

I got my head shaken open in August when I attended an Exceptional Customer Service workshop at our university. We studied the telephone and face-to-face etiquette material that I was expecting. However, we did an exercise that calculated, in dollars, the price of a disgruntled patron leaving our campus. It was a staggering amount after factoring in four years of attendance, exponentially increased by the fact that the angry person will take five people (conservative estimate) with them or discourage from attending our school (Everidge, 2006) . If the sheer pleasure of making patrons happy and returning is not enough incentive to improve customer service, the bottom line certainly is! I shared that exercise with our forty-one student library assistants last Saturday during our customer service portion of their library training. They, too, were startled at the \$338,760 price tag resulting from a possible wretched service event.

A library must plan for exceptional customer service. Decisions need to be made to define your desired customer service culture (Cole, 2005) . The word ‘culture’ emphasizes that exceptional service must be a pervasive attitude of all members of the staff, on the floor even in offices not accessible to the public. Culture is also defined by the way you handle the “moments of truth” and consequent training in reaction to those interactions. Data gathered by conducting walk-through audits (Rowley, 1994) monitor total customer experience. Audits can be constructed to assess the speed of delivery service, convenience of library procedures, adjustment to the priorities of the patron, and other aspects of service. Armed with some data and the commitment to improving customer service, library policies must be examined to determine if rigid policies and lack of autonomy granted to employees is an impediment to improvement (M. Rogers, et al., 2001).

Learning the culture of your patrons is imperative (Younker, 2006) . Learning about what patrons listen to, do for weekend enjoyment, and the amount of popular culture embraced, informs decisions on service as well as collection development. This information will help decision-making about the style and form of information delivery. Using current communication tools online and engineering library webpages for personal service to patrons who have much experience with Amazon.com, instant messaging, and peer-to-peer websites is a way for libraries to be a presence in the world of techno-savvy patrons (Casey & Savastinuk, 2006) . Peer mentors, who are often the first and only contact with patrons, could be used to bring cultural cues to the attention of older staff members (Macke, 2005) . Ask student assistants if a particular library service is useful. For example: does a library blog communicate better with students than a newsletter? Defining space in the library promotes good will among patrons pursuing diverse activities (M. Rogers, 2006) . Just this week, I tried to study at a local university that I was visiting. I chose to study in a magnificent reading room with a fireplace, soft seating, and tables with copper reading lamps. It was so inviting and all the patrons in the packed room were respectfully silent. However, a balcony above this room was filled with students working on a project. Much laughter and conversation assaulted those below who were trying to read. I escaped and asked the reference desk attendant if there was a

place that was quiet and she referred me back to the room I had fled. I took that opportunity to examine all four floors of the library. Aside from study rooms that were packed, there was no other quiet area. The library was definitely a place for project work. There were few areas set aside to service patrons with a diverse purpose. Many libraries spend much time and money studying the demographics of the community (geographic and learning) served. There are marketing strategies that can be employed to hone in on services needed, to assist in building a collection that reflects those, and to help generate policies that streamline access for patrons served (Lifer & Albanese, 2001). Ethnic diversity not considered in policy making, collection development, and library ambiance (brochures, displays, signage, for example) is not serving the patrons well.

Patrons are busy people. Librarians and staff must be respectful of time pressures and serve immediate needs with aplomb. Assessing a patron's need is an invaluable skill with a high-quality reference interview being the tool for matching need with authentic resources. In these encounters with patrons, care must be taken that these are interactions and not just transactions. Impart skills in small bites, one trick at a time after trust has been built (Davis, 2006). If more instruction is necessary at a later date, then teach later when the patron is open to it. Having needs met in a non-threatening way will create a desire to return for more (Macke, 2005). While interacting with patrons, minimize the technical jargon we spent so much money in library school to acquire (Williams, 2006). There are many websites on the internet that help students interpret what we are talking about when we use "Boolean logic" or "precision" while web-searching. John Kupersmith (2006) has a website that aids libraries in constructing websites with alternative words that carry more meaning for patrons. When talking with patrons do not condescend or appear that you are "dumbing down" any words (Cronin, 2000; Woodsworth, 1996). Genuinely (everyone can spot a fake), meet the patron in their own comfort "zone." As a tool, federated searching presents a simpler environment for patrons as a "one-stop shopping" strategy. Making the library webpage an information portal consolidates a patron's efforts.

