

# Library v. learning centre

'What the... is a learning centre?' or 'Why did the Cortina come into the library?'  
A response to the article 'Lithgow, first learning city in NSW', inCite, September 2005

When I was newly arrived as library manager of Bathurst City Library in New South Wales in 2001, I received an invitation to visit the site of the new learning centre in the nearby City of Lithgow. I was not sure what a learning centre was, so I accepted the invitation with enthusiasm, knowing I would be on a learning curve. I eventually set off, my heart aflutter, keen to see such a beast. Bear in mind I had been a public librarian in two states and manager in three library services, so my experience was not inconsiderable! Yet did I know what I was going to see? ...nah, not a clue. I was absolutely unaware that I was going to see the site of the new Lithgow Public Library (and a very nice library it turned out to be).

I am committed to fighting the insanity of the use of this misleading name, 'the learning centre'. Forgive me for being sceptical, but the recent phenomenon of renaming our public libraries 'learning centres' really is driving me to distraction. What's a learning centre and why are we inflicting this boring and confusingly inane nomenclature on our customers? I believe that, to the great detriment of public libraries, our core function is being clouded by the growing use of this title.

Public librarians have spent generations trying to imprint some recognition of what a library is into the minds of the general public. We have been successful to a degree but many people still regard the public library as an elite institution with nothing to offer them. Should we now further confuse our prospective customers with this confusing, misleading name and will we reclassify ourselves as 'learning centre specialists'?

Calling ourselves a learning centre confuses prospective users as to our pri-

mary focus (recreation!) and, I believe, absolutely acts as a barrier to those specific groups who are traditionally non-library users and whom we are trying to attract – youth and males.

The majority of our customers demonstrate, by borrowing fiction and general non-fiction and using our recreational audio-visual resources, that they are in the library for recreational purposes. Many people use the library as a place to meet for a coffee, to eat their lunch, to relax, to look at a newspaper, magazine or coffee-table book or to use the internet for e-mail or chat. Despite this statistically unchallengeable bias towards recreational use, we continue to value the few information seekers disproportionately in terms of diverting highly paid staff to cater to their needs (whims?) and in terms of resources allocated.

A modern library should be employing staff and resources in a way that responds to the actual usage patterns of customers, rather than catering for the information enquirer. The separate information desk should be eliminated. Those restful hours spent by qualified librarians answering the odd reference query should be redirected to support a single dual-purpose desk for circulation and information. This should be operated by all levels of library staff, trained and motivated to respond enthusiastically with proactive customer service to prospective customers and to all initial enquires without discrimination.

As a customer service training exercise, our staff regularly visit other public libraries in a secret-shopper role. In one large western Sydney library our shopper was actually told, by a presumably overworked information desk librarian, to 'come back tomorrow'. Yet not 5 metres away at the circulation desk, two staff stood waiting for customers. This response is simply not acceptable in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: customers are not prepared to wait, or accept being sent away until 'another day', but demand service NOW. In many instances on our visits, we found that information desk staff failed to look up from what they were doing to be proactive, or to ask if they could help; they failed to make eye contact with possible customers. The concept of a separate information desk is no longer relevant or sustainable, we need to provide the maximum customer service response at one service point by the maximum number of staff.

The library assistants at a service desk will always be asked for help from customers who are unaware and uncaring of any differentiation between staff or desks. Why should we separate information and circulation service points, as is often the case in library design? Many library assistants have excellent product knowledge, good customer service skills and are wasted in limited circulation functions. Customers who recognise a constantly friendly face among staff should be able to ask for help from that source.

Combining information and circulation functions, as we have done at Bathurst Library, has resulted in a reduction in operating costs of public library services, particularly in the long term. We reduced the number of qualified library staff and now use properly recruited, trained and motivated library assistants in their place.

All technical services staff, cataloguers, office staff and IT specialists working in public libraries should as a matter of course be regularly rostered on to the customer service desk so as to develop a customer service ethic. For how on earth does one gain and retain such an essential focus if one is not serving the customer on the floor? Naturally, I propose that all public library managers should also serve on customer service desks, as I do. Only thus, when all possible staff resources are diverted as a priority to the customer service function, will libraries provide a maximum customer service response effort.

Scarce staff resources can be deployed more effectively if all staff are working together with fewer distinctions between librarians, library technicians and other staff. A better team atmosphere will be engendered and better customer service will result. Staff in libraries should wear a uniform to create and foster a customer service style and facilitate easier identification by the potential customer. No more hiding behind a disguise of anonymity but an up-front availability, expressed by the corporate uniform, worn by all library staff, including the manager. Naturally librarians (though fewer) will still create initiatives and provide leadership, strategic direction and mentoring.

In terms of library layout, we also need to increase the ease of recreational access by adopting a retail or bookstore look, allowing easier browsing. Observe the more modern library layout and you will see many books being displayed cover out, as in a bookstore, and not neces-

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sarily in any order. It is more difficult for librarians to find a particular title, yet our browsing recreational readers love it. The information imperative (books on shelves and in order) must be overcome and browsing used more often in libraries, providing the recreational reader with easy access to the parts of the collection they want. Increased customer satisfaction and reduced staff time spent shelving will more than make up for any inconvenience to library staff.

Libraries need to be interesting and exciting places. For the young, a visit should be a good experience. That's why we give small kids stamps when they visit and why we parked a 1963 Cortina from the National Motor Racing Museum (Bathurst) in the library – just to create an interesting backdrop to a display for 'big kids'.

Many people who never come into the public library, thinking it's an 'elite institution' would find material, services or facilities here that meet their needs, even if it is only to sit and drink a coffee in a comfortable space and read today's newspaper. At Bathurst our external signage is deliberately designed to promote a non-cultural image and so we have large, un-library-like, impossible to ignore, gaudy, fluorescent signs proclaiming that we offer books, cool drinks, coffee and free internet, with not a mention of 'learning'.

In 1985 Bathurst Library lent 188 736 items, in 2005 we lent 289 197 items. This increase compares favourably to the United Kingdom

where usage statistics for public libraries are down 50 per cent over the last 20 years. How have we achieved our increase at Bathurst? By providing a customer-first attitude, a non-threatening, welcoming environment and promoting recreational material. In other words, giving users what they want, in a format they want and displayed the way they can easily access it.

I believe that librarians need to understand that the present century will see greater recreational demand and we need less focus on information and 'learning' as a driver for our services, as access to information through the internet and by as-yet unimagined technology and other resources improves for the majority of the population. We need to accept this premise and respond by restructuring our staffing structures, resources, attitudes and customer service practices accordingly.

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*Does this look like a library?*

*Public libraries need to adopt a new identity for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is not that of a learning centre but rather that of a recreation provider.*



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