

The Law Librarian's Home Companion to Hospitality

by Carol Billings

Don't get me wrong. I'm just as irritated as the next woman by Martha Stewart. This column will not give instructions for crocheting little turkey-shaped mouse cozies or for whipping up a batch of homemade, pumpkin-scented library paste. But just like the queen of good housekeeping, during this season we naturally begin thinking about ways to extend hospitality to family and friends for Thanksgiving and the forthcoming Hanukkah and Christmas holidays. Perhaps because librarians are experts at welcoming those who need their services, libraries are popular sites for holiday parties in schools, firms and courthouses. Hosting the festivities can be a lot of work for librarians, but they have discovered that these hosting duties provide excellent opportunities to help their clientele get better acquainted with the library and what it has to offer.

Throwing parties is only one form of hospitality, however. Public relations is all about hospitality. Everything that a user observes and experiences in libraries — the physical premises, the policies, the demeanor of the staff — combines to express librarians' attitudes toward their clientele. Libraries strive to make their facilities, collections and services attractive to their patrons. They issue invitations in many forms — Web sites, publications, educational programs, special events and exhibits. And when those patrons accept our invitations and enter the libraries, librarians "put on the dog" to impress users with their expertise and eagerness to satisfy patrons' needs. All of this seems very obvious, but because it is such an "everyday" aspect of the librarian mission, libraries run the risk of overlooking important aspects of hospitality.

I was reminded of this rather unexpectedly in August when SOLINET, the Online Computer Library Center's southern component, offered a workshop in New Orleans on "Allocating Space in Your Library to Meet Changing Needs." The announcement promoting the program explained that the emphasis would be not so much on planning a new building but

on how to improve what one is stuck with for the foreseeable future. That angle immediately appealed to my colleague Cathy Lemann and me. Our staff has been trying to hold our current facility together with baling wire and duct tape for nearly 20 years since the planning began for our alleged move to a grand, renovated courthouse.

The Supreme Court Building that now houses our library was completed in 1958 — not the heyday of American architecture — apparently without the advice of anyone possessing expertise in library design. Recalling President Kennedy's remark that Washington was "a city of southern efficiency and northern charm," our library is noted for neither beauty nor utility. Like many other older law libraries, ours was ill-equipped to meet the challenge of the electronic information revolution. Electrical outlets were few and far between. No individual carrels, but only large reading room tables were provided. In short, lawyers and other citizens have always come to our library when they really need our collection or face-to-face assistance. They have not been attracted by aesthetically appealing or comfortable surroundings. Consequently our staff is always open to helpful hints on how to upgrade our appearance and convenience without spending much money on our soon-to-be-vacated facility.

Had we known 20 years ago that we would still be in this facility today, no doubt we and other court departments would have made dramatic improvements, knocking out walls and rearranging space for patrons and staff to deliver services more efficiently. Instead, like a family of modest means renovating a house, we have conducted piecemeal renovations, adding a little here and a little there. Few things match. Furniture, equipment and staff are squeezed into tight places. Our collection is now too big to be shelved in completely logical order. So we have resorted to shelving some seldom-requested sets in remote spots that only the staff can remember. Our courthouse and library are examples of how desirable growth and

technological progress can unintentionally render an institution inhospitable despite the staff's efforts.

Ruth O'Donnell, the Florida library consultant who presented the SOLINET workshop, pointed out that crowded libraries like ours can be consumed by clutter that makes them both unsightly and inconvenient. "Clean your room!" she exhorted. And I thought of the boxes that accumulate outside my office because no one knows where to put them until they're unpacked. I thought of the heaps on my desk, credenza, filing cabinet, booktruck and floor. I felt like a teenager being rebuked by my mother. I wouldn't dream of welcoming guests to my home with it looking like the mare's nest my office has become. "Don't stuff your space. Make it more effective," O'Donnell lectured. "Service is more important than stuff," she continued. We are not doing our patrons a favor by filling our libraries with materials that they will never need but will hinder their finding what they want. "Get rid of sacred cows!" preached O'Donnell, and I thought of the big index table in the middle of our reading room that people have to maneuver around but seldom sit at.

Signs constituted another major topic in the workshop presentation. Libraries stick up far too many small homemade signs that patrons look right past to seek information from a staff member. Large, professionally made, prominently placed, easy-to-read signs that give directions and locations in layman's terms are important aids to patrons. Information about the library's hours should be displayed outside the front door. Other information about the library's collection, services, policies and rules are best disseminated via brochures and bookmarks, according to O'Donnell. She would prohibit the staff from taping or tacking anything up in public areas. Signs that say "Do not ..." are definitely a no-no.

Patrons' expectations have been raised by businesses that must be attractive in order to sell their products and services. Libraries have to compete for clientele with glitzy book stores that now encourage customers to peruse their inventory as one would do

in a library, but while lounging in easy chairs and enjoying gourmet coffee and pastries in the adjacent cafe.

Clearly many libraries lack the funds to turn their sows' ears into silk purses, but they can be tidy, uncluttered and convenient for their patrons. Library staffs must take care to avoid conversations in areas where patrons need peace and quiet to do research. Computers and printers provided for the public must have helpful

information nearby as well as directions for requesting help from staff. Photocopiers, copycard dispensers and change machines must be reliable and easy to operate. In short, everything that the library does should send its patrons a message that it cares about pleasing them and fulfilling their needs.

Recently many law librarians were concerned that the lawyers who were our regular patrons were increasingly relying

upon electronic information access in their offices. Librarians know that they still have a great deal to offer them through their collections and specialized services. The more ways libraries can demonstrate a spirit of hospitality, the more the lawyers will want to come back.

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