

Libraries: adopting business strategies for customer service

The information, education, and entertainment marketplace is crowded, and customers are demanding new styles of service. Consequently, libraries are implementing business techniques to build patron loyalty, to remain useful and relevant. This article outlines the most valuable and transferable corporate approaches: how many does your library do?

Management

Niche establishment means determining your uniqueness. In libraries what can you provide that Google and LexisNexis can't?

Localisation is necessary, and even global franchises adapt to their context: McDonalds made burgers from chicken in India. For libraries, studies showed different patterns in rural and metropolitan areas; in America, there are more computers per head in country libraries.

Codify customer service in the mission statement – the Miami-Dade public library aims to "provide a 5-star customer experience". Some organisations draw up a separate customer service charter: Australian libraries include Macquarie University and the State Library of WA. Extend the responsibility of excellent service beyond 'front-of-house' personnel, and make it inform and affect everyone's actions. Train staff in customer relations, and refresh their skills. The library at the University of Wollongong does.

Earn trust by keeping your promises. All businesses know reputations take years to gain and seconds to lose.

Demonstrate a social conscious: more and more consumers favour companies that support and do charitable work. Note that in the 2009 bushfires in Victoria, libraries like Orange City became aid centres.

Respond to trends in recreation, health, and the economy. For libraries, stock books on (in recent years) knitting and Pilates and, during the GFC, assisting patrons in checking job ads and preparing CVs.

Promote your organisation and keep your customers informed: issue press releases, newsletters, and flyers, and make and use strong media relationships. Libraries could perhaps establish a regular page or column in the community newspaper.

Membership

Becoming a customer should be as simple as possible; make library registration no more complex than subscribing to a commercial provider or opening a credit account. Increase appeal by rewarding

patrons, at random or according to a scheme, and run competitions, especially at festive seasons. In both businesses and libraries this could be respectively longevity of membership and Easter, Christmas, Mother's Day, and Father's Day. Libraries can also focus on sector significant occasions like Library and Information Week.

Continuous improvement is necessary to retain clientele. Frequently evaluate your performance, and broadly source data: try 'mystery shoppers', suggestion boxes, surveys, and feedback forms. Note more responses are received when distributed online, as users find it more convenient to complete.

Product

Ensure currency of product [collection], and obtain multiple copies of in-demand items [bestsellers]. Restructure purchasing when format preferences change (a library example is DVDs versus videos). Pricing is a primary factor in attracting customers; whenever possible, keep costs low, and give advance notice of the start or increases in charges. In libraries like the City of Stirling this relates to fees for photocopying and laminating, and the introduction of overdue fines.

Virtual environment

Customers expect businesses to maintain a 24/7 internet presence, with an online catalogue, FAQs, and digitised materials. The website must be easily navigable, and accuracy is paramount. Companies garner respect by staying up-to-date with tools and technologies; therefore libraries should use wikis, blogs (Amazon has Amazon Daily), Twitter, and Facebook. Links to other sites add value to the customer – note podcasts and virtual tours are provided by Curtin University's library, and videocasts are streamed by the State Library of NSW. Customisation fosters goodwill; for instance, Amazon maintains customer profiles to flag new items that might be of interest. Libraries can also prepare and upload "Who writes like" lists.

Physical environment

It has been long contended that libraries can become a social hub or (after home and work), the 'third place' for citizens to congregate. To rival pubs, cafes, and gymnasiums, consider having food and drink vendors onsite, co-tenants (for example, in Wanneroo Library and Cultural Centre, there is also a gallery and museum), and inviting societies to hold meetings (for libraries, consider historians and genealogists).

Visual appeal and placement are vital. Good stores have a welcoming entrance and immediately visible staff to assist visitors. They put new displays close to high traffic areas, and organise the most popular sections near the entrance. Libraries should look at Dymocks' layout – for instance, the

first shelves contain fiction. Clear signage is crucial, as are aesthetics: retailers install comfortable furniture, well-lit and roomy spaces, and pleasant decor. Libraries can learn from Borders, who encourage sitting and browsing. However, enable either short or long visits (express shopping versus 'mall trawls') by designating obvious pathways and service zones.

Interaction

Staff boost patron enjoyment with welcoming and approachable verbal and non-verbal mannerisms (smiling, nodding). Roster non-desk time – customers prefer to ask roving workers for help, and name badges and uniforms assist identification. They also like being escorted to sections, rather than pointed in the direction.

However, remote mediation is becoming the norm, which heightens the need for unambiguous phrasing. A library example of distance interaction is the reference facility, 'Ask a librarian'.

Patrons wish to choose methods of communication, so let them nominate how they are contacted, be it by mobile, email, SMS, RSS, or other. They also prefer options for fulfilment, like loan, print copy, digital copy, or purchase. Participation and convenience bring satisfaction and control – note that today's consumer wants self-service (ordering / requesting), self-checkout, and the opportunity to add tags to content. In response, libraries can change their catalogues to permit comments, and install card readers. Public libraries in the ACT were early adopters.

Speed reduces customer frustration: answer phones within four rings, acknowledge those waiting in queues (make eye contact or say "Be with you soon"), or open another lane / service point. In libraries, this might mean another barcode station, and promptly follow up queries.

Solve problems quickly – most businesses respond to complaints within 24 hours (e.g. BigPond); they then rectify the situation and/or compensate the customer. In the past, the University of Wollongong Library offered coffee vouchers. Understand the power of word of mouth, for instance, the restaurant rule-of-thumb is that a bad experience is told to up to ten people. Libraries are already disadvantaged by the battleaxes images: try defusing conflict by using the supermarket 'Sorry-Glad-Sure' speech ("I'm sorry you had a problem with our service, I'm glad you told me about it, and I feel sure we can work it out").

Meeting patron needs has always been part of library operations, but now the balance of power has shifted. For libraries in the 21st century, as it is in the business world, it's your customer, but their way.

Leith Robinson
Ph D student, Curtin University
ltkrobinson@bigpond.com