalt Master Thy Craftsmanship

A person wishing to become a good librarian or a information professional must master the art and science of library craftsmanship, i.e. the practical skills in librarianship. Actually it is what he/she is paid for. Academic qualification is not enough but just the beginning. We tend to forget easily what we learn by reading and listening. But the more we work the more we learn and we cannot forget easily what we learn by doing. Many qualified librarians have been seen to have spent their career simply by doing lending of books, which is clerical by nature. A librarian must practice his craftsmanship. Without good craftsmanship, a librarian is more or less like a storekeeper. S/he cannot fulfill the objectives of the library and will remain incompetent too. Therefore, he/she must know all the tools of the trade, techniques and services, both conventional and modern. A librarian must uplift his/her working status from a clerical to a professional one. A librarian should not only master the skills of *how-to-do-what* from his/her point of view for storage but also think of *how-to-find-what* from the

users' point of view. We must embrace new technologies and adapt to the IT environment and make ourselves skillful in handling these equipments. S/he should follow the available standards, guidelines and best practices and learn the new skills to survive in the new age. Moreover, the library where such a good craftsman-librarian works attracts more users and the parent institution will also feel proud of both of its library and the librarian.

### 2. Thou Shalt Always Thinkst Thou Art a Professional to Serve

A professional librarian or a person aspiring to become a librarian must always think that librarianship is a profession to serve/help the users to their satisfaction. The very nature of a library is non-profit making, fully depended on its parent organization or on charity established with the noble objectives of providing information to the parent body, to support study & research and to encourage self-education & lifelong learning. Librarians should remember that '*Right to information*' is one of the basic human rights. There should be *equal access to information* for all the library members. So, even if the collection is rich, even if there are many privileges and facilities provided to the users, they are likely to stop coming to the library or at least minimize their frequency if the librarians/library staff do not work with the sheer motive of service or if they work reluctantly. The librarian should help



establish contact between the library resources and the users. According to F.W. Lancaster - *"No amount of automation could substitute for direct face to face assistance from a knowledgeable and caring professional.... We need more warm librarians"*. It means that we must not forget to provide service in person. The library rules and regulations too should reflect the service attitude of the library. It should be made simple and flexible enough to encourage to users for the optimum utilization of the library materials. The librarian should also serve as a motivator and mentor. We must learn the info-tech supported service skill and devote our attention to the remote users who never make a personal visit to the library. There should also be a provision of service for the blind and other physically handicapped people. It is not good to keep books or other reading materials away from the purview of users' reach except some fragile or expensive or rare type. Therefore, an incumbent librarian should always think that s/he is employed to serve and an aspiring librarian too should make up his/her mind that s/he is going to sacrifice his/her noble career with the sheer motive of service.

### **3. Thou Shalt Read a Wide Variety of Literature, in Addition to Thine Own**

Being a librarian, it is essential for us to read a wide variety of literature. This habit not only makes us knowledgeable, but also makes it easier to do our jobs. If we read

widely, we know a variety of subjects; knowledge grows, and our vocabulary automatically expands which helps in determining the thought contents of books for assigning Classification numbers, as well as ascertaining appropriate Keywords/Subject headings. Another advantage is it can help us give answers to various queries posed by users, enquirers or even visitors. Actually a librarian has to be a voracious reader yet selective on reading matters. Reading our own literature, i.e. books/journals on LIS does no doubt make us up-to-date in our subject field and makes us competent too. Reading world famous classics, bestsellers and even the banned books make us well informed in many respects.

### **4. Thou Shalt Keep Thyself Abreast of Recent Developments and Contemporary Issues**

There is a saying- *"If a person who graduated yesterday stops learning today will be uneducated tomorrow"*. It is quite appropriate in this competitive age. If a librarian is not well-informed, then how can s/he disseminate right information to the users? Learning something new in one's own subject field and being concerned in contemporary issues would prove to be a boon for a professional librarian's career development. Nothing is more distressing /repelling to a user than to hear "Sorry, I don't know" from a librarian. Most of us have poor General Knowledge (GK) because we do not keep



ourselves abreast of recent developments and contemporary issues. It is appropriate here to give a concrete example of how a poor GK affects the performance of a librarian. In one of the notable libraries in Kathmandu, the famous book entitled "Kenneth Starr Report" written about the relationship of the former US president Bill Clinton and his intern Monica Lewinsky was assigned 'Sex' as the Subject Heading and 'Sexual abuse' as the only Keyword. It reveals not only the poor vocabulary of the cataloguer librarian but also deficiency of his/her General Knowledge. Neither of the above two words represent the true thought content of the book but rather misleads the users of the true subject as well as of the above given subject words i.e. 'Sex' and 'Sexual abuse'. There were other numerous mistakes. It was because of the cataloguer librarians poor G.K. Our general knowledge must constantly be kept updated. News & views of National as well as Int'l importance and professional items must be in our reading priorities.

