



Learning About Your Unknown Unknowns

A lightly edited transcript of a conversation between Kim Dority and Mary Ellen Bates, March 6, 2018

Mary Ellen Bates: Hi, this is Mary Ellen Bates of [Bates Information Services](#), and today I'm picking the brain of [Kim Dority](#), a friend and colleague, and one of the smartest people I know. Kim is founder and president of [Dority and Associates](#), an information strategy and content development company. She's also an adjunct faculty member for the University of Denver [MLIS program](#), where she teaches a course on alternative career paths for LIS students and practitioners. Sometimes I'm lucky enough to guest-lecture there—it's always a great class. She is the author of dozens of articles and several books on library and information-science career topics, including [Rethinking Information Work, a Career Guide for Librarians and Other Information Professionals](#), and the [LIS Career Sourcebook: Managing and Maximizing Every Step of Your Career](#). Most recently she has been drawing on her expertise in LIS careers to provide career advising, webcasts, workshops and content resources for LIS graduate schools and their students and alumni. Recently, Kim was telling me about an epiphany she had about her "unknown unknowns", to use the phrase popularized by Donald Rumsfeld. I asked if we could continue that conversation. Welcome, Kim.

Kim Dority: Hi, glad to be here.

MEB: To set the stage, recently you moved your business into a new strategic direction and you had to question your assumptions about what your clients value most about your services. You're familiar with this market. How did you know when to just trust your gut on what your clients would value, and when to question your assumptions and start looking to your unknown unknowns?

KD: I think I was trusting my gut when I was coming up with my overview of what I would be offering, because I did know this market well—the market of graduate schools. I had done a lot of work with them, so I was pretty sure that I knew what their critical needs were, what their pain points were. I wrote that up as potential things that I could do, and then two things happen.

One, I sent that out to a number of potential clients and the ones who responded did so by asking me to do different things than I had originally identified. That was

my first heads-up that maybe I didn't know as much as I thought I knew, which is sort of a recurring theme in all of our lives.

Then I went to the [ALISE](#) conference—the Association of Library and Information Science Educators—and I was hanging out with a lot of people who might be potential clients of mine. We were having very comfortable conversations where my goal wasn't so much to sell my services to these individuals but simply to understand more clearly what their realities look like. Our conversations weren't about, gee, I could do this for you. They were more about, this is what I'm seeing in the profession, and what do you think? If you were counseling students about which direction to take their careers these days, in terms of courses you might suggest they take, what does this look like for you? Once they began talking more about their realities and their pain points from their perspective rather than mine, I started realizing that, although I think I was correct to offer a broad range of services, I was not nearly as confident in my ability to identify which of my services people will need.

Two things emerged from those conversations. The first was how differently the deans and directors were looking at student needs than I was, because I came at it as a faculty member rather than a director of a program. The second was how different each program is in terms of its own circumstances, its own stakeholders—which might, depending on the program, mean that they have a very powerful board or they have a very powerful faculty group or they have a very powerful alumni group. The power dynamics in academia can be extremely varied. So another initial unknown unknown for me was how different everybody's circumstances would be. I hadn't realized that, and it has changed how I approached this now.

MEB: Stepping back one step, when you set up these meetings for your contacts who were going to be attending the conference, how did you set it up in a way that didn't sound like it was going to be a sales pitch of you talking about your set of services and how you might help them? How did you make it feel like something they would want to say yes to?

KB: It started off by saying, let's meet in the bar. If it involves food, that's good; if it involves alcohol, that is even better! And that certainly encouraged a very wide-ranging and relaxed conversation, I have to say. Usually, the way I approached it was with no agenda, but it was usually people that I had in some way connected with in advance online. So, for example, I had been a guest speaker for a course in their program, or we had served on a virtual committee together, or I had reached out to them on some other topic, or they were in a LinkedIn group that I manage. What I was looking for was what's a factor that we have in common, that isn't about us necessarily working together but more about the two of us being in the same profession, being interested in the well-being of that profession and the success of the people who are coming into it, i.e., the students.

