

I Can Help You:

Legal Information vs. Legal Advice—

A Customer Service Perspective

For law librarians who work in libraries open to the public, pro se patrons are like the weather: Everyone complains about them, but nobody ever does anything about them. While there is plenty of literature that warns about the problems created by pro se patrons, precious little of it actually gives good, solid advice about what to do with them. Librarians in law libraries open to the public are struggling constantly to find effective ways of dealing with pro se patrons, hoping to both maximize the effective provision of legal information while minimizing any inadvertent harm to the user and limiting the library's exposure to liability.

Admittedly, there are no simple solutions. Assisting pro se patrons is always a matter of making the best of a difficult situation. Pro se patrons are the bane of law librarians, mostly because we understand so well how little we can really help them and how unlikely they are to successfully help themselves. Delivering effective customer service to a clientele whose needs we may not be able to meet, and who are often upset before they even come in the door, is a tricky proposition.

One of the sessions of the 2000 Annual Meeting, "I Can Help You: Legal Information vs. Legal Advice—

A Customer Service Perspective," attempted to provide some guidance for this difficult

area of law librarianship. The session addressed a number of issues, including how to provide good customer service to this difficult clientele, how to build and maintain referral networks within your organization and with other organizations, how to construct resource guides for patrons and reference policies for staff, and where the line is between legal information and legal advice.

The session was geared primarily to court and public law libraries—libraries where pro se patrons are a large portion of those served, and often a primary type of patron as well. For such institutions, many of the ideas and suggestions given in the session were quite valuable, especially those relating to creating resource guides and setting up referral networks.

Unfortunately, many of us do not work in such institutions. For those of us in libraries that are open to the public, but who have other primary clientele, such as faculty, students, or the practicing bar, the practicalities of creating guides and referral networks are less obvious. Yet for libraries who do not deal with such a volume of pro se patrons, the problems created may be even more vexatious. In such institutions, the relatively small number of pro se patrons means that staff are less experienced in dealing with them, and it can be hard to justify expending the resources required, in staff time and materials, to create

and tend guides or referral networks aimed at the pro se patron. We are focused on other primary users, and we are busy enough, stressed enough, and strapped enough that such projects are usually one too far.

On the other hand, the recommendations made during the session for reference policies relating to pro se patrons are ones that all libraries should follow. It is

shockingly true that very few libraries have explicit reference policies, or if they do, they fail to properly update and disseminate those policies. Reference policies relating to the treatment of pro se patrons, including acceptable and unacceptable activities, should be developed, all staff having contact with the public should be trained on them, and the policies should be disseminated to all interested parties, including, in perhaps shortened form, to the patrons themselves.

I always go to the Annual Meeting hoping for some solid, useful information on topics that interest me. This session succeeded admirably on that score. **Sarah Andeen, Karen Anderson, Ruth Nunez-Schaldach, and Bob James** are to be commended for an excellent presentation rife with many great suggestions for libraries of all types. For those libraries that can justify expending the resources, their suggestions are definitely worth exploring. For the rest of us, we should at least be preparing reference policies so that we can deal effectively with pro se users.

Like the weather, pro se patrons are not going to go away. The best we can do is prepare, and hope for the best.

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