

Customer service: musings from the front line

"One of the things I learned in library school is that when people have an information need, they'll always ask people they know before they ask a librarian. The trick is making sure that librarians are some of the people they know."

Jessamyn West

One of my first assignments for my graduate diploma in Library & Information Management was to understand information-seeking behaviour of library patrons by going 'undercover' and observing the desk staff at my chosen library, and report my interaction – very book and dagger stuff. The librarian on the ironically titled Help Desk did not look up from her work, and when I did catch her attention, looked like she wanted to be anywhere but there. By the end of our exchange, I ended up *apologising* to her for bothering her. Was she simply having a bad day? Needless to say my assignment made for some interesting reading.

Public libraries as we know are mercurial beasts subject to the whims of so many elements: budget, changing technologies, the internet, a savvier clientele, competing interests, outsourcing, an ageing library workforce, and did I mention budget?

In my experience, librarians are professional, wonderfully innovative, informed people who believe in the ethics of their profession. So how do we get this across to the people we are serving and to the Councils that are financing us?

The answer is simple, by providing quality, friendly, targeted, and professional customer service. I'm not talking about the over enthusiastic approach: blinding smiles and would you like a side order of crime fiction with that? I don't think that approach works for Australians. Rather we need a customer service attitude that welcomes our patrons, is polite, approachable, helpful, and professional. We should treat our patrons the way we want to be treated, not standing awkwardly by, while the librarian is busy doing more important work.

Which leads me to my first point: acknowledge the patron. Whether it's a smile, a hello, or saying "I won't be a moment".

Listen to the patron, and I mean really listen. We all know that most people are not really sure what they want and they don't want to appear silly or stupid. So if it's a difficult enquiry repeat the question and then, using our brilliant reference minds, narrow the problem and (hopefully) give the patron what they want.

Refer, confer or defer! If we can't answer a question, ask for help.

The front, circulation, reference, customer service desk – whatever the term is used should mean exactly that, being on desk. .

Know our stuff! There is no point touting our wares, if we have no idea how to use our own databases. Product knowledge is give good customer service. Library managers train your staff: they are worth the investment!

Library policies are integral for the smooth running of the library. Why? They provide an operational base for us and ensure fair and equitable treatment of our clients.

I have clocked many tours of duty on the front desk, and I confess that it is not always easy to be all things to all people. The library is a magnet for the weird and wonderful and my last observation as we navigate our way around the patrons, all the while running all our programs, is that patience, passion, and a healthy sense of humour are the keys to delivering quality service as well as maintaining our sanity!

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