### **5. Thou Shalt Strive to Upgrade Thy Qualification and Engage in Teaching and Writing**

A professional librarian must upgrade his/her academic qualification as early as possible. S/he must strive to be a scholar, a knowledgeable person able to advise and counsel the users. As said earlier, s/he must learn how to learn and transfer this information skill to others that will

promote readership and lifelong learning. S/he should expand his/her knowledge/modern skills by attending some training and/or participate in workshop programs. One must take the advantage of continuing education opportunity offered by employing institution, if any. The new concept of Open University system has also been helping a lot to those who want to acquire higher education. There are many universities that offer distance education.

It may seem absurd to hear why is it necessary to teach in order to be a successful librarian. Teaching is a noble job, a worthwhile practice. To teach something we have to know the subject matter. For this we are compelled to read a lot. Thus, it expands one's knowledge and develops self-confidence. It also improves communication skills, a must for modern librarianship. After all librarians also have to teach the new users on information identifying and retrieving skills. S/he should also teach his/her colleagues to help improve their traditional library skills, information skills as well as other technological know-how transferable skills.

Writing is yet another form of self-expression and information sharing. Some call it self-inflicted pain (because of the trouble involved in writing), but they fail to perceive the pleasure it brings afterwards. Write articles, especially professional ones and contribute to the local/international LIS journals. The most



significant benefit of writing articles/books is that it automatically compels you to read more books/journals of other writers to absorb more ideas to put into your creation, thus making you more knowledgeable. Avoid plagiarism and comply with the copyright laws. Give due acknowledgements and mention references or add bibliography. You could write articles on your experience such as on- "*How I run my library good*" or other *know-how* articles or on your research findings. Similarly, it is also advisable that a librarian should also learn any one of the IFLA languages, in addition to English language.

## 6. Thou Shalt not Stop Expanding Thy Vocabulary

A strong vocabulary not only helps in expressing one's thoughts easily but also adds brevity and accuracy. In addition, a person with a robust vocabulary takes no time in understanding and determining subject matter of verbal or written communication. It is extremely important and necessary for a librarian to increase his/her stock of words. Without a good vocabulary, it is very difficult for him/her to determine the subject matter of books to assign Classification numbers and to assign Keywords/Subject headings for the work piece. Similarly, many of the librarians of developing countries are not aware of the emerging terms in our professional fields, Such as, Information literacy, Virtual library, DVD ROMs, e-

publications etc. I myself have found my stock of words to be inadequate while reading international journals. It is an example of how poor is our vocabulary stock. Actually, we are oblivious of the difficulties we have been facing due to our poor vocabulary. In my point of view, a librarian should aim to make his/her vocabulary as strong as that of a professor of English. But it doesn't mean that we should spend our valuable time and energy in learning the pure technical terms of other professional subject fields. But at least we should strive to enlarge our stock of words to that degree until we find ourselves comfortable at reading and understanding general subject books without taking help from the dictionary too often and be able to determine thought content and find out exact keywords.

## 7. Thou Shalt Never Abstain from Sharing Professional Information

Not only the Mass media but the libraries also are the disseminators of information. There is a saying "*Information is power*" and yet another saying is "*Information is doubled when it is shared*." When we the librarians are sharing information it is not only we are performing our duty but also we are expanding our knowledge. The IFLA's one of the professional priorities is "*unrestricted access to information & promoting resource sharing*". It is ironic to say that in the developing countries like Nepal there are rare evidence of such systems, networks or consortia that would play a vital role to upgrade the quality of



library systems and the profession and to share information for the benefit of all. It is professionally obligatory and necessary to organize talk programme after attending conference/seminar abroad to share one's experience and knowledge. The listeners will enjoy the talk programme as a refreshing second-hand experience and also get chance to keep themselves abreast of recent developments in their subject field. Our librarians in Nepal seldom organize such talk programmes. Perhaps it is because of the inability of our senior librarians to set examples of that kind worth to be emulated by their successors. But it is very necessary if we like to be called the disseminators of information. It is our moral obligation not to hide information that may be beneficial to the concerned. Moreover, we know that "Right to information" is one of the basic human rights.

