

'Word of Mouth' – a strategy for engaging with customers

Our customers love us – the free local public library with books, CDs, DVDs, toys, wireless, internet, baby time, and great comfortable environments. But do they know everything we offer?

At a recent meeting a group of our City of Onkaparinga library team leaders and promotion staff with a passion for marketing and promotion strategy thought about our marketing plan and our budget and how to engage with those who do not know how wonderful we are. We had a shared 'moment of truth' about our regular customers being unaware of the breadth of our services. Then there are those who are yet to become customers.

Alongside marketing and promoting to attract new users we decided we need to promote ourselves to our current users. We have trained our staff in customer service, with operating principles and changes to procedures to support them in becoming more customer friendly. We have trained staff in engaging, used the 'fish' philosophy, changed our library décor with lounges, bright colours, art work, and other retail approaches. We have changed our collection policies to remove old, worn items, and to display in a more appealing manner.

But we still need to get the word out there.

And so *Word of Mouth* was born. *Word of Mouth* is a strategy designed to encourage all staff to take ownership of their role in promotion. We select a topic of the week or fortnight which promotes either a service or an event. Staff are asked to focus on this one topic and engage with customers.

The first topic was launched in the last few weeks of January when parents were low in cash, and children bored: "Ask me – What's free to do in Onkaparinga?" The focus was to promote our community information service and the huge range of free activities available to families over the holidays.

I visited each of our six libraries and talked to staff about the concept and the first program. We provided staff with:

- A badge saying – "Ask me – What's free to do in Onkaparinga?"
- A poster and multiscreen promotion slide.
- A list of links to relevant documents, web sites, and other information to assist staff. A reference link was available on a central place on our library intranet.
- A handout staff could provide to customers with relevant sites and pamphlets.
- Suggestions about how to promote the topic at each branch including displays of books, pamphlets etc.
- Emails to all staff with a link to the intranet site encouraging them to engage in the program and to have fun.

How did it go? Well, we expected customers to ask the questions – but they didn't. So we realised staff needed to take the lead.

Our next program was linked to Library Lovers Week. The idea this time was not to promote a service, but to engage with customers so they leave having had a great experience.

We are continuing with our program, the next focus on a service – our newspaper related databases using the theme: "Ask me about". We will continue to monitor the success of this strategy. Hopefully the *Word of Mouth* will spread and be a natural process for staff to proactively engage with customers and have fun!

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What the MSIT Library has learned from the retail industry

What has Metropolitan South Institute of TAFE Library learned from the retail industry in regards to customer service and how have they implemented what they have learned?

First, MSIT Library staff realise the importance of giving our customers what they want and need. Retailers obtain feedback from their customers through the use of surveys, telemarketers, or competitions. Feedback from MSIT customers is obtained from either talking directly to customers, our teachers and students, or by more formal means like questionnaires and focus groups. The suggestions made by our customers have been implemented in the way we provide our services and resources and in the type of services and products we provide.

Open when the customers want you to and make good use of advertising and promotions

Over the years MSIT have opened when customers want to use the library. Justice students and teachers have used the library on a Saturday. During the week the libraries have opened until 8pm for teachers and students to access resources when it is most convenient for them.

MSIT Libraries advertises the fact that customers can access our library catalogue and databases 24/7 during library orientations and with brochures and book marks. These are provided throughout the library and in packs sent out to students.

Promotions such as competitions and special displays are held throughout the year in the MSIT Libraries, but particularly during Library and Information Week or when students exhibit their assignments. MSIT are fortunate to have art and fashion students that are happy to display their projects in the library. The library also takes advantage to promote its services during other events like the Vintage Fashion Fair held at Mt Gravatt campus.

Roving Reference

It is rare to walk into a retail store without staff shouting out a greeting or approaching customers to ask how they can be of assistance. MSIT library staff have become roving reference librarians by sitting in the student areas and by roving around the library looking for opportunities to assist. This prevents students from ignoring the reference desk if they feel intimidated.

Training

Retail staff realise the importance of training with regards to serving customers. It is also important for library staff to hone their skills. At MSIT Library, staff have participated in their own specially developed training such as Customer Service in the Library or through ALIA PD courses such as the recent Managing for Service Quality.

MSIT Library staff take note of specific instances of service that has impressed them in retail stores and link it back to the way they serve customers in the library. These points are brought up in monthly staff meetings.

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