So my outreach was about how it would be great to connect at the conference, let's go grab a drink after your presentation or my presentation or whatever. And then,

because we were agreeing to just chat and get to know each other and hear each other's stories and that sort of thing, it diffuses the need to drive the conversation in a specific way. And that means that I can just ask lots of questions that are essentially, tell me your story, tell me about the program. How did you get in that job? Did you always want to be a director of a program? What are the things you're most concerned about? If you were going into the profession today, what would you be looking at in terms of a professional direction? My goal was to get to know whoever I was talking with as an individual first, as a fellow LIS professional second, and then as a director of a program third. That's the way my interests go, that's the way I'm most comfortable having a conversation.

But also, if I were then going to pitch the products and services I can deliver, I'd much rather have already laid the face-to-face groundwork of building a personal relationship with that person, and then connecting via email or phone call with a conversation of oh, by the way, I'm going to be doing this kind of a workshop, would you like me to do one for you? Because I think doing it the other way—first coming in with, I'm going to be doing this kind of a workshop for this client and I think it would work well for you guys as well, without having first established that personal relationship—I don't think it works well. At least it hasn't for me personally and I don't think it would for the kind of clients I work with.

MEB: What I think is interesting is you're able to establish those personal connections before you even meet them because of the other work that you do. You're not just a random person; they know you because you volunteered to be on a committee or because you agreed to speak at their event or something else where you were contributing to the profession, and that's the context in which they know you.

KD: I think that's absolutely correct, and it is absolutely critical. If potential clients first get to know you as a fellow professional who is willing to invest for no money in the well-being of whatever profession you're in, that really changes the nature of the relationship.

MEB: I can see why. Any thoughts on techniques or tips for keeping your contact thinking expansively during the conversation, so that you don't get lost in the weeds or into details that aren't going to move you forward? Any way that you can glean as much as you can from them without it feeling like it's an interrogation on your part?

KD: There are some people I have spoken with where I probably have said three sentences over a three-hour period. In those situations, I just surrender to my destiny and order another drink. I let people range wherever they would like to range because it becomes pretty clear that that's what they enjoy doing. You're just going to let them do that as part of establishing the relationship. But with people with whom there's more of a give and take in the conversation, a lot of times I'll ask them higher-level questions.

A bridging question from down in the weeds—for example, where they're talking about launching this class next quarter—would be asking a question like, so tell me why you brought that particular type of curriculum into the program. What are you seeing in the future for students? This is to get them to a higher level, so I can understand more effectively how they want the program to grow and what they want for their students.

What you're looking for are bridging questions that acknowledge where they are, what they're talking about at that moment, and then bridge them into a question that takes them up a higher level, or in a related direction that allows them to share more information. My goal is to use a conversation to understand as well as I can both my client, i.e., a dean or a director, and how they see their universe. That is a combination of both in-the-weeds questions—like, how did you end up in this job?—and higher-level questions of almost a SWOT analysis. For example, I'll ask, what are you seeing for students as their strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats? Those kinds of questions enable the person you're talking with to really think about and comment on their own reality and the reality of their clients, i.e., their students.

MEB: So the thing to always keep in the back of your mind is, how can I learn more about how they see the world, how can I see the world through their point of view?

KD: Exactly. And of course that's when you see your unknown unknowns, when they say something and you think, whoa, I had no idea that was the case. Or it takes you into an area where you have so little knowledge that you realize this is something you've missed—that there's a direction or a thread developing that you didn't have on your radar, so you're taking mental notes. Those are some of the best opportunities, because you learn in a situation like that. You don't need to say, oh my gosh, I had no clue that was the case. You just want to say, isn't that amazing how that's working, and then make a mental note to follow up on it.

