

18 Advocacy for Libraries – the Best Quotes

These experienced advocates have agreed to share their top tips for library advocacy with the younger generation; with the following quotes, they provide a basis for avoiding common mistakes in advocacy and for practising the basic attitudes that make success more likely. All quotes from the German interviews in 2021 are translated into English, with those from the international interviews in 2022 part of the original English interview.

18.1 Advocacy Concept and Plan

There is a lack of [political] advocacy towards decision-makers. Very often advocacy is understood as just marketing. (Jennefer Nicholson)

Have a strong vision and share it in a consistent language! (Liv Sæteren)

Make sure the content of your advocacy is new – rather than “more of the same”. Most politicians and decision-makers are visionary people, they are really interested in the future. It does not matter if the image you are depicting is a little bit blurry, as long as it has a certain feel of being unique and new, preferably with a bit of a wow-effect. The blurriness leaves space for decision-makers to fill in the vision with their own thinking and wording. (Rolf Hapel)

You go everywhere, not because you want to do advocacy, but because you have a cause. (Elmar Mittler)

You need a good plan, and do not change your theme. Work hard, step-by-step to that direction. (Wu Jianzhong)

Working through your concept, analysing what is your concept, if you have a vision. (Liv Sæteren)

The most important question is why? Why should someone get involved in the library? Only by taking the other person's perspective can you see what they get out of working for the library. Purely intrinsic motivation is rare. With this mindset as a starting point, you can begin your advocacy activities in a targeted way. (Hannelore Vogt)

You must always remember to do things in such a way that other people can see that they can achieve their own goals with what you want. That is the recipe for success. (Elmar Mittler)

The core of library advocacy is content, I mean, is to decide what to advocate. (Li Donglai)

Ensure that the gains for the sector of the advocacy you are doing are very clear and needed. (Jennefer Nicholson)

18.2 Advocating for Solutions

Only by offering solutions can you achieve anything. (Elmar Mittler)

It is not about what we are called, it is actually about what we do. (Jennefer Nicholson)

In your advocacy, do not focus on library as an institution, focus on we are helping people to learn. (Gene Tan)

Here is a problem; if you help me solve it, I will tell you how to do it, you do not have to do any work (just do not expect the other person to think about it), here is the finished concept. (Elmar Mittler)

Rehearse your narrative, the narrative about what needs the library must fulfil, the societal problems the libraries are solving. And always try to formulate it not so much as a need but as an opportunity. The centre of the narrative should highlight the fantastic opportunity that is here now. It should be aligned with the current politically held strategies and policies about development of communities and society. The narrative is not intended for the library, it is aimed at the political level, the decision-makers, for them to seize the moment and make it hers or his narrative and run with it. (Rolf Hapel)

It is not about self-interest! Library advocacy is always about the public good. This distinguishes it from lobbying for personal and economic interests. (Claudia Lux)

That is the biggest difficulty, when you only think from the institution's perspective and do not link it with what is important to the country. (Gene Tan)

18.3 Values

Do not overestimate the rationality of decision-makers, do not forget the human edge. (Stephen Wyber)

We should always focus on the value that it brings to us as a human being. (Rashidah Begum)

I believe that we need to advocate the value of libraries and what libraries can contribute to the society nowadays. What is the value of libraries? That is, what libraries can contribute to today's society. In short: know ourselves, the library's unique value and contribution. (Li Donglai)

18.4 Go Out and Listen!

Do not be so much involved in your routine activities. Take time to go out and mix with the community and find out exactly what they do. (Rashidah Begum)

Go out from the library and invite others in. (Liv Sæteren)

Do not stay behind your desk, you have to go out, that's how you can convince people. (Wu Jianzhong)

You have to go out and see what the information need is. (Rashidah Begum)

Librarians are looking inwards at what services can we deliver, instead of going out and asking what services you would like. (Jennefer Nicholson)

18.5 Consensus and Dissent

You need some kind of consensus that change is needed, otherwise it will not happen. (Carolina Botero)