Practical suggestions to assure that the patron has a positive experience in the library abound. We must exclude "library dogs" – the sitters and pointers from our library service areas (DiMattia, 1992). Library staff must spend more time on the floor and less behind desks. Patrons are more likely to ask questions and better yet, staff can intervene with "Is there a way I can help you?" rather than the defensive-creating phrase "Do you need help?" Observing the body language of the patron is a skill to hone (Hahn, 2005). We have a spot on the carpet that could be marked with a question mark. It is the place where patrons who need help all pause and look around. We don't let them linger there for more than an instant. Library staff should engage in conversation with patrons to develop trust. Practice the "Be there" and "Make Their Day" aspects of the FISH! Philosophy (Charthouse, 2005) that we teach our student assistants. When talking with patrons, listen instead of taking over the situation by telling the patron what he/she needs to know. Don't anticipate a question (Brodsky, 2006). Let the patron unfold their desires. To create the Nordstrom experience in the library, all staff should have some working knowledge of all the departments or, at least, know who to ask. Staff should feel free to deliver service in areas they are just walking through (Staff, 2005). When filling out

Customer Service – Schmooze ‘Em or Lose ‘Em  
Sharon Porter

forms for a lost item or similar forms with lots of data to fill in, insisting that all the blanks be filled in to prove that a library worker is thorough, is not good customer service. Getting the essential information is plenty then, let the patron go ahead with life (Compton, 2005) . Improve the quality of reference answers to increase that 50% accuracy rate touted as a shameful reflection of poor service in libraries (Woodsworth, 1996) . Library staff should get out more. Set up kiosks in the student union, in dorms, and at special functions. Public library staffs can create a presence in the mall or at bus stations.

Patrons **do** write our paychecks. Library workers do not know the power that a particular patron has. The patron at the circulation desk may be the student who serves on the budget request committee or the business person who serves on the city’s finance committee (Cole, 2005) . Involving patrons as partners in developing services and procedures reflects a value you hold for them as long-term investments (Altman & Herson, 1998) . Ask the patrons often for their opinions to find out what most matters to them. Rewarding patrons for their loyalty will keep them coming back as well (DeFelice, 2006) . Recognize patrons who have read the most, attended the most programs, donated the most paperbacks, or read the most pages to the elderly. Patrons have many choices of where to get their information needs met. You want to make your library their first choice. The best cost-effective measure to assure exceptional customer service is schmoozing and kindness. They cost nothing!

## References

- Altman, E., & Herson, P. (1998). Service quality and customer satisfaction do matter. *American Libraries*, 29(7), 53.
- Brodsky, N. (2006). We all like to think we listen to our customers--but do we really hear them? *Inc.*, 28(7), 55-56.
- Casey, M. E., & Savastinuk, L. C. (2006). Library 2.0. (Cover story). *Library Journal*, 131(14), 40-42.
- Charthouse, L. (2005). Fish! Philosophy [Electronic Version]. Retrieved September 28, 2006 from [http://www.charthouse.com/fp\\_principles.asp?whoenter=](http://www.charthouse.com/fp_principles.asp?whoenter=).
- Cole, L. (2005). Thoughts on customer service. *Machine Design*, 77(23), 129-129.
- Compton, J. (2005). When CRM Leaves You Flat. *CRM Magazine*, 9(2), 12-12.
- Cronin, B. (2000). Customer Satisfaction. *Library Journal*, 125(17), 44.
- Davis, K. D. (2006). Mind the Retail Reference Gap. *Library Journal*, 131(9), 66-66.
- DeFelice, A. (2006). Opting for opt-in. *CRM Magazine*, 10(2), 14-14.
- DiMattia, S. S. (1992). From the president of RASD: Dogs - or stars? [Electronic Version]. *RQ*, 31, 307-309. Retrieved September 18, 2006.
- Everidge, J. a. T. M. (2006). Exceptional Customer Service. La Grande, Oregon: Training and Employment Consortium.
- Hahn, J. (2005). The Techniques and Benefits of Observation Inspired Customer Service. *Library Mosaics*, 16(4), 14-14.
- Kupersmith, J. (2006). Library terms that users understand. Retrieved September 12, 2006, from <http://www.jkup.net/terms.html>
- Lifer, E. S., & Albanese, A. R. (2001). Tapping into the Zen of Marketing. *Library Journal*, 126(8), 44.
- Macke, B. (2005). Roaches, Guerrillas, and "Librarians on the Loose". *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 31(6), 586-589.
- Rogers, M. (2006). How do you manage? When in doubt, throw 'em out? [Electronic Version]. *Library Journal*, 131, 82-84. Retrieved September 19, 2006 from <http://0search.ebscohost.com.eos.eou.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=21072526&site=ehost-live>

Customer Service – Schmooze ‘Em or Lose ‘Em  
Sharon Porter

Rogers, M., et al. (2001). How do you manage? Case study unhinged [Electronic Version]. *Library Journal*, 126, 67-69. Retrieved September 18, 2006 from <http://0search.ebscohost.com.eos.eou.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=5124889&site=ehost-live>

Rowley, J. (1994, 1994). Customer Experience of Libraries. *Library Review*, 43, 7-17.

Staff. (2005). A Nordstrom Experience. *Library Journal*, 130, 7-7.

Williams, L. (2006). Making "E" visible. *Library Journal*, 131(11), 40-43.

Woodsworth, A. (1996). Service a la your neighborhood store. *Library Journal*, 121(13), 49.

Yunker, J. M. (2006). I Want My MP3. *School Library Journal*, 52(8), 28-28.