What I've found most effective is not to be good at talking to people so much as to be good at asking questions that allow them to talk. That is the way I learn more—to listen very carefully, find areas of connection, respond in a connecting statement of, right, I ran into that same issue when I was teaching five years ago. You're confirming what the other person said but then also asking them another question. When they get tired of talking, they'll start asking you questions, but it's a fun way to get to know people, by asking more questions than you're talking about yourself. And if you ever want to have a potential client relationship with them, it gives you an incredible wealth of knowledge.

It also gives you something that I find to be very helpful, which is enough information to understand future touch points with this person. For example, I spoke with a gentleman at the ALISE conference who's a new dean, delightful guy. We had a really fun although very short conversation. But during that conversation, he was talking with great pride about some recent strides that the university had made and it was one of the reasons that he was so excited to be taking on this job leading the MLIS program. This past weekend in the New York Times, there was an

article about two schools that are doing incredibly innovative things to help their students succeed and graduate, and one of those two colleges was his. Because we'd had that conversation, that was a trigger point between us that I knew was important to him. So I emailed him and said, I really enjoyed seeing you; I saw this in the New York Times today and it made me realize why you're so proud to work with this school. I can see why you would want to take this job and that's really, really cool.

If you're looking at building a relationship with a client, which from my perspective is how you have a long-term business built, one of the things you're looking for is how you can have connecting points with them that don't involve asking them for work, that don't involve touting your own skills, and that do involve saying, I paid attention to who you are, what you said, and what's important to you, and here's a way I can help support that or acknowledge that. Those are the kinds of things that I'm looking for when I'm in a conversation like this.

MEB: That makes perfect sense. In fact, I'm thinking of some of the conversations I've had with people who are in the industry or the field I am looking at getting into. I've noticed that one thing that keeps me focused during a conversation is to watch for something that's going to surprise me, wanting to get out of that conversation having learned something that smacked me upside the head, because that's something I probably will know that most people don't know.

KD: I think that's a really good point. When you're working with clients, if you can help them grow in their understanding of their own field, because you have picked up that kind of knowledge, it makes you incredibly valuable—and for good reason. It's not just that they should hire you, it's that you may be in a unique position to see things as an outsider to that profession that other people wouldn't see because they're in it. That's one of the cool things that we bring as consultants, as strategists, as people who are independent and are lending our expertise to our clients. We have a very different perspective that may bridge their field, their profession and their industry as well as maybe three other ones that we've also worked in or know about.

For example, I'm from Colorado and I'm watching the cannabis industry for what's called an industry roll-up, because I'm also from the cable television industry. When I first worked in that industry, there were 400 cable television companies, but it went through an industry roll-up, which meant that about four major providers emerged and started rolling up or purchasing all the small mom-and-pop cable companies. If you've seen things like that happen in one industry, you bring that knowledge to other industries as well. It may not be a cable industry roll-up, but maybe you've worked in the media industry and now you're moving into the healthcare industry, and you bring lessons learned in the media industry to your perception and framing of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats in the healthcare industry. The more a-ha moments you have, the more value you can add, but also the deeper and broader your expertise becomes, in how you can frame what you're seeing.

MEB: Yes, and the wonderful thing is that it all comes from a conversation where you're letting the other person talk.

KD: Absolutely. And for those of us who are introverts, it makes it a lot easier. If someone asks me a question, I can respond but I'm not real chatty, I'm not real talkative. For me to have to carry a conversation on my own would be very, very difficult; I would probably run out of steam after about 15 minutes max. Instead, because I'm actually interested in people and what they think and how they think, and I show up simply with curiosity and innate interest in what the other person thinks, then the questions come very comfortably. I think that approach especially works better for introverts. And most people like to be asked questions about what they think about things.

MEB: Yes, you're asking thoughtful questions and you're reflecting back your perspective that you've picked up from other people too. So they're always picking up some nugget of information as well; it's never a one-way street.

