

CROSS- POLLINATION

Like many people I started my working life with no fixed ideas taking in what the world had to offer, gathering valuable experiences along the way in the corporate, government and education sectors that are now priceless to me as manager of a secondary school library.

Customer service is a trait straight out of retail 101. In our school library we always open with a friendly greeting, weather-related or book-related, as a way of saying 'I see you – you belong and are welcome here'. For teenagers who may be feeling lonely or isolated, being greeted, recognised, or simply smiled at, can have an impact that goes beyond anything that we will ever be aware of.

Deadlines matter

Not all deadlines are negotiable. Sometimes fulfilling an information request five minutes late is the same as not delivering at all. If the request is impossible, it's better for the client to be told sooner rather than later.

Value-add

Anyone can search Google, but librarians' skills remain relevant when we do what others cannot: we find credible, relevant sources. We synthesise multiple sources to make the salient facts more digestible. We save our clients time. We make our clients look good.

Train the end-user

Empowering end-users to do their own smart searching is part the 'teach a person to fish and you feed them for a lifetime' school of librarianship. End-user searching frees us up to continue developing higher value user services that in turn increase our value to our organisations. Showing a student how to search the catalogue for books gives them a research tool they can use in the future. Simply handing a book over only 'feeds them for a day'.

Critically evaluate sources

The clients of the libraries at NSW Parliament and at Fairfax Media depend on getting factually correct information from library staff. The libraries' reputations depend on it. A key element of my current role as an educator is teaching students to critically evaluate sources for accuracy, bias, perspective and purpose. Nothing hones these skills like the knowledge that information provided by you could end up on page one of a newspaper or recorded for posterity in Hansard.

Lean times are an opportunity

Nothing makes you assess the value of the services you provide like budget pressure. Finite financial and human resources force you to evaluate the 'return on investment' for every library service you offer and purchase you make. But crisis-time can, surprisingly, also be an incredible time of creativity as every workflow is examined to see what fat can be cut from it: do we need to write the price of a book inside its cover if the catalogue record contains that information? The result is lean, streamlined work practices that, in better times, free you up to add additional higher-value services for patrons.

Marketing never ends

Libraries must treat every day and every patron interaction as a marketing opportunity: selling reading, promoting quality research, advertising our value. We do this by cultivating relationships with departments and faculties, by producing high-quality print and digital artefacts, by merchandising our spaces and fulfilling customers' information needs.

Although I never had cause to discuss post-apocalyptic zombie literature with my adult patrons in the corporate and government library sectors, I developed a passion for the genre when I began working in a secondary school. Learning is a process that looks both forwards and back: what do I want to learn now, and what do I already know that is useful in this context? I can't wait to see where the road leads next. 🚦

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