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Transferring corporate service philosophy to a library setting

By: David King

Imagine walking into your bank to make a deposit. As you approach the teller, you decide to ask about current CD rates. After asking your question, the frazzled teller says "Well, they're on that big sign right behind me. Look for yourself!" If this attitude became the norm at your bank, you would probably begin to look for another bank one that treated you as a respected customer. Now transfer this same scenario to a library setting: the bank customer is the patron and the teller is the librarian. If that patron doesn't receive the service she expects, she now has other choices, like fee-based agencies, database connections, or simply not using the library.

This article, which discusses how the concept of customer service can translate to a library setting, is arranged in three sections: 1) a discussion of the current state of customer-service orientation in the library; 2) an examination of top-ranked service providers in the corporate world and their philosophy of customer service; and 3) the viability of adapting a service mentality to the library setting.

Current State of Customer Service in the Library

McDonalds and MasterCard share similar philosophies. They are both examples of a new type of organization the service organization. "Service organizations are becoming more important in our daily lives as the United States changes from manufacturing to a more service-oriented society." [1] This change has also affected the way customers are treated. Service organizations are beginning to focus on serving the customer, or "customer service."

This new generation of pampered customers has a certain set of expectations that are already being met by clothing retailers, loan officers, and restaurant servers. They expect to be served by employees who are not only knowledgeable about their products, but who are courteous at all times to all customers.

The customer takes these service expectations to the library as well. Today, when patrons walk into a library, they expect to be warmly greeted by a courteous librarian. When they ask a question, they expect a prompt, correct answer. They also expect to be treated with courtesy and full attention, regardless of their own behavior. These are the demanding customers of the '90s.

Unfortunately, many libraries don't have a strong history of service-orientation. Although librarians are learning how to develop a more service-oriented attitude toward patrons, they need to take this attitude one step further if they wish to compete with book stores, other library branches, and fee-based agencies. Here are two examples of poor service the author has experienced.

During his undergraduate years as a student, the author attended a small liberal arts college. Although knowledgeable, the librarians at this Midwestern college's library were not focused on the customer. For example, this library had no observable reference desk. There was no librarian sitting in a clearly marked area ready to answer questions. Instead, the reference librarian had an office to the side of the reference area, and her door was usually shut. The librarian seemed only to emerge from this office when her own question needed to be answered. This unavailability resulted in many hours spent on wild goose chases in the library, because professional staff were not available to help students.

Lack of customer service isn't unique to small or mid-sized libraries. For instance, in one state university library, the reference desks are clearly visible and are always staffed by professional librarians. However, the librarians are sometimes preoccupied with other work. And, when answering questions, some of these reference librarians speak in a condescending manner, making the patron feel as if he were wasting their time. It's true that librarians are often overworked, and have to juggle many tasks at once. But, this lack of concern for serving the patron is a loose rung in the librarian's ladder.

As Bernard Vavrek notes, "a philosophy of service [orientation for librarians], which certainly includes definition, is lagging."^[2] Theoretically, a librarian should want to help patrons after all, the job of librarian revolves around finding information for others. In fact, even the librarian's salary is dependent on the patron and, therefore, on the patron's satisfaction with the system. Public libraries are funded by taxpayers' money, and university libraries are largely funded through public funds and student tuition. Librarians need to begin to develop a customer service philosophy.

Customer Service in the "Real World"

Now that we've examined the problem, let's look at customer service in the corporate setting. What is the corporate philosophy of customer service, and how is it provided? Consider two service-oriented chain-stores, Home Depot and Bookstar.

"Every customer has to be treated like your mother, your father, your sister, or your brother."^[3] This is how Bernard Marcus, chief executive of Home Depot, a national hardware store, wants his customers to be treated. "When we started Home Depot, we recognized that something was missing in retailing. It was having people care about the customer."^[4] In fact, to encourage his employees to care about the customer, Home Depot requires all their employees to own stock in the company, which helps employees work harder to please customers and, in turn, to strengthen customer loyalty. If employees don't keep customers happy, business might drop off and their stock price might plunge. There are also weekly seminars for employees on all Home Depot's products, called "product knowledge" classes these seminars educate employees about home repair and about what

can be built and fixed with all the gadgets sold by Home Depot.[5]

Another company that embraces a service philosophy is a little closer to the library field. Bookstar, a national bookstore chain, focuses heavily on serving the customer. For example, instead of pointing out where a book is located, employees are encouraged to walk with the customer to the correct section of the store, find the correct book, and place that book in the customer's hands.[6] In fact, Bookstar's employee handbook states that employees will "greet every customer ... and ... provide excellent customer service."[7]

These two examples show that good customer service includes these elements: 1) employees need to treat the customer as a valued person, not an interruption; 2) employees need to have some type of investment in the company, so they feel a part of the organization; 3) employees need to know as much as they can about each product they sell; and 4) make sure customers have what they want when they leave. If a company operates under these four principles, customers will return to the store.

Service Mentality in the Library

What can librarians learn from these examples? Let's categorize these statements into four areas of customer service:

1. Treat the customer like a "valued person."
2. Invest in the company.
3. Know the product.
4. Make sure patrons get what they came for.

1. Treat the customer like a "valued person."

At Bookstar, employees focus on helping each customer, so customers can get the most out of their shopping time. Consequently, customers generally come in, buy, and leave in a relatively short period of time. In a large library, thousands of people come in each day, asking questions, researching a topic, or needing other types of service offered only in a library. Librarians sometimes have a difficult time handling this sea of people.

