

# Customer service is the key

Peter Fitzgerald, Trace Library

The Trace Library serves two federal government departments (Transport and Regional Development, and Communications and the Arts), part of another (the Maritime Transport Division of Workplace Relations and Small Business) and several of their associated organisations (around 1600 potential clients).

Our collection includes 1500 serial titles and 20 000 books, as well as videos, CD-ROMs, multimedia, standards and the papers from the Federal Parliament. Our oldest materials date from the 1920s. We have access to Reuters, Dialog and First Search, and we produce CFI (Communications Futures Index) covering the new communications technologies and their impacts on communications, transport and work (it is available through RMIT).

The Trace Library is open to the general public with approximately fifteen per cent of our customers coming from industry and research institutions. Because we serve so many external customers, we see the library as a part of our parent organisations' public face and corporate image.

We are also part of the nation's information infrastructure, (one-third of our communications materials is held by no other Australian library) with most of the collection reported to ABN. We respond to requests from other libraries immediately on receipt and aim to be a library of first resort.

During the last two years the departments we belong to have had considerable cuts in personnel and funds. Additionally we have had to face organisational, customer behaviour, technological and information industry change. The library has had to absorb parts of the collections and customers of abolished or re-organised federal authorities, which has considerably increased the variety of topics covered.

To meet the challenge of the changes enveloping us, we decided to focus on customer service and to maximise the resources available to us by thoroughly reviewing how we do things. We also respond to each new change, challenge or threat by instantly increasing our visibility and the awareness of our services with a publicity blitz.

Everything we do in the library centres on customer service, the reason for the library's existence. A vital part of our services is to advise and help our

customers to learn about information and libraries. We don't just catch fish for our customers — we also try to teach them how to fish for themselves.

Some of the the changes that we have recently implemented are not especially unusual. They include providing workstation access to the catalogue and new books listing, following up on completed inquiries, hand-delivering materials and always being open within our advertised hours. We ensure that the library presents well with lots of display and reading/use space, constant tidying and cleaning, and clear, dynamic signs.

Other aspects of our customer service are less usual, although some are derived from public libraries or small business. These include: having a customer service charter; conducting user surveys; using the catalogue to list Internet addresses, subject specialists and materials held elsewhere within the departments and electronic/full text journals and databases; giving our end products (such as reference inquiry reports, lists, guides, current awareness bulletins) colourful, distinctive covers; providing a food-dispensing machine (which also generates income); maintaining extensive Internet and intranet sites with refereed hypertext links; drawing together OPAC, CD-ROM, PC and multimedia to create an electronic information centre; providing a leisure reading collection of donated fiction paperbacks; having a single telephone number for all inquiries; using controlled subject terms which are meaningful and familiar to our users; and having the work area separate and not visible from use areas.

The library's staff comprise two full-time and two part-time librarians and a support person (who handles computer systems and purchasing). Among the librarians there are no set tasks — everyone does some cataloguing, mail/serial processing, reference, inter-library requests, and on-line searching. This means that everyone can handle any task, work loads are shared equally, and each person has a more varied and interesting job. Furthermore, this does not leave the library unable to process client requests because the particular person that would handle that type of request is away.

An effort has been made to eliminate unnecessary record keeping. There are no paper records for loans (all items are barcoded), reservations

and inter-library loans. We use the free-text notes field very heavily to record action taken on inter-library requests and orders. We keep no records of ALIA vouchers.

The Trace Library uses *Book Plus*, and several other software systems which help to simplify tasks. For example, to produce *What's new*, the library's electronic new items list, we use software that allows us to strip catalogue records into a script file which is then loaded onto the office networks. This easy-to-use, fast system obviates the need to re-key data.

We do not circulate journals. This is a time-consuming and expensive exercise which guarantees that most people on a circulation list are not aware of current developments, and prevents the library from being able to provide access to the most up-to-date information. We would be unable to respond to those requests (and we get a lot of them) wanting only the most recent information if we circulated our journals. Instead, we display current issues (earlier ones may be borrowed), index key articles, and provide specialised current contents services. Relevant current awareness services are purchased from other libraries and we rely on Reuters, rather than keeping long runs of newspapers.

We are experimenting with end-user searching and document delivery, and in training individual customers at their desks in using the Internet and networked CD-ROMs. We are looking at extending electronic delivery of services, especially individualised current awareness services.

Libraries are intermediaries and gateways between the users who want information and the information. Our customers really don't care whether the required information or document comes from our collection, another library's collection, or from a database. They want an effective and efficient service that delivers documents, advises and directs, that has appropriate systems in place and provides them with the skills needed in an information world (increasingly so that they can help themselves). Our ability to accept change positively, in fact to see everything in terms of change (we even change the furniture around every so often), and to extend and develop our services in a period of uncertainty has seen the Trace Library retain its share of corporate resources. ■