Politicians do not want to stand between two people, so make your issue look as consensual (or at least obvious) as possible. (Stephen Wyber)

Know who the key players are, understand their position on the issues, and use this in targeting your advocacy with the relevant approach and to the right people. (Jennefer Nicholson)

The power that the economy has in developing countries needs to be observed. Rights owners are so powerful, you need to develop very good arguments and be aware, as their reaction is very strong. (Carolina Botero)

Make sure your messaging (arguments) is the right messages – that they are concise, easy to convey, evidence-based and supported with that evidence plus any “spin” that relates the advocacy to those you are advocating to i.e. contextualise it to their situation so they can more easily understand it. (Jennefer Nicholson)

Be aware that people will oppose you. So, you need to think of the counter-arguments, and you need to think of the reasons why someone might not do what you are asking for. (Stephen Wyber)

In negotiating (especially in copyright) be aware that over time you are not giving away pieces that are important. (Carolina Botero)

Your messaging should be consistent – and persistent (Jennefer Nicholson)

18.6 Administration – Key Player in Advocacy

At the municipal level, the administration is a partner not to be underestimated, alongside the city council and the mayor. Employees have often worked there for

many years, have extensive expertise and know the legal issues and tricks of the authorities. The administration can be an irreplaceable supporter of political advocacy. (Eric Hattke)

Contact with the administration is important, but there are some things you just have to do! (Hannelore Vogt)

18.7 Excellence and Capacity Building

When you strengthen the capacity in the public librarians and in their associations, this can help to make them more independent; in addition, other associations of the society can help to change political imbalances. (Carolina Botero)

Keep learning all the time. You must be a self learner, as all things are changing so fast. We have to motivate ourselves to be learning all the time. (Rashidah Begum)

Understand the constraints that the library sector has in developing countries; they face very important barriers and constraints, so it is not that easy for them to advocate. (Carolina Botero)

Some associations produce a well written letter for advocacy and put this on their website and think then the people will listen. No one cares about your website, be humble! (Stephen Wyber)

If the work of the library is unsuccessful, the advocacy cannot be successful, and it does not even matter to advocate or not. (Li Donglai)

Surprising decision-makers again and again should be part of any advocacy. (Claudia Lux)

If you want to do something bigger, then you must convince the decision-makers by working harder. (Wu Jianzhong)

18.8 Storytelling for Advocacy

Every time a person comes to the academic library ask whatever information was needed and received and if this changed anything for them and if it helped them. Interview them to find out [and use it for advocacy]. (Rashidah Begum)

Visualize your vision with storytelling. (Liv Sæteren)

18.9 A Network for Advocacy

Share and discuss your vision with your team, then you are more credible. (Liv Sæteren)

It is very important for the library to maintain regular contact. The most successful ones not only come to the cultural committee once a year to answer questions but stay connected throughout the year. Just like the dbv does. (Barbara Schleihagen)

Look like you unify things by bringing together in one intervention the voices of lots of people, rather than having lots of different voices coming in (Stephen Wyber)

You need to find the right people for your organisation. (Liv Sæteren)

More cooperation, more professionalisation based on a division of labour, fewer institutional reservations and more impetus from civil society are the keys to successful advocacy. (Thomas Bürger)

At least when you advocate that you understand the problem. (Carolina Botero)

When you make the first contact, it is not enough to have a number on the account, it must be a personal contact that has to be maintained. People have to be invited, there must be conversations on the spot until you're ready. (Hans-Erich Au)

You must keep reminding yourself, even with small and always different things, so that you are present. It is particularly important for local library managers to stay connected, to invite people to visit and to build up a circle of friends. (Barbara Schleihagen)

Everyone must try to build up a network at their own level and get in touch with people through events or personal contacts, so that you can inspire people and make contacts that you can fall back on later. (Hans-Erich Au)

In advocacy you need to work with alliances and relations around you. (Liv Sæteren)

If you have a good network and maintain it, you can rely on it when it matters. This is something that we must recommend to our members in a very clear way. (Barbara Schleihagen)

