Super-Sizing at the Library:
Customer Service Best Practices

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Abstract

Because libraries exist to fulfill patron’s information needs, customer service is vitally important in libraries, yet often overlooked. To emphasize the importance of providing good customer service at every opportunity, several examples of great customer service from both public sector businesses and libraries are discussed. Techniques for using customers as marketing tools, such as relationship marketing and viral marketing, are reviewed. The current trend in libraries of developing a customer service policy is also examined.
Introduction

On a cold and rainy morning, patrons line up waiting for the library to open. When a vendor enters the building, a mother and toddler try to follow him into the vestibule to stay warm; they are told by a librarian, “we’re not open yet,” and forced to return outside. The child starts to cry.

Two children and their grandmother approach the children’s reference desk seeking “books about firemen.” The librarian addresses only the adult during the entire transaction, does not ask the child’s age or reading level, and does not think creatively about which keywords to use in her search, resulting in a long investigation. When she finally locates a single title, she retrieves it alone without taking the opportunity to educate the patrons about its location.

A patron approaches the desk to check out several books. Because she does not have a library card, she is asked to apply for one. When she gives her address, the librarian tells her, “Because you don’t live in our community, I can’t issue you a card and you can’t check out those books. You’ll have to go to your own library.” The patron leaves empty-handed.

Situations like these are common in libraries all over the United States. Their uniting problem? Poor customer service. Public libraries are not typically known for their outstanding customer service; they are instead viewed as bureaucratic locations where the patron must follow the rules and keep the volume down. However, customer service has over the last few years become a hot topic at American libraries, as they are dependent upon public support. In order to thrive, libraries must learn from the public sector and court customers via excellent customer service practices.
What Is Good Customer Service?

Everyone knows poor customer service when they see it: lots of rules, staff that doesn’t listen to or care about the customer’s needs. Karen Hyman calls this “the Rule of 1965,” meaning that libraries consider the services they’ve offered for a long time (i.e. prior to 1965) to be standard, and everything else, including services that might be difficult to execute, less popular, or expensive, to be extras that patrons must jump through hoops to get. (Hyman, 1999) But what is good customer service, and how is it applied in a library setting?

One such example can be found in the Seattle Public Library (SPL) system. Between 1998 and 2008, this library system conducted a “Libraries for All” campaign, in which they constructed several new facilities and improved the existing ones. However, they didn’t arbitrarily decide how to configure their new and existing buildings: they asked patrons what they wanted, and then made their patrons’ desires a reality. As a result, their branch libraries have features like a “green roof” planted with low-water-use plants, a periscope inside the Ballard branch that provides patrons with views of the Olympic Mountains, sculpture and art created expressly for Library locations, relaxing reading rooms, more computers, and coffee carts. The Central library even has community landmark status, thanks to its innovative design. SPL made these changes because they believe that, “You have to build a culture that bases all decisions, activities, and services on what is in the best interest of the user.” (Mathews, 2009) This constitutes good customer service.

However, good customer service is not just about reacting to needs; it is also about anticipating those needs in advance. The Darien Public Library (DPL) in Connecticut calls this “extreme customer service” and they have won awards and accolades for providing it. According to the DPL, “service with a smile” is not enough: if a librarian smiles at the patron and points in
the direction of what the patron is looking for, it is considered gatekeeping, not service. The DPL says,

“The Library seeks to reach beyond standard customer service to extend what it does for its customers, all the while looking for innovation. In this way, every activity of the Library can be organized to the same end – service. And the expectation is that today’s extended customer service will become tomorrow’s standard customer service, while innovations provide the basis for new levels of service. The result is a constant renewal throughout the Library of its service imperative, always with the goal of providing Extreme Customer Service.” (http://www.darienlibrary.org/extremecustomerservice, p. 12)

This means that at the DPL, rules are made to be bent if a customer needs it; employees are empowered to make decisions that benefit customers; systems are made easy to use for patrons; and there is no charge or limit for printing from library computers. The DPL makes every attempt to anticipate customer needs for its collection and technology by studying use and circulation patterns and responding by increasing the number of computers, buying extra copies of bestsellers so patrons won’t have to wait, and the like. The DPL also makes it a priority to provide service and leadership to the community and its groups, not just individual users. All of this adds up to the kind of customer service that every library in the United States should be providing every day.

For customer service advice, libraries should also look beyond their own world to the public sector. When people talk about companies providing great customer service, Southwest Airlines is frequently mentioned. In a tough U.S. economy, Southwest has made it a top priority to keep fares low and charge no fees for checked bags, unlike most of their competitors. Also, Southwest asks its employees to “Liv[e] the Southwest Way, which is to have a Warrior Spirit, a Servant’s Heart, and a Fun-LUVing Attitude.” Southwest’s spirit of hard work, proactivity, and fun keeps customers flying on their planes – and libraries can learn much from their example.

