
Now Serving Customer 7,528,413

Lorraine J. Pellack, Guest Columnist

Correspondence concerning this column should be addressed to **Diane Zabel**, Schreyer Business Library, The Pennsylvania State University, 309 Paterno Library, University Park, PA 16802; e-mail: dxz2@psu.edu.

Lorraine J. Pellack is Head, Science and Technology Department, Parks Library, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa.

This is the second reflective essay that Lorraine J. Pellack has contributed to *Reference & User Services Quarterly* (RUSQ). She created a buzz with her guest editorial, “First Impressions and Rethinking Reference Questions” (see RUSQ 49, no. 1 [Fall 2009]: 4, 6). She continues the discussion on the importance of service excellence in this provocative piece.—*Editor*

Libraries . . . are dedicated to serving their customers. Their mission statements attest to this goal, and even relatively junior staff members have been told again and again that service is a top priority. At the same time, customer service takes time away from real work and is widely viewed as a frill. It even seems that while more lip service is paid to it, the *quantity and quality* of customer service may actually have *declined* in the past twenty years.¹

Reading this statement for the first time positively chilled me to the bone. Woodward is very direct at describing workplace climates where staff are increasingly unhappy working with the general public, stretched with multitasking, and have continually evolving job descriptions. She hints that the decline of quantity is probably due to budget cuts with fewer staff being stretched thin but spends most of this chapter talking about possible causes in quality decline, which whittle down to motivation, job satisfaction, and adapting to change. Both quantity and quality of services are seriously important concerns and can be observed at a department or organization level as well as at an individual level.

WHO ARE YOU, AS A LIBRARY, SERVING?

Libraries, by their very nature, are public service organizations—even corporate and special libraries. Serving the needs of patrons is paramount to fulfilling the library mission. Yet, when making decisions about new services, cutting services, or finding solutions to problems, the patron point of view is often not considered, is considered only lightly, or is overridden by higher budgetary priorities. When budgets are examined for places to cut, services that are considered tangential are targeted, especially services that do not have readily-visible benefits. Checkout rates, door counts, and shelving statistics are all easily quantifiable and enable circulation departments to readily justify numbers of staff needed to maintain basic circulation services. On the down side, many other library services are not so readily quantifiable:

- finding a misshelved book for a researcher faster than they could have received it via ILL
- helping a graduate student find a key reference for their dissertation
- troubleshooting access problems for a patron trying to access a journal article
- providing stapler, hole-punch and/or pencil sharpeners in convenient locations
- equipping printers with both single and double-sided printing
- ensuring computer workstations are functioning properly or repaired quickly
- relieving angst of a patron who cannot find sufficient articles for their term paper

A colleague of mine once said, “Cutting services (for whatever reason) is like amputating your feet because the price of shoes is increasing.” Yes, we could try going barefoot—and in some climates that might be doable—however, that is missing the point. It’s time we stop worrying about the price of the shoes and focus instead on the impact shoes might have on someone’s life.

So, how does one show impact of a service on someone’s life? At what level should increasing enrollments in distance education programs justify shipping library books to remote students in spite of library budget cuts? Does replacing a human being with an automated phone system make sense in a service-oriented environment? When does it become acceptable to provide a service for the “greater good” even if it flies in the face of budgetary frugality? Staying financially afloat is important but at what cost to our future customer loyalty and perceived usefulness?

Start With Why is a 2009 book by Simon Sinek, and Steven Bell and Brian Mathews have recently praised its concepts, as they encourage librarians to reexamine why they offer some services. Bell talked about branding and loyalty: “Before you can build trust, authenticity, relationships, professional integrity or a following, you must first establish the WHY. The WHY is simply what you believe and what drives your message.”² Essentially, he asserts that once you consider the why of your services, then you can better position your library to ensure customer loyalty. Give them a reason to be proud of you and they will recommend you to their friends and help you build up your patron base. His comments made me stop and dream about a future scenario when the library would be the talk of the day among our patrons. Can’t you just imagine overhearing students on the bus talking about “have you heard what cool thing the library is doing today? It’s really going to make my life/research SO much easier than before!”

