



## — the bottom line

Peter Bloomfield showed me into the Alexander Library through the rear entrance above the car park. My first impressions were of light and space, muted colours, the aroma of fresh coffee from the internal cafe, and lots of readers.

Back home in Melbourne, one of our members sent me a clipping from a local paper. A public library customer, frustrated in her attempts to find a newspaper back issue, let go with a letter to the editor:

Yet these incompetent and overpaid librarians, most of whom are concerned only with their own comfort, convenience and welfare, have the gall to agitate for higher wages.

What a contrast between the view from the inside and the view from the outside. From the comfortable and elegant surroundings of the most inviting library I have been in to jangling vitriol prompted by a service failure, our success depends upon the perceptions of others. The message is clear. With appropriate funding and professional commitment libraries can work their small miracles of discovery for everyone.

Recently I visited Perth at the invitation of the WA Branch, met with members, and visited as many different libraries as 72 hours allowed. The magnificent new \$40 million Alexander Library is a fitting home and sym-

bol for the delivery of library services in press ahead Western Australia. Fortunately my itinerary had me returning several times, and on each occasion I was impressed with its functional layout, its busyness, attention to detail in design and sheer class in presentation. It is so tastefully decorated and furnished that its overall impact would tend to make one forgive a missing newspaper issue . . .

Customer service, WA style, was the theme of the visit. I met with school librarians struggling to provide a resource rich environment for young people against a bureaucratic background of disinterest in the educational contribution of teacher-librarians. If the educational planners could see the looks of rapt attention on children's faces during storytime, they might recognise that their libraries have a major role as learning centres, and no future as child-minding agencies.

Public libraries also struggle for funding to meet the needs of an increasingly sophisticated clientele. With school libraries, public libraries are at the sharp end of librarianship. Most of the customers are here, yet the cake is always smaller than the appetites of those who would eat it. At least in WA public libraries receive strong backing from their State Library in the form of bookstock and technical services, but without local government support it is hard for libraries to move into the new non-print service areas that will bring increases in community participation rates. And it's paradoxical that without additional funding and usage the library will have a tough time competing with drains and roads and stray dogs.

The special libraries I saw appear to be flourishing. Ros Membrey from the Parliamentary Library showed me over her cramped but highly functional premises, then we vis-

ited Ingrid Sim's model automated library at the Department of Health. From there it was on to the smallest library and the largest lobsters with John Sauzier at the Marine Research Laboratories. The special tour ended at Kerry Smith's Australian Mineral Ventures library from which, in entrepreneurial fashion, she services three separate companies on a full cost-recovery basis.

There's a lesson here. Why is it that the specials are such an enthusiastic and energetic group? I think it's because they're close to their customers. Impetus for service developments comes from familiarity with client requirements, and without this frequent and productive contact with information consumers, special libraries would be unable to prove the value of their services. Cut off from the market they have no reason to exist. Think about it.

Ian McCallum  
President

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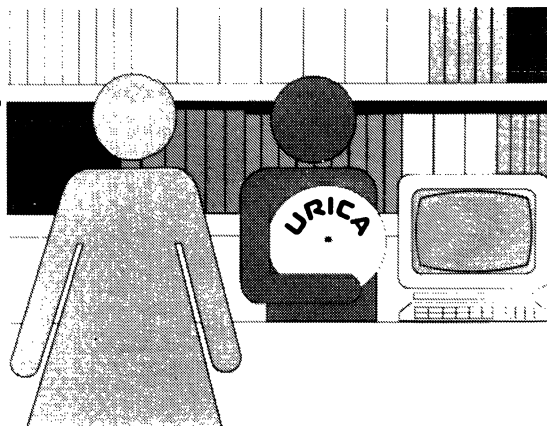
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