Zappos, a popular online shoe retailer, is also a customer service pioneer. Zappos’ mission is “to
provide the best customer service possible,” and to do this they operates on ten core principles, including “Deliver Wow Through Service,” “Create Fun and a Little Weirdness,” “Build Open and Honest Relationships With Communication,” and “Be Humble” (Tolley-Stokes, 2009). All of these principles can – and should – easily be applied to library customer service. What companies like Southwest and Zappos remind us, as librarians, is that our job is to serve people. If we can do this with passion and excitement, our customers will appreciate it and return: as Rebecca Tolley-Stokes writes, “Positive experiences are key to generating return visits to the library.” (p. 289).

**Marketing Your Library, Via Your Customers**

In order to bring customers to the library, and keep them coming back, libraries need to market their services. Marketing is not something that libraries generally prioritize, if they do it at all. One reason is that libraries devote most of their budgets to materials and staff salaries, with little left over for marketing campaigns. However, in order to stay viable, libraries must learn how to sell themselves as a vitally important service provider to the community. There are many ways to market libraries: via print, online, television, etc. However, not all of them are expensive, and several techniques utilize customers themselves as the marketing tool. One way to serve your customers and your library well at the same time is called relationship marketing, and it involves building relationships with your customers so that they will not only return to the library, but also tell their friends to visit. Besant and Sharp define relationship marketing as “the demonstration of a deep and abiding regard for the customer and this is displayed in the product and services sold, in the interaction between company and customer…” The theory behind relationship marketing is that in order to create relationships with your customers, you have to
listen to them, find out what they want, and provide it. If you satisfy their needs, you will retain them as customers, and those customers will in turn bring in others.

Viral marketing is another way to put your customers to work for you. Viral marketing is a technique for marketing products and services that relies on the use of social networks. It can take the form of an email, a YouTube video, or even a word-of-mouth conversation; and the thought is that ideas are passed from one person to the next, much as one might pass along a virus. Viral marketing is popular because it is inexpensive and simple. Successful viral marketing contains three components: an emotional hook to which people can connect; an element of public service, which makes people want to help others by sharing the story; and a trigger, which is defined as “an environmental reminder to talk about an idea” (Heath and Heath, 2009). As budget-conscious marketers, libraries should be using this type of marketing to reach as many customers as possible.

**Promoting Great Customer Service Practices With Employees**

Managers who want to promote positive customer service practices amongst their staff must train them appropriately. If employees fully understand the library’s policies and priorities, they can be empowered to make small rule-bending decisions for patrons (extending the due date of a book for a vacationing patron, for example). These kinds of actions will result in goodwill between staff and patrons, who may start to view the library in a new light.

Another way to inform employees how customers should be treated is to create a customer service policy for the library. These policies are gaining in popularity: in fact, PLA now offers for purchase a “Train the Trainer” kit which prepares trainers to teach a customer
service workshop for libraries, where the focus is on developing an effective library customer service policy. Many such policies are available on the websites of libraries all over the country.

One example can be found on the website of the Brooklyn, New York Public Library, which is very clear about what customers should receive when they visit this library:

“During interactions with library staff, customers can expect to:
- Be acknowledged appropriately
- Be treated courteously and respectfully
- Be valued for their input
- Receive the same high standard of service regardless of age, race, ethnicity, religion, gender, physical limitations, or any other criteria
- Receive prompt and timely service
- Receive knowledgeable service and professionalism from all staff
- Have open access to traditional and innovative resources and instruction in their use
- Have their privacy and confidentiality respected, and
- Have responsive, community-oriented service
The library endorses high standards of customer service and supports it through a plan of employee trainings, leadership development and opportunities for customer input.”
(http://www.brooklynpubliclibrary.org/legal/customer-service.jsp)

Other policies also include instructions for library employees on appropriate behavior in their customer interactions. In clear, concise language, these policies spell out how interactions between patrons and library staff should be conducted, focusing in particular on helpful, friendly, and prompt service.

Conclusion

Libraries are customer service-oriented organizations – after all, without our customers, a library would simply be a warehouse. In order to keep patrons coming through the doors, it is crucial that libraries provide the best possible service to their customers at all times. Managers need to lead the charge by establishing a customer service policy for their library that is clear for all staff, and then they need to lead by example and demonstrate this policy in action.
Many good customer service practices sound simple and obvious: for example, smile. However, public librarians are often so rooted in the rules that they have a hard time serving patrons as well as they could. In my personal experience of libraries, I see library staff giving less than customers deserve, and I see customers who think the library is an unyielding, inflexible entity. My goal in my library career will always be to find ways to say “yes” instead of “no,” thereby helping to change this perception. According to Besant and Sharp, “The way to create a dynamic library organization is by understanding and cultivating customers.” If we listen to our customers, understand what they desire, and in response, offer more instead of less, everyone is happy. In the immortal words of McDonald’s, we should be looking for opportunities to ask the library equivalent of, “Do you want fries with that?”
References


**Other Recommended Reading:**


