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Not Fit For Print

May I Serve You? What Is Service Anyway?

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K-MART is in trouble and Sears is struggling to regain its old dominance of the retail market. Even the venerable WalMart is having trouble growing and its stock has stalled. Car dealers are trying to change their image and offer no haggle pricing to lure people back into the showrooms. Lawyers are finally being sued by unhappy clients just as the Doctors have been for decades. Librarians in corporate libraries are being let go just as the need for information starts to explode. What in the world is going on here?

What you are seeing is professions and corporations adjusting, or as is more often the case, not adjusting to changes in clients and customers expectations for services. Managing the expectations of customers is a full time business and should be of great concern to anyone who is a service provider today. As a confirmation that many stores aren't the same anymore and that their slowing sales aren't a glitch, I shopped one last week and want to share my experience. Remember I am a professional shopper and you shouldn't try this at home. The only item I found that seemed to fit my needs wasn't priced. It was a bicycle for my soon to be 10-year-old and it was exactly what she had asked for. I tried in vain to find someone to tell me the price including one of those guys who walks around with a clipboard. A manager for sure. After roughly twenty minutes of fooling around trying to get someone to tell me what should have been posted on the bike anyway, I gave up and left. I didn't expect that and there is the crux of the problem.

Librarians are in the service business just as surely as are lawyers, accountants and bankers. The changing expectations of their customers is as important to libraries and librarians as it is to any professional service provider because librarians can manage the expectations of their clients also. For example, there are the recent dismissals of the library staffs at several major law firms and corporations. Without knowing the specifics, I can speculate that it is possible that the librarians were seen

as impediments to obtaining information rather than providers. Pretty obvious is the substitution of on desk computers to provide a self service version of the services that a librarian formerly was responsible for providing. Self service options are called the "industrialization of services" in marketing talk. The old grocery clerk used

to take your shopping list, gather things from the shelf and fill your order while you stood

and chatted. You knew each other well and traded there because of that personal relationship. It is no coincidence in my mind that the problems that banks are having keeping clients is directly related to the ATM. No one knows anyone at the bank anymore so it matters little where the customer goes for a loan. When service becomes too automated, it resembles a commodity and then price is all that matters. Without the intervention of human beings, there is little value-added, and there is also the loss of something even more important. Feedback! That store has no idea that I walked out and even worse, they don't know that I told so many people about my bad experience. That is carrying self service too far.

As a luncheon speaker at the local Rotary Club last week, I asked the audience a question. If you absolutely had to have a particular book, where would you go. Barnes and Noble and Borders was the answer. Even though the city librarian was at the podium with me and had read the invocation, no one said the library. Yet no store has more books and better access to books than a library. So what was the audience thinking when they answered with bookstore names? Were they recalling a past experience? Had they waited weeks for an interlibrary loan? Had they wandered around serving themselves and couldn't find the item they wanted and then, like me, they just walked out? Or was

"But it may also be the case that information on demand may not be as easy as people expect."

the expectation of coffee and music and desserts with wide aisles and plenty of clerical help just such an overwhelming reminder of their last bookstore visit that they just didn't think of the library even with a real live librarian standing just feet away from them? Somehow a nameless and faceless clerk has replaced our cherished image of the hometown librarian. Is it because the bookstore clerk is assigned to wander around and help people while our library clerk is assigned busy work behind the desk?

As you automate your library and find more ways for your clientele to serve themselves, beware the trap of losing touch with them and becoming a commodity. Part of the excitement of electronic publishing is the perception of easy access. That may be true if you think about 24-hour access when the library is closed and not having to wait for a busy librarian or a document from another library to arrive. But it may also be the case that information on demand may not be as easy as people expect. They may actually need some assistance and

we surely don't want them to think of Barnes and Noble when that happens. After all, a library is just another building full of books without a librarian. But that librarian has to be visible and accessible or no one will ever know what wonderful services can be provided by the librarian and we may have repeats of the law and corporate layoffs.