# Too Many Cards on the Table? Practical Ways of Improving Your Current Awareness

**Abstract:** This article by Clare Brown is based on a presentation given at the BIALL Online Annual Conference in June 2021. It takes the form of a case study that illustrates how library and information professionals can control the flow of information so as to avoid users being overwhelmed by news.

**Keywords:**   law firms; legal information; current awareness

## INTRODUCTION

My aim in this practical, case study-based article is to illustrate how library and information people can control the flow of information so that end-users can avoid being overwhelmed or inundated by news. Professor Nick Belkin recently said, "Information access is not the same as information inundation".[1] The role of information specialists is to facilitate access as well as enable control.

## THE SET-UP – OR 'THE LOCKED ROOM'!

Even as the world has been turned upside down by the pandemic, there have been reassuring work-related constants. Library and information people have continued to collaborate and communicate with end-users, they have promoted themselves and demonstrated their value to the organisation - and beyond.

There have been interesting debates about COVID-19 being a Black Swan[2] or a Grey Rhino[3] event but, whether it was highly probable or not, it has transformed everything. Although a few people remember the 1918 influenza,[4] this latest pandemic has hit everyone in different ways. Everyone has been glued to the news to keep up-to-date on lockdowns, guidance, vaccine availability and other issues, and everyone has been constantly making behavioural adjustments in response.

Although many firms said they made the transition to home working smoothly,[5] anecdotal evidence on Twitter described some legal and business service staff struggling to access remote office systems and experiencing difficulties with internet connectivity, whilst having to juggle caring responsibilities.

How can library and information people who work in legal, commercial or financial industries move beyond the immediate logistical challenges, and use their considerable library management skills to innovate, create value, and strike out into a brave new world? As any library person will tell you, the key to continuity is efficient information management, and that means reliable access to know-how systems, online databases, current awareness, etc.

## CASE STUDY 1

### Applying the little grey cells - let the tech take the strain!

This first case study is a straightforward challenge. Producing current awareness used to take up to 40% of my time when I was a library manager. In hindsight, it was inefficient, unwieldy, unsustainable, inflexible, and I was limited in what I could realistically produce. But crucially my firm valued what I spent time producing, and my newsletters were actively used by all departments.

I've recently interviewed information managers and they faced similar problems. One explained her frustration with the amount of time it took to manually produce newsletters. She said:

> scanning 90 plus websites daily meant that half of my time was spent doing current awareness. When the opportunity came up to evaluate ways to automate the process, the information team were keen to get involved[6]

Another said that current awareness was "time consuming and admin heavy when trying to maintain and coordinate the many tracks being run. Each team member had a portfolio of tracks and they quickly became experts, but it could be difficult to pick up the baton quickly when covering annual leave".[7] She added:

> We can respond faster and deliver more, highly curated, relevant updates, customised to people's needs. The professional, fresh design has elevated our team's output. Less time in admin means more time for us to scan sources, read and up our market knowledge. The fact that people are enthusiastic and

*engaged means we are finding this a re-energised, positive, collaborative exercise.*

One of the many challenges information people face is maintaining the confidence of the end-user. Lawyers stay ahead of the competition by being better informed and current awareness is a large part of their know-how and expertise. They like the reassurance of controlled, hand-curated updates, created by experts.

## How Covid-19 has turned negatives into positives

Tracking all the news related to COVID-19 has been one of the biggest current awareness challenges that information departments have ever faced. Some teams were already rolling out content aggregation platforms before the pandemic, and were well placed to create either automated alerts, or manually curated newsletters for the benefit of colleagues and clients. For instance,

> When Covid-19 measures hit we were inundated with requests for monitoring the effect on the different sectors and we were able to respond quickly, setting up initial daily updates quite easily and then modifying them as weeks have progressed. We find it so much easier to collaborate as we can add/amend/share searches, topics, sources or manage email lists and the inbox[8]

COVID-19 has given information departments an opportunity to turn negatives into positives. Every point of frustration faced by traditional, manual current awareness delivery can be transformed:

- Save time: From spending 30-50% of your time manually visiting every website you need, automate it and use that time elsewhere.

- Seamless service: Ensure your specialists get a continuous stream of relevant information regardless of sickness, leave, or any other service interruption.

- Built in flexibility: A manual checking and scanning process meant limits on frequency, timing, sources covered and customisation requests. Elevate your standing with a can-do attitude.

- Branding: Impress your end-users with a fresh, contemporary email template.

- FOMO: Lawyers need news, but in a controlled, targeted way so with excellent current awareness, they'll never experience the dread of missing potential business opportunities.

Furthermore, now that people are working remotely, there is more need than ever to collaborate. Everyone can work on and contribute to current awareness, on a single platform from any location.

## CASE STUDY 2

## An unusual card game - is platform migration the right route for you?

This case study assumes that a firm already has a current awareness platform in place. The automated current awareness market is relatively mature and for the past decade or so, automated emailed newsletters have been the norm. However, is the existing platform fit for purpose and/or is it state of the art?

Current awareness platform migration is a complicated and time-consuming undertaking and vendors acknowledge that many library and information teams are running at capacity.[9] This being said, many firms are embracing the challenge and choosing to go with an alternative aggregator. It might seem that there is never a good time to embark on such a large project but think about the benefits:

- *Technology.* Heritage systems might not include all the functionality required. For example, could natural language processing (NLP) improve the alerts? Could improved reporting and analytics help? Could innovative ways of repackaging and presenting information change the way the information department is perceived?