### **8. Thou Shalt Globalize Some Part of Thy Professionalism**

Gone are the days when the libraries were just the storehouses of books and the librarians as storekeepers confined to one's own cell totally aloof from other libraries. Now the concepts of Local Area Network, Wide area Network, Resource sharing etc. have made all the libraries to come close together. The emergence of Information Technology has turned the whole world into a global village. The Internet and CD-ROMs have revolutionized the information storage, retrieval and

dissemination and transmission process resulting in speedy and effective globalization of knowledge and commerce. The concept of library without walls or a Virtual library has now become a reality. Keeping all these in mind, a librarian should also think how can he/she be a part of the global library community. For example, a librarian can make a list of local or indigenous terms that are not found in the available Subject heading/Thesaurus. Some of the terms may be of global importance. In this case, the Headquarters of the Subject Headings/Thesaurus can be supplied with the new terms as proposed Subject Headings. Another way is by writing articles and publishing them in the international professional journals. This will make the global readers aware of the current trends of libraries, library practice and professionalism in our country. Yet another, if possible, is by launching websites of our own having contents of professional nature. There are many many other things that we can make ourselves helpful to international professional communities and this practice in itself is also a way to become true and competent professionals.

### **9. Thou Shalt Get Associated with Professional Associations and Intellectuals**

We are interdependent in many respects. In order to thrive in our professional field, we must also get associated with like-



mind people and professional associations/institutions. By keeping them in touch we can keep ourselves abreast of recent developments in our fields. Our knowledge increases, our circle of acquaintances expands and eventually our performance gets better and all these greatly help us become successful professionals. It helps us find ways for resource sharing. There are many professional associations such as Librarians' associations, Writers' associations, Students' Alumni associations etc. at Local, National and International levels. For example the International Federation of Library Associations & Institutions (IFLA) and International Federation for Information and Documentation (FID) are very useful Int'l Organizations established for the upliftment of Libraries, Librarians and Documentation Centers in the world. Similarly, we can also take benefits by associating ourselves with the library associations of other countries viz. American Library Associations, UK Library Associations etc. We can find many other organizations both at home and abroad those are equally useful for our professional development.

#### 10. Thou Shalt Above All, Be Guided by Professional Code of Ethics

Even though we perform our jobs if we do not live by code of ethics we are not called honest and true librarians. Not necessarily the code of ethics can always

be found in written form. We have to use our conscience while performing our duties and responsibilities. The five laws of Library Science propounded by the father of Library Science in India Mr. S.R. Ranganathan, to some extent, try to remind us of our duties (*Books are for use; Every book its reader; Every reader its book; Save the time of the reader and the fifth law Library is a growing organism*). However, the 5 laws actually are by no means the code of ethics. Most of the famous library Associations of the world have made code of ethics for their librarians. Here in Nepal we don't have any, till now. In a country like Nepal, where honesty and loyalty usually do not yield, where only sycophants are paid heed to and are rewarded, it may seem almost absurd to talk about ethics but however, whatever the prevalent situation is, the librarian should not forget his/her **Dharma**. Therefore, I suggest that the following points have always to be kept in mind as the checking parameters of our professional ethics.

- a. *Towards the employing institution:* Being loyal and avoiding malpractice.
- b. *Towards the user/authors:* Our service attitude i.e., impartiality, promptness, users rights to privacy, right to information, intellectual property rights etc.
- c. *Towards our co-workers/colleagues:* Ask yourself- 'Does any of my actions cause professional harm to my co-workers and colleagues or retards



their endeavor for educational upliftment?

- d. *Towards the profession and professionalism:* Avoiding the practices that bring defame to librarianship or tarnish its image.

### Conclusion:

Since everyone can see from one's own point of view, anyone can make his/her own list of professional do's and don'ts, and if that works well that are the commandments worth to be followed and practised. Moreover, it is true that whatever one does, that must be fruitful to the employer institution, uplifting to one's professional career, beneficial to the

users, encouraging to the colleagues and coworkers and favorable to the communities at large.

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