Brian Mathews followed up Bell’s *LJ* column with a thought-provoking blog posting. Focusing on the “why” of library social media services, Mathews said:

I keep coming back to that question of why bother . . . at all? If we deleted all of our [social media]

accounts today would it really matter? Would anyone notice? What impact would it have (or does it have) on our operations?³

He was not being negative; rather, he used the “why” as a way to relaunch and rethink how and why he is providing certain services in his library in order to improve them. In the throes of budget cutbacks, have we, as a profession, forgotten the “why” in library services? Why do we bother staffing reference desks? What impact would it have (or does it have) on other library operations or our patrons? If we stopped giving course-related instruction sessions, would anyone notice? Stop and ask yourself why you are providing certain services and, once you know that, how might this enable you to re-focus and improve them?

WHO ARE YOU, INDIVIDUALLY, SERVING?

During tough economic times, administrators ask department heads to justify their existence and the need for each and every one of their staff. Who is contributing, and who could we make do without? How valuable are you to your library and your patrons? Are you here because you have to be (in order to garner a paycheck)? Are you here because you want to be (enthusiastically)? Or, are you somewhere in between?

Dr. Alan Zimmerman recommends individuals ask themselves five questions to define their purpose.⁴

I posit that Zimmerman’s questions can be altered slightly to fit to libraries as a whole as well as librarians individually:

1. What makes you tick, or what makes your day?
2. What parts of your job do you enjoy so well that you would do it without pay?
3. What aspect(s) of your job excites you the most? How can you become contagious and infect those around you with this same enthusiasm?
4. Who are you becoming personally and professionally? Are you comfortable with him/her?
5. Are you at peace with your job performance, or does something seem to be missing or off-kilter? Is there something you wish you were doing better at?

I would add to the original five:

6. What value do you bring to your coworkers? Patrons?
7. What impact do you have locally?
8. Are you of service to those around you? How do you define “service”?
9. Who are you answerable to? (Hint: the answer is never you.) Will they feel the same about your performance?

Dr. Zimmerman urges people to “stay conscious of the meaning in what you do. If you don’t know the meaning of what you do, you don’t bring much value to what you do.” How valuable are you and what impact have you made on

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your patrons recently, as a library and as an individual?

Customer service was one of those fads that we all paid tribute to many years ago, and then we moved on to bigger and better issues. At the time, we attended numerous workshops on customer service, presumably put techniques into practice, and then filed away all our handouts. There is a general sense that we took care of it at the time and should be good at it by now, so we can put all that behind us as past history. Realistically, customer service permeates everything we do in public services—in the past, present, and future of libraries. Desatnick and Detzel asserted that “customer service excellence begins with a restless dissatisfaction with the status quo and the belief that one can do better.”⁵ How satisfied are you with the status quo? Are you standing still or continually improving? Who are you really serving and why? Have you given any thought to this recently or are you just numbly assisting yet another person in the line?

References

1. Jeanette Woodward, *Creating the Customer-Driven Academic Library* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2009), 156, emphases added.
2. Steven Bell, “The WHY of Your Brand,” *Library Journal* (Jan. 20, 2011), www.libraryjournal.com/lj/communityacademiclibraries/888893-419/the_why_of_your_brand.html.csp (accessed Sept. 19, 2011).
3. Brian Mathews, “Why Does My Library Use Social Media?” *The Ubiquitous Librarian* (July 6, 2011), <http://chronicle.com/blognet/work/theubiquitouslibrarian/2011/07/06/why-does-my-library-use-social-media/> (accessed Sept. 19, 2011).
4. Alan Zimmerman, “If You Don’t Stand for Something, You’ll Fall for Anything,” *Tuesday’s Tip with Dr. Zimmerman* 145 (Mar. 25, 2003).
5. Robert L. Desatnick and Denis H. Detzel, *Managing to Keep the Customer: How to Achieve and Maintain Superior Customer Service Throughout the Organization*, revised edition (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993), 18.