

# 10 Ways to Avoid a 'Political Cliff'

By Judith Gibbons

We hold our breath in anticipation every time Wile E. Coyote chases the Road Runner off a cliff in the popular Looney Tunes cartoons. Somehow, the Road Runner always escapes his nemesis—until the next time.

This is fun in the land of cartoons, but not in the real world of marketing and politics. Today's economic upheaval can leave those of us in library marketing feeling more and more like the Road Runner, trying to avoid being pushed off a political cliff and wondering exactly how and when our jobs became a focus of public scrutiny. We can't control what happens in D.C., on Wall Street, or on the 10 o'clock news, but we can prepare ourselves for many possible scenarios. Here are 10 tips to help you protect your library in an environment where wily enemies may be sneaking up on you or trying to plot your demise.

**1. Be Transparent:** Marketers are not magicians. Don't hide under a cloud of illusion. Be proactive and accountable. Make sure that you communicate as much news as possible without library lingo. Share, don't hoard, information. Be visible and participate at internal and external meetings.

**2. Be Professional:** Don't ever forget that you represent the library. Make sure that your conduct is a plus. No matter where you are, you are representing yourself, your institution, and the profession. Take advantage of the exposure. Your positive image will build credibility for yourself and your library.

**3. Be Ethical:** Don't let your library be the star in your city's next exposé. When in doubt, don't do it. Those little nagging feelings are there for a purpose. Walk away if something doesn't seem 100% legit. Review your ethics policy, and make sure that you and your administration are always in compliance. Build a good reputation.

**4. Be Visible:** The days of library staff hiding behind the circulation desk are long gone. Get out there, and get your director and staff out there too. Be part of the conversation and the community. Participate in activities and organizations that benefit your stakeholders and give the library positive press. A few stellar mentions in the local press can give you a treasure trove of exposure. (And if the local media doesn't pick up on your involvement, promote it yourself.)

**5. Be Accountable:** Remember Harry Truman's adage "The buck stops here." Take responsibility for yourself and

your actions. Don't blame your co-workers, your boss, or your library board for your missteps.

**6. Be Flexible:** Forget rigidity. Think adaptability. It's better to find a win-win solution than to stubbornly go after an unattainable goal. Be progressive and proactive. Don't continue services and programs just because they worked in 2004. Always scan your community, formally plan, and think future-forward.

**7. Be Vibrant:** Don't let your staffers put their audiences to sleep with statistics. Make sure that all presentations and press releases are clear and succinct and that they utilize user-friendly stories and facts. Use common tools like a basic return on investment calculator, Facebook, and Twitter. Talk about library philosophy, services, and programs in easy-to-understand language that's suitable for the target audience. This is an area where you can really let your communications expertise shine.

**8. Be Friendly:** Don't go it alone. The combination of partners, community supporters, and a formal Friends organization offers innumerable benefits. Encourage trustees and Friends to speak from their hearts at events like budget hearings and legislative days. And don't forget to teach the staff to love (or at least like) the media.

**9. Be Thankful:** Count your blessings. Encourage the staff to show appreciation to your funders, allies, and donors, in private and in public, in writing and face to face. Keeping up relationships on all levels makes it much easier to rally supporters when needed.

**10. Be Political:** Talk with elected officials, and ask what they need to know so librarians can serve them with direct research. Set the library up for success by telling everyone how it improves the community. Help politicians and voters understand your value before they're tempted to attack.

Although we can never be sure when a crisis will arise, these 10 tips will give you ammunition in case your own Wile E. Coyote pushes you and your library toward a political precipice. \*



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