

Shirley Prescott — Customer Service Champion

Shirley Prescott is the co-ordinator of Reader Services for Yarra Libraries in Melbourne, Victoria. She was awarded the Margery C. Ramsay scholarship by the State Library of Victoria to undertake a study tour of the UK in May 2006, investigating reader development. *inCite* talked to Shirley and discovered she is passionate about public libraries, reader development and customer service.

What were some key differences and innovations you found in the UK which could be applied to customer service in Australian libraries?

Reading seems to have a much higher profile, politically and in the media, in the UK than Australia. This was demonstrated in the UK Government's 2003 Framework for the Future program's report at www.mla.gov.uk/website/programmes/framework. The program's mission is to bring reading to the heart of every community and it advocates that reader development is the key to addressing change in the community. In the media, a good example is the success of The Richard and Judy Book Club, see www.richardandjudybookclub.co.uk, which has brought great reading ideas to the mainstream.

The recognition of the importance of reader development in UK public libraries can be largely attributed to the work of two main organisations — The Reading Agency (TRA), and Opening the Book.

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The Reading Agency: I looked at their work with adult readers, with the media and in book trade partnerships with public libraries. In particular, TRA's innovative Reading Partners project matches libraries and publishers to work together on programs for readers. Library staff are gaining a great deal of job satisfaction and professional development and have enjoyed better promotion to the wider community. Publishers have had direct contact with readers for their market research.

Opening the Book: In libraries, the reader-centred approach they take offers a level of customer care which can inform and reinvent services across the board. The 'Working Concepts' section at <http://www.openingthebook.com/otb/findout-about.asp?idno=54> has background information about a reader-centred approach and what reader development is.



What approach to customer service can libraries take when they are not actually selling something?

I believe that the biggest advantage libraries have over bookshops is that we give our readers a chance to experiment with books. As our patrons do not have to purchase anything, they can be encouraged to try something different and out of their normal reading comfort zone without any cost to themselves. This can really help people expand their reading choices.

How can libraries engage with customers in an increasingly digital/remote service delivery environment?

Opening the Book is creating reader-centred websites. There are some terrific examples that bring books and readers together in interesting and fun ways, such as www.whichbook.net, the Welsh libraries' Give me a break, at www.givemeabreak.org, www.scottishreaders.net and the wonderful Reader2Reader, at www.reader2reader.net, which features a 'Bin a Book' section, where you can consign an overrated, over-hyped book to the bin.

I believe that many people choose a profession in libraries because they love books, yet we have had a 10–15-year period of service delivery, staff expertise

and professional development dominated by IT and information services. Now, however, Australian libraries are being called upon to focus back on our core business of books and reading, especially with the reader development renaissance being witnessed internationally — particularly in the UK and the US. Our main challenge here is that many of our library staff have lost confidence in giving people advice about books and offering our borrowers the chance to try something new to read.

A great example of meeting that challenge is Essex County Council. It has 73 libraries and, astoundingly, it supports over 350 reading, or Booktalk, groups. June Turner, Reader Development Manager, told me that Booktalk groups play a very active role in the library service in many ways: for example, members make regular contributions to 'Ask Chris', another fabulous reader-centred website containing thousands of recommendations from readers and reading groups. Also, members appear once a month on BBC Radio Essex.

How can libraries help patrons who are increasingly time-poor?

They can rethink their spaces and the services offered to readers. Opening the Book's reader-centred approach has really turned around the way libraries organise their collections, making it easy for the independent browser to find something appealing to read — quickly. As part of my study tour, I attended Opening the Book's excellent Reader-Friendly Library training. What struck me is that for too long libraries have organised their collections and spaces to suit the needs of the library staff. Staff know their way around their library, but for most borrowers, the library is bewildering. Opening the Book's research shows that 75% of library users are browsers and most visits only last 5–9 minutes. The importance of putting the reader first and making a strong impact with attractive face-out displays in high-traffic areas is obvious. Many libraries I visited had Express Zones or Quick

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EVENTS EVENTS

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25/9 ALIA Career Management Group (VIC) The Real Management Conference. Featuring 'Fish!' author Steve Lundin, and Stephanie Dowrick, it's a focus on productivity, fun and happiness at work. Location: Sydney, Darling Harbour. Cost: ALIA member \$600, Non-member \$770. Contact: Sue Hunt, ph sue@synergyplus-training.com

26/9 Mentoring NSW Library Folk In the Pub. The Hippo Bar, Madison Hotel, cnr Devonshire and Chalmers Sts, Surrey Hills, 6:00pm. Contact: Julian Sortland, 0429 470 672, info@lfip.info, <http://www.lfip.info/>

27/9 Key Forums - Master Class Implementing Library 2.0, led by Dr Alex Byrne, University Librarian, University of Technology, Sydney. Cost: ALIA member \$930.30, Non-member \$1094.50. Contact: Key Forums, ph 02 9436 4255, helen.lewis@keyforums.com.au, <http://www.keyforums.com.au>

NT

19/9 ALIA Top End. Meeting. Venue: CDU, Palmerston, 5:30pm. Contact Sarah White, 08 8935 9991, sarah.white@palmerston.nt.gov.au

QLD

16-19/9 Queensland Public Libraries Association Conference Building Bridges to Knowledge – Community Engagement, Technology and Public Libraries. Venue: Civic Hall, Ipswich. Contact QPLA Secretary: ph 07 4992 7361, jensenf@banana.qld.gov.au, <http://library.ipswich.qld.gov.au/qpla/index.htm>

