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Improving Customer Service

Without customers, libraries are just buildings filled with books and computers. Thus, customer service is imperative in order to gain and retain customers. Excellent customer service is also important to gain library supporters for the town budget or fundraising. There are a number of ways to improve customer service. They include vocalization, exceeding expectations, training with incentives, simplification, observation, renovation, and evaluation.

Casey and Stephens (2008) suggested that library staff members with the most customer contact vocalize their suggestions to higher management, who don't always have contact with customers. They encouraged tactfulness, honesty, and an even manner, and cited online suggestion boxes as an approach for the staff on the front lines to be in touch with management about their ideas.

Exceeding expectations is another method to improve customer service. Hulsey (2003) related his experience with a "purchase on demand" feature at the Willard Public Library in Michigan, serving a population of about 90,000. Instead of requesting items through interlibrary loan, Hulsey's library decided to purchase items that patrons requested. With data that ILL requests were costing the library around thirty dollars and taking a long time, purchasing items on demand was a better option for Hulsey's library.

The Clearwater Public Library System in Florida implemented staff training with incentives to boost service. Kothe et. al (2008) described familiarizing staff with the library's electronic resources by emailing a question that could be answered with a specific resource. At

the end of the month, a grand prize winner was selected. The idea was to train staff and improve customer service by having staff able to answer questions about the library's databases.

Simplification often improves a customer's experience by streamlining and speeding up service. Blumenstein (2007) wrote about the main branch of the Public Library of Cincinnati doing just that by doing away with subject-specific reference desks, implementing roving reference librarians, and reverting to Dewey Decimal classification instead of compartmentalizing the collection into subjects. Furthermore, the library added kiosks throughout the building to improve access to online materials.

An additional strategy to better a customer's experience in the library is pure observation. Being more in tune with customers can personalize their service before they even speak, as noted by Hahn (2005). He looked at how customers were walking and what they were carrying to get a sense of what they might need. A person walking slowly and looking around may be in unfamiliar territory and need more help than someone speeding toward the reference desk to request a study room. Similarly, a customer heading toward the circulation desk with nothing in their hands may be there to pay a fine or some other, less routine function. One can learn a lot by just by looking and engaging with a customer.

Perhaps the holy grail of bettering customer service is renovation. Done properly, a renovated building can do wonders. Martin and Kenney (2004) described a few renovation projects that were underway at the time of publication, including the Darien Library in Connecticut. Darien's focus was on convenience and was accomplished by grouping high-traffic functions together, implementing RFID tags, and doing away with the traditional reference desk. At the Free Library of Philadelphia, the renovation included an "urban room" with extended hours and space for lectures and other programs. If the library's budget permits, a renovation that

is focused on customer use can greatly improve service because the new (or revised) building will have been designed around customer needs.

Finally, what better way to improve service than by evaluating the current service being offered? Burkamp and Virbick (2002) related the experience of hiring “secret shoppers” to evaluate the customer experience in the Arapahoe Library District in Colorado. Each department had its own criteria, and everyone—including the director—was included. Other areas of critique included how busy the library was, the lighting, and cleanliness. The “shoppers” wrote down first impressions and examined how staff provided excellent service while properly observing library policies. Although this method may sound sneaky, it’s a useful tool to see what’s going right and fix what’s going wrong.

Clearly, not all the methods listed are right for every library. However, by taking a step back and working on the customer experience, libraries can gain supporters, improve circulation, tailor programming to specific needs, and remain a relevant, vibrant part of their community.

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