- *Efficiency.* Why is something always done a certain way? If the answer is "we've always done it like that" then delve deeper. Have a look around, talk to colleagues, find out what counterparts in other firms are doing. A clean slate might be the perfect opportunity to embrace new efficiencies.

- *Economy.* A migration project might actually save the firm money as well as raise the profile of the information department. It's an opportunity to evaluate and make the most of expensive subscriptions, and potentially explore opportunities to collaborate with clients.

I've recently interviewed information managers about the migration process. As one manager notes, "the work needed to get a current awareness service up and running might seem daunting, and there are hurdles to overcome, but it is worth the effort. The time you save in the long term means that the investment at the beginning does pay off in the end".[10]

- *Start with a project plan.* Sketch out timelines, commence discussions with key people across the organisation and be prepared for any eventualities. Maintain open lines of communication with all stakeholders, but do not get overwhelmed by their input. Let them have a voice, listen, but the library team has the final say.

- *Do internal and external research.* Given that there are many content aggregators on the market, find out which one ticks all the boxes - or at least, as many as possible. The more research that is done beforehand,

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the easier it will be to manage expectations as the project progresses.

- *Work with the chosen vendor.* They will be on hand to advise with data cleansing, search migrations, end-user training, inspiration for use cases, and will be able to offer potential functionality development work.

- *Overcoming obstacles.* As the project progresses, do not get discouraged. One library director advised, "allow yourself time to get to know the [new] platform". He pointed out that with a new system, you get out what you put in. Invest time in the right solution at the beginning, and you will reap information rewards going forward.[11]

And finally, everyone I have spoken with recommends that everyone involved with the migration project should keep an open mind.

## CASE STUDY 3

### The surprising denouement - become a revenue generator and true brand ambassador

Clients expect more and more from their professional services. In today's competitive landscape your firm should constantly be asking itself how it can diversify client offerings and differentiate itself within the market. Over the last couple of years we've seen a rise in professional services and networks providing highly tailored news and alerts for their clients.

One large international firm is creating new revenue streams by asking their in-house knowledge and information management teams to manage clients' current awareness. Like any new business model it's a risk because it requires innovative thinking and it involves a commitment from both sides. NDAs, subscriptions, licencing, with open honest conversations between firms and clients.

Lex Mundi wanted its network members to be more visible, as well as wanting to raise its own profile.[12] Once again, it is about approaching business development challenges in a thoughtful and intelligent way, and working together with vendors can get firms thinking about new solutions. When the information department is a revenue generator and true brand ambassador, everyone benefits:

- Clients get the most reliable current awareness prepared by trained information professionals.

- The information departments get the recognition that they are major contributors to client relations as well as generating revenue.

- Managing partners - or legal networks - can be confident that their organisation's name and brand is visible on newsletters, current awareness dashboards and websites.

## Focus on visibility

COVID-19 measures mean that library and information people have been out of sight for quite a while. Due to the radical rethink of the way everyone works, end-user behaviours have changed dramatically, so what should library managers be doing?[13] One of the best articles I've read about library branding concludes,

> There has always been a need to advertise and promote our services and I would say that it is more important now than ever. There is a continual need to prove ourselves as being necessary within a modern law firm environment. Our role is important and will continue to be so but it is down to us to make sure that our users get that message.[14]

The visibility of the library in both the online and physical environment is heavily reliant on the library having a strong, consistent brand. If your branding hasn't been reviewed in awhile, is a library rebrand appropriate right now? That obviously depends on the availability of your current resources. A project like that needs stakeholder consultation and careful thought.

> It is all very well delivering a good service to the lawyers but if they aren't sure where it is coming from, you have a problem…it is down to us to make sure that our users understand what we do for them and who is doing it.[15]

Everything you are publishing, communicating and pushing out for your audience's consumption must have the 'face' of your service on it, and all internal and external content needs branding. For example:

- logos, colours, and font

- templates for email newsletters with appropriate footers/headers

- cover pages for reports and research

- presentations, training and inductions to new joiners

- social media pages

- intranet, extranet, other dashboards,

- Zoom or other backgrounds and anything that has come from COVID-19 workflows

As was pointed out many years ago, branding is much more than a logo or a strap-line. When developed to its full potential, your brand should help define and communicate what it is that you can do better than anyone else, what distinguishes you from other services, and what is most relevant to the needs of your customers.[16]

Ultimately, the point of branding is to reassure your audience that they can depend on you and your service. To this end, you have to follow through on promises made to them that your service is first rate - you want

positive associations with your brand, not negative! In a period of upheaval and change, such as recent events, seeing a familiar 'face' is reassuring.

## BRINGING EVERYTHING TOGETHER

Apologies for all the Christie references but I wanted to tie this piece to the theme of the 2020–2021 BIALL conference. In these challenging times, knowledge and information teams are working hard to transform a complicated multi-channel, multi-database information environment into something holistic, user centred and inclusive.

Current awareness is a major part of this transformation. It has been the common thread throughout this, even though each case study focused on a different aspect of it. Once you start pulling at threads, you realise it is all connected and why content aggregation is so important.

If you are part of the information function within an organisation, you are integral to its success. Information people are excellent at assessing the needs of the organisation and their clients so that everyone has the resources to work towards the same goals and outcomes. In order to maximise reach and differentiate themselves, companies have to make full use of information, knowledge, and research people.

## Footnotes

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## Biography

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