

The Customer Is Always Right: Law Libraries in the Age of Customer Service

by James Duggan

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The constant mantra of the “suits,” the management-types of my pre-librarian years in the fast-paced worlds of food-service and retail men’s clothing, was “The Customer is always right.” My bosses would imply that this meant that I must “do what it takes to make the sale and make the customer happy.” Fortunately, I was surprisingly good at saying things with a straight face like “Why yes, that 100% polyester orange striped shirt goes with anything, *especially* those brown sansabelt rayon slacks!” and “I’m sorry, my mistake, I didn’t realize that when you said you wanted your steak well done, you meant nicely cooked.” Despite my (some might say) rather tenuous grip on honesty, I actually worked hard to listen to what the customer was saying, and then tried to resolve the need or problem (as best I could) *to the customer’s satisfaction*. This service orientation probably contributed more than anything else to my desire to become a librarian.

One of the biggest trends today in library operations is the emphasis on customer service. Darlene E. Weingand, in her book, *Customer Service Excellence: A Concise Guide for Librarians*, suggests that unless libraries anticipate and respond to customer needs, customers will “vote with their feet” and obtain information somewhere else. While libraries in general have been slow to embrace the customer service mantra, the

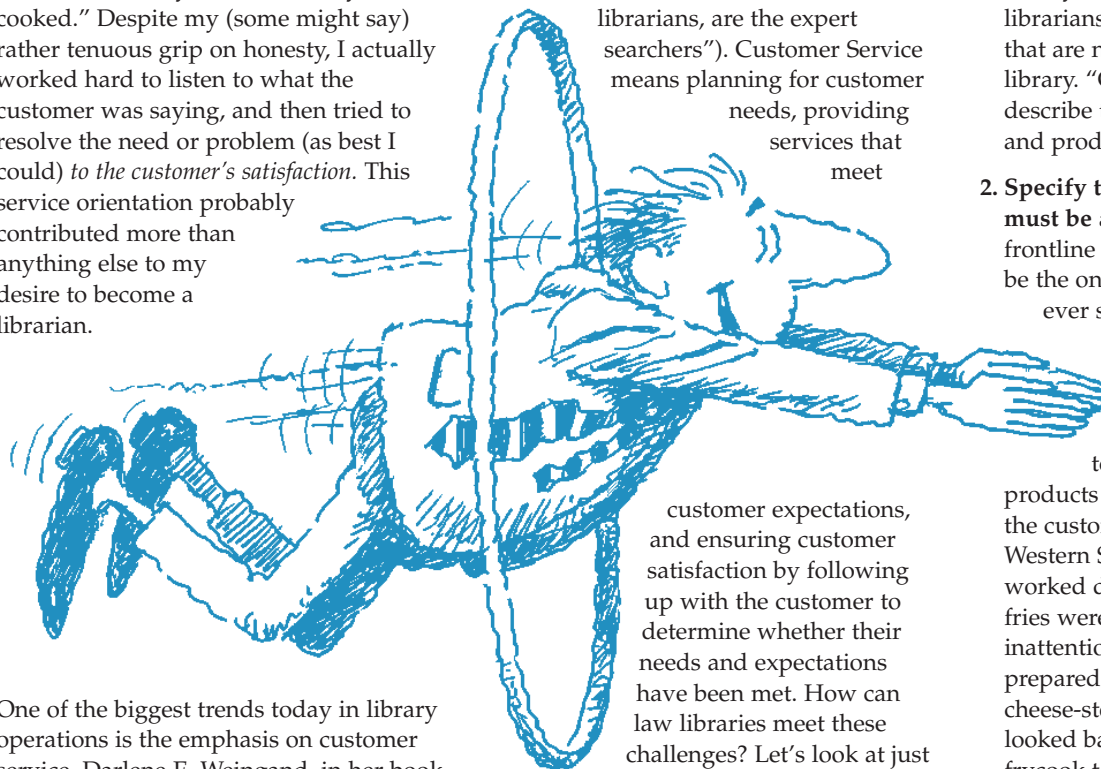
response by some law libraries has been “titanically glacial.” We continue to enforce customer-unfriendly policies because “that’s the way it’s always been” (i.e., “that book doesn’t circulate because someone else might want it,” or “I’m sorry, you cannot bring that spill-proof container filled with a beverage in the law library”). Many of us grumble about adapting to new technologies, and there is still a reluctance to give up our perceived expertise (read *power base*) to the mere mortals (i.e., “Attorneys shouldn’t have access to the Internet on their desktops since they will only play around and waste time, and we, the law librarians, are the expert searchers”). Customer Service means planning for customer needs, providing services that meet

competing law libraries across the street, or bring back a book they’ve checked out and ask for a refund. Law librarians do not normally engage in “up-selling” (“would you like to ‘biggie-size’ that annotated statute by shepardizing it?”). However, both the terms “patrons” and “users” have baggage of their own (patrons from the medieval “patron of the arts” to the modern day “users” of drugs ... although there might be something in the “library pusher and user” analogy). Neither term takes into account the potential “customers” that the law library could be serving, provided librarians had thought of their needs that are not currently being met at the library. “Customers” more accurately describe the consumers of the services and products that all libraries provide.