When one person arrives at the reference desk with a detailed question about an unfamiliar topic, the phone is ringing continually, and the reference desk line loops out the door, a business-like mentality sets in, and librarians tend to do just enough to send the person on her way as quickly as possible. This way, the librarian can quickly answer questions and begin to thin out the crowd; unfortunately, since the person's question might not have been fully answered, she might be back to the reference desk three or four more times, rather than once.

In fact, librarians don't refer to people in the library as "people" they easily become faceless "patrons," or more appropriately, "users." It is time to change this way of thinking. "Users (or readers or clients or patrons or information seekers or whatever), although referred to collectively, are individuals." [8] Although a collective term like "patrons" or "users" is useful to librarians on a practical level, librarians need to remember that patrons are not a homogenous group, but are individuals, and should be treated as such.

There are many ways to treat patrons as individuals. For starters, librarians can pay more attention to the individual when she asks a question. If the librarian is busy doing something else, he should immediately drop what he is doing and "serve the customer." Also, when a reference librarian is sitting at the reference desk, he should focus on potential customers of that desk rather than his reading material or another project. This reveals a level of professionalism that is already established in other service settings, and should be included in a librarian's job description. Finally, remember that no matter how ridiculous a question seems, it is not ridiculous to the library customer who has courageously approached the reference desk to ask for help. Just smile and help patrons find whatever it is they need.

2. Invest In the Company.

Remember Home Depot's policy of including every employee as a stockholder? Having a stake in the company's profitability encourages employees to make every effort to treat customers as individuals. In the same way, a librarian should "invest" in his library. Obviously, a librarian can't own stock in a library, but a librarian can "invest" in unique, service-oriented ways. Library school should be a good starting point for this investment. Professors can focus training on more than the intellectual aspects of the job, and include lectures on service-philosophy. By graduation, a library student will be able to function professionally in a service organization, and will have laid a foundation for caring about the service provided by their library.

After landing that first job, a librarian can actively help plan new library programs. By improving the programs and activities of the library and by making an effort to be involved in planning for the library's customers, a librarian will have a feeling of "investing" in the library. After planning a program, the librarian cares more about how the program is progressing and if people involved in the program are enjoying it. The librarian is able to have a guiding hand in serving the customer.

3. Know the Product.

It also helps to know the "product" of the library. To do this, a librarian can read library-related journals, take an active part in library research and write about the field. Also, going to continuing education classes and seminars can help stimulate ideas for better service. Even by simply walking through the stacks, a librarian will become familiar with the library in a more practical way. Think of the service a librarian can provide by instantly directing a customer to the correct row of books on a particular topic ("third shelf to your left, halfway down"), or better yet, by physically taking her to the shelf, similar to Bookstar's philosophy.

4. Make sure patrons get what they came for.

At Home Depot, the employees always make sure that their customers leave with the things they need. They ask questions, are able to suggest better items, and are able to direct customers to appropriate areas of the store. Sometimes the chief executive himself puts on an apron and walks the floors, helping his employees provide top-notch service.

Librarians can do the same thing. Reference librarians are often told that they need to ask "is this what you're looking for?" or "do you need more information?" This question-asking

can't be stressed enough as a primary form of customer service. A model for this type of service can be seen in the restaurant business. Go to a good restaurant and listen to the server. He constantly asks questions before the meal, during the meal, and when you're paying the bill.

Before the meal, the server will take your order and ask if you'd like anything else. Librarians should use this same philosophy when the patron approaches the reference desk and says "I need help finding... ." A librarian needs to listen and ask probing questions in order to find the best information before sending the person to the stacks. Questioning at this point also helps clarify the need if the patron's questions are unclear.

During the meal, the server asks if you need more to drink, if the meal is acceptable, and if you want dessert. A librarian can check with the patron on his satisfaction with the library's service. If possible, check on patrons to see if they are finding what they need. A librarian can also walk the floors of the library and randomly ask patrons how their search is progressing. This shows patrons that the library really cares about their needs.

After the meal, the waiter again makes sure that the dinner was satisfactory. While a librarian shouldn't pester patrons in the library, librarians do have a responsibility to make sure these customers are finding what they need. Always make sure that the patron knows he's welcome to come back to the reference desk if he needs further information. Also, a survey of patron satisfaction might help steer the library in the right direction.

Think back to the rude bank teller described at the beginning of this article. If this employee had focused on improving his customer service skills, his customer would not be hunting for another bank. In the same way, if librarians adapt a customer-service orientation within the library, it will continue to attract curious patrons. These patrons, if treated like welcome customers, will continue to support the library, rather than take their information needs somewhere else.

End Notes:

1. Jo Bell Whitlatch, "Reference service effectiveness," RQ 30 (Winter 1990): 205.
2. Bernard Vavrek, "The meaning of reference service from the field," Catholic Library World 54 (February 1983): 261.
3. Patricia Sellers and Andrew Erdman, "Companies that serve you best," Fortune 127 (May 31, 1993): 74.
4. Leslie Bayor and Kim Bryan, "Home Depot, Inc.," Advertising Age 64

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6. Dave Strickler, "What I learned in a bookstore," Library Journal
117 (June 1992): 48.

7. *ibid.*

8. James Rettig, "Self-determining information seekers," RQ 32
(Winter 1992): 158.

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