KD: Yes, that certainly is my goal and usually that does happen—I hope it happens all the time. You do want that give-and-take and the more that you can contribute to the other person's knowledge, the better it is. And that comes from the more different viewpoints or perspectives you can bring into a conversation.

MEB: Any last thoughts on how to spot your unknown unknowns and then explore them with prospective clients?

KD: I would suggest getting involved in as many questions as you possibly can. If you already know a lot of clients in your field, sit down with them and just ask them, what am I missing? Why would you do this or not do this? Would this be valuable, or why wouldn't it be valuable? One of the biggest questions I think you can ask is, why wouldn't this be valuable, because if you think it would be valuable and your potential client doesn't think it would be, that means you don't know as much as you thought you knew.

For anyone who's thinking about launching a new product or service, or going after a new market—and this is a design thinking—rough in what you think you know and describe what that would be, maybe start a website and put up some content, and then start talking to people and ask as many open-ended questions as you can to start getting a better sense of the landscape. As you start building those relationships, ask more targeted questions. And if you already have those relationships, ask them off the bat. The biggest one I would ask is, why wouldn't this be valuable? Because you're looking for answers that tell you that you have an incorrect assumption, that you haven't vetted your assumptions and have simply taken them for granted (which generally we all do). You know—I think this is important and so, rationally and logically, A follows B to C, of course it makes sense that you would look at it exactly the same way I do. But it turns out absolutely not! My first whop upside the head is that just because it looks like this from my vantage point does not mean that's how it looks to someone else. You go in with a let's run-it-up-the-flagpole idea, but then start talking to people and seeing what

they value or what they say. They may say, no, we don't care about this thing much at all, but this other thing over here we really, really need.

MEB: So, it sounds like we have to approach this as an iterative process, starting with what we know and then testing it and seeing where we're wrong and modifying accordingly.

KD: Yes. For me, having recently gone through this and realizing how much I didn't know about my unknown unknowns, it was a matter of coming up with an idea, shaping it and putting some parameters around it so I could describe it, and then starting to vet my assumptions. When you put together an idea for a product or a service, you are making some assumptions about what you think your market will value and pay for, and you don't want to invest any more time, energy, or money into that product or service until you have vetted those assumptions. You need to be open to people not only saying, that's nice but I wouldn't pay money for that, but also saying, oh, you know how to do this thing over here? Because this came out in these expansive conversations—that's actually the thing we're desperate for and we would pay you money for that.

If you haven't invested too much time, energy, ego and money in something based on your untested assumptions, it's very easy to pivot and respond to your market opportunity from this other vantage point or this other perspective.

MEB: Yes, before you get too attached to your own ideas of what your market values.

KD: Yes, that's a great phrase, "before you get too attached to your own idea." I've worked for a number of startups where literally millions of dollars were "invested"—I won't say thrown away, as I'm sure they were important investments — but they were invested in a founder's attachment to the product or service he wanted to take to market. And when the market basically ignored that product or service, the owner was unwilling to shift into a related market opportunity because he was too attached to the one that he had come up with. I've seen that happened three different times now.

There's a great book out called [The Four Steps to the Epiphany](#), with the premise that if you get start-up capital, you should never invest a dime of that capital into a product or service until you have invested 10 percent into developing the market, which means understanding the market, piloting prototypes of potential products and services, taking them through the market, seeing what the market says and taking that feedback. You don't actually commit to anything until you have tested every assumption in the marketplace for that product or service. Only then do you invest the rest of your capital, that startup fund, to create that product or service. What usually happens is people spend 95 percent of their startup capital building what the founder was so attached to and was so positive about, and then they spend five percent trying to beat the salespeople into selling the damn thing when nobody wants it. You really have to be careful about being overly attached to a

market product or service—or even a market. It's easy to do and it's really, really damaging.

MEB: Kim, thank you so much. I've been talking with Kim Dority of Dority & Associates. You can find out more about her at dorityassociates.com. Thank you so much, Kim.

KD: My pleasure. Good luck to everybody.