2. Specify that library customer service must be a team effort. While the frontline library staff members may be the only ones that most customers ever see, it’s important to remember that all of us working in law libraries must feel responsible for the library’s success, and work together to insure that quality products and services are available to the customer in a timely manner. In the Western Sizzlin’ Steakhouse where I worked during college, if the french fries weren’t done, due to the frycook’s inattention (even if I had already prepared the customer’s delicious cheese-steak sandwich), the entire staff looked bad (from waitress to cook to frycook to management) when the food was served cold. Similarly, the law library tends to be seen as non-responsive to the customer’s needs if the looseleaf set he or she needs is unavailable because it’s locked up in Technical Services waiting to be filed. Just how inflexible are your library’s

customer expectations, and ensuring customer satisfaction by following up with the customer to determine whether their needs and expectations have been met. How can law libraries meet these challenges? Let’s look at just a few suggestions to make law libraries more customer-focused.

1. Define actual and potential library users as “customers.” This is often a hard thing for many law librarians to do, since library patrons or users do not usually make purchases, have



A Desktop Learning Opportunity

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rules, for instance, on circulation? Does a circulation staff member, as part of the team, have the authority to waive fines or allow circulation of normally non-circulating books if the customer has legitimate needs? Or must the customer wait until someone in authority is available to make those decisions? The team approach dictates that all library employees have a stake in the customer's satisfaction, or else employees may be working at cross purposes.

3. Open up communication among staff and customers.

Although warm and friendly staff, speedy responses, accurate information, and a pleasant environment are essential components of effective customer service, according to Weingand, they may not be enough to insure that customers' needs are being met. Part of the problem is in trying to discover what those needs actually are. It's always amazed me how the first patron question, "Do you have the Illinois laws on contracts?" actually metamorphoses after the successful reference interview into "I'm looking for cases dealing with used car dealers who fraudulently misrepresent that the '84 Ford Escort they sell to unsuspecting car buyers like me has not been wrecked, and how can I sue for huge damage amounts, just like on the episode of *Matlock* I saw last week?"

Just how inflexible are your library's rules on circulation? Does a circulation staff member have the authority to waive fines or allow circulation of normally non-circulating books if the customer has legitimate needs?

In the retail business, the successful sales person would take "I'm just looking" and turn it into "I really need to update my entire wardrobe, now that hip-hop is so passé." Weingand suggests starting with that all-important gambit, "Can I help you?," and adding just two little words, "how" and "today" (as in "How can I help you today?"). This takes the response in the customer's mind from "Well, I don't know ... *can* you help me?," to "Gosh, this library staff member is pretty darn confident that he or she *can* help me *today!*" Law library staff members must be active listeners as well, and really attend to what the customer is saying,

rather than trying to formulate answers to preconceived notions of what the customer might be asking for. Communication must be open on both sides, and the staff member should feel free to restate the customer's question, in order to hone in on the actual service or need being requested.

4. Create and post a Customer Service pledge. Just like Wal-Mart, the law library might consider formulating a "Customer Service" pledge, that can be used to promise that the needs of the library's customers come first, and will be met on a quantifiable and measurable basis. Although law libraries probably won't open up a new check-out line if more than three people are waiting (as Wal-Mart used to promise), we can name those library services that we promise to accomplish within specific time limits. Wright State University Libraries created a Customer Service Pledge in the mid 1990s (see http://www.libraries.wright.edu/services/Customer_Services.html), and has used it successfully to "develop a

core of satisfied customers." Among the services that Wright State pledges to do are "[to][a]cknowledge you immediately at any service desk and serve you within three minutes or call additional staff," and "[to][r]espond to online reference inquiries within one working day."

Of course, these suggestions are just at the very tip of the "customer service" iceberg ... and law libraries' abilities to adapt to the changing needs of all customers, both actual and

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potential, may well determine whether the law library as we know it continues into the twenty-first century. And now, to answer that age-old question ... is the law library customer always right? Hey, would I lie? (*"Sir, here's a nice little statute on the tort of alienation of affection..."*).

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Learn more about Customer Service from the library perspective!

Participate in the AALL 1999 Spring Teleconference.

Librarian-Customer Service experts Pat Wagner and Darlene Weingand will focus on libraries as Customer-Driven Organizations and techniques for developing the link between service and excellence.

Join us on April 15, 1998, from 12:00-1:30 p.m. EST. Additional information is available at http://www.aallnet.org/prodev/event_satellite.asp or by contacting Lara Koban at lkoban@aall.org.