18/9 Library Technicians QLD General Meeting. Location: TBA. Time: 5pm for 5:30pm start. Contact Trish D'Arcy, 07 3623 7407, p.darcy@mcauley.acu.edu.au

19/9 QOPAL Meeting. Resource Options, Suite 5, 936 Logan Road, Holland Park. Contact Jenny Hale or Kerri Nixon, ph 07 3847 6499, info@resource-options.com.au

SA

3/9 ALIA South Australia Monthly meeting. All SA ALIA members welcome. Venue: Amore Café, Adelaide. Time: 6pm for 6:15pm. Contact: Helen Kwaka, 02 8397 7454, kwakh@cttg.sa.gov.au

14-15/9 South Australia State Conference School Libraries Make A Difference. Contact: Eva Dimasi, eva.dimasi@nazareth.catholic.edu.au

17/9 ALIA South Australia Visual Merchandising Workshop. One-day workshop featuring Kevin Henna. Venue: Burnside Ballroom, Adelaide. Cost: ALIA member \$80, Non-member \$100. Contact: Benita Wheeler, ph 08 8242 1138, benita_j@optusnet.com.au

26-27/9 ALIA South Australia Academic and Research Libraries 20/20 Vision. A joint ARCOM and ALIA Information Science (SA) event. Venue: Stockdale Room, Flinders University. Time: 1:45pm – 5:00pm. Contact Christine Cother, ph 08 8302 6810

TAS

5/9 ALIA Tasmania Elizabeth College Library Tour. Includes access to the Aboriginal Education Resource Centre and the ESL collection. Time: 12pm – 2pm. Cost: gold coin donation. RSVP appreciated. Contact: Jo Beck, jo.beck@education.tas.gov.au

VIC

27/9 ALIA New Graduates Group (VIC) CSU Student's Dinner. Venue: European Bier Café, 120 Exhibition St, Melbourne. RSVP required. Contact: Michelle Thomason, ph 03 9345 5158, michelle.thomason@rch.org.au

WA

6/9 Australian Copyright Council Seminars, Perth Presented by ACC copyright law experts. Seminars on copyright topics for librarians, including the new provision for maintaining or operating a library or archive. Contact Reception: ph 02 8815 9777, info@copyright.org.au, <http://www.copyright.org.au>

NATIONAL

6/9 National Simultaneous Storytime 2007 This event will take place on the Thursday of National Literacy and Numeracy Week at 11:00am. Contact ALIA National Office, 02 6215 8222, <http://alia.org.au/advocacy/storytime/>

10/9-22/10 ALIA & School of Health and Related Research (University of Sheffield, UK) e-Folioz: An introduction to e-learning. Registrations open soon. Contact: ALIA PD Officer, ph 02 6215 8222, pd@alia.org.au
1/12/07 – 13/2/08 Summer Reading Club Superheroes Summer – Read around OZ! For further information and to order SRC merchandise: <http://www.alia.org.au/src>. Official website: <http://www.summerreadingclub.org.au>

CONFERENCES

6/9 Libraries Australia Forum 2007 Venue: State Library of Queensland. Register online: <http://www.nla.gov.au/librariesaustralia/aum/1af07/rego.html>. Contact: ph 1800 026 155.

7/9 Australian Committee on Cataloguing (ACOC) Seminar 2007: Promise for the future, or legacy of the past: cataloguing in a changing world. Venue: State Library of Queensland. Time: 9:30am – 4:30pm. Contact Events Manager, 02 6215 8214, conferences@alia.org.au

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Choice areas and all library staff reported that these have had a positive impact on performance as well as improving the image of the library.

What can managers do to motivate teams to deliver high levels of customer service?

If libraries are to truly transform the way they offer their services and spaces, staff training is absolutely essential. Opening the Book has taken a very effective approach with their online training course, Frontline, which targets those who have most direct contact with readers. It is practical, self paced and can be done by anyone, anywhere. Everyone I spoke to in different library authorities said their staff have benefited greatly; some said it was the best training their staff have ever done.

Whenever I talk to people who work in libraries about the findings of my study, there is a strong sense of enthusiasm and excitement. We ran a couple of reader development seminars in Melbourne last year with Opening the Book's Director, Rachel van Riel, and participants were heard to comment, 'Finally. Some training about books!'. Investigations are underway to secure funding to make Frontline available in Australia, with Victoria the pilot state.

What else would you like to encourage Australian libraries to do?

The support of reading groups is possibly one of the most reader-centred services a library can offer. They give the opportunity for people to interact with others who love reading and expands people's reading choices, introducing them to books they would not necessarily have picked for themselves.

Reading groups are very popular in Melbourne and Victoria but not all library services have their own. I noticed that most of the UK libraries I visited had a close relationship with the reading groups in their community — as well as directly supporting the groups with regular meetings in their libraries, they also provided reading group sets for non-library groups to borrow.

The time is absolutely right for reader development to take off in libraries in Australia. I strongly believe that by implementing these principles, the level of service our libraries offer will improve markedly. Our libraries will perform much better, engagement with the community will be stronger, and staff will gain a greater deal of job satisfaction. The reader-centred approach is the ultimate customer service we can offer.

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