Build relationships. Libraries are often not really working together with other institutions, but they can be of very good help. (Liv Sæteren)

Librarians need to go out and make friends. Making friends outside the library sector is very important. (Gene Tan)

Get close to the decision-makers. I have seen many library leaders that would hate to be close to the political arena. That is wrong, they have to. It is an important part of the work. (Rolf Hapel)

You have gotten to a position where you meet CEOs, meet members of parliament and the ministers, building your network chain upwards. (Gene Tan)

Politicians are generalists and they have to be generalists in what they are doing. So, think building up capacity that have some generalists [sic] is kind of good. (Stephen Wyber)

Trust is number one in relationship with the politicians. (Gene Tan)

In advocacy, good arguments are the basics and are very important. (Carolina Botero)

Your messaging should be in the language of the audience – not “library speak” (Jennefer Nicholson)

18.10 Patience in Advocacy

Be patient. (Jennefer Nicholson)

Be persistent. (Rolf Hapel)

In advocacy, you need to have a lot of patience. (Wu Jianzhong)

Sometimes you do not have luck with some politicians and sometimes you are very lucky. Sometimes you just have to wait for three or four years. (Liv Sæteren)

Focus where you have a chance of some success – the hard issues are also important but can take a lot of time and resources so it is important to balance this with what else can be achieved in other areas or incrementally. (Jennefer Nicholson)

In advocacy, resilience is needed. (Wu Jianzhong)

The realisation of good things is proceeded by rough times. (Wu Jianzhong)

Timing is very important, be prepared for if an unplanned opportunity arises, or you have a chance to create a receptive opportunity. (Jennefer Nicholson)

Always help the politicians make decisions. If you have a larger project, break off the decision into small chunks of decision-making over a period of time. Maybe the politicians will support a pre-project around the theme, and then you can build upon this. When you come to the really big decisions, it will be hard for a politician to turn back, because they have already decided this and that on the way. (Rolf Hapel)

The first concept is persistence. If you want to achieve something, you have to get on people’s nerves in a charming and cheerful way, but you have to keep going. (Hans-Erich Au)

To keep the idea for so long, you must be a kind of mad! (Liv Sæteren)

18.11 Appearance in Advocacy

It is about three things: authenticity in your presentation, political foresight and a good basic knowledge of the issues about which you are talking. You should not think that you can only get ahead with politics and a good appearance, but you also have to convey expertise. (Andreas Degkwitz)

Always be authentic, there is no point in pretending, and take a good look at what is going on in my community. (Bernd Schmid-Ruhe)

Be confident about your skills. (Rashidah Begum)

Do not forget who you are, what you love, and use this even to advocate. Because then you do not use the language of libraries, you use the language everyone knows and then people are more excited about what you do. (Gene Tan)

Focus on putting forward your position rather than being distracted into defending yourself against other positions. (Jennefer Nicholson)

Librarians' main problem is they are too inward focused and forget about the community they are serving. (Jennefer Nicholson)

Librarians should have subjective consciousness and responsibility; we should act proactively and make new knowledge contributions. At the same time, we should have a sense of boundaries, we are not all-powerful. When librarians have subjective consciousness, it can be expected to advocate the library and display the value of the library accordingly. (Li Donglai)

Do not assume that you have a divine right to be heard, you need to play the game. (Stephen Wyber)

Our openness is that everyone can come to the library, so our openness must translate to openness of ideas. (Gene Tan)

What I would like to see from libraries are new creative formats for living democracy in the library as a meeting place. (Eric Hattke)

I have been in contact with libraries since my elementary school, and I feel myself lucky, so the sooner people discover libraries, the luckier they will be. (Li Donglai)

Make your issue likeable by being likeable yourself! (Stephen Wyber)

What you want to ignite in others must burn within you. (Motto by Hannelore Vogt. Unknown source)

Never complain, be positive at all times and offer solutions rather than problems. (Claudia Lux)