February 2002

Inside Pandora's Box -- Suggestions for Improving Customer Service Today

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Recommended Citation

Steinmacher, Michael (2002) "Inside Pandora's Box -- Suggestions for Improving Customer Service Today," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 14: Iss. 1, Article 32.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.3156>

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Inside Pandora's Box — Suggestions for Improving Customer Service Today

by **Michael Steinmacher** (Assistant Manager, St. Matthews/Eline Branch, Louisville Free Public Library)

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Improving customer service in any business is neither an easy undertaking nor is it easily accomplished. While the overall planning and implementation of a customer service strategy can be a daunting task, there are some simple steps that can be taken to immediately improve customer service. Today's libraries must acknowledge the need for high quality customer service and integrate it throughout their daily operations. The suggestions offered below can serve as the foundation for an overall customer service plan. Such plans frequently yield increased customer satisfaction, which can lead in turn to a plethora of benefits for the library, including enhanced reputation and increases in budgetary allotments.

Libraries must make an effort now to solidify their increasingly tenuous grip as the world's premier provider of information resources. With the rise of the Internet, commercial information providers, and super bookstore chains such as **Barnes & Noble** and **Books-a-Million**, libraries are increasingly in danger of losing their position as the pre-eminent provider of information sources and services. Some may argue that libraries have already lost that status, a result of resting on their laurels having been the only "game" in town for years. Libraries, however, can learn much from business management approaches to customer service and re-imagine themselves as a hybrid between the information repositories that they always have been and the customer-driven organizations that they must become.

Library literature on improving and integrating customer service into daily operations is on the rise. While this focus upon customer service in library science is a fairly new trend, business literature has focused upon it for years. Much of this is easily applicable to the library setting. The business literature contains a wealth of information for libraries seeking to formally implement customer service plans.

A good example of this trend is the brief article "Flying the Friendly Skies" by **Jeffrey Gitomer**. Gitomer's article, which focuses upon customer service in the airline industry, is easily applicable to the library setting. He

proposes five service lessons for the airline industry:

- Customers only want to resolve problems, not hear yours.
- Listening has nothing to do with hearing. It has everything to do with listening.
- Customers only want to hear one word, "Yes!" They get mad when you give excuses why you "can't."
- When you make a mistake, be professional enough to apologize.
- When you make a commitment, take ownership enough to follow through. (Gitomer 39)

While Gitomer's service lessons are suggested for the airline industry, one can see that they are easily applied to the library setting. This is the case with much of the business literature concerning customer service. Libraries seeking to build a better customer service orientation should consult this wide-body of literature on the subject.

As noted earlier, however, a recent trend in library literature indicates that library scientists have become increasingly attracted to applying customer service principles directly to the library environment. **Karen Hyman**, in her article "Customer Service and the 'Rule of 1965,'" argues this position forcefully. She suggests a number of easily taken steps that can be the beginning of an effort to reshape the library as a more customer-driven operation. Her first point is to "Remember that the customer is not the enemy" (Hyman, 58). She states that many libraries operate on the theory that library users cannot be right and take an adversarial approach to providing service. Her suggestion is that libraries refocus that energy into trying to find methods to meet the customer's wants and desires.

Another way to improve customer service immediately is to constantly remind staff that they should look at things from the perspective of the customer. Staff should be reminded to think how they want and expect to be treated when roles are reversed. Everyone is a customer at some time or another, so imagining this role reversal

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should be quite easy for staff members. With this in mind, role-playing exercises among library staff can be very helpful to members as it provides a safe environment to practice high quality interaction under typical circumstances.

Libraries can also improve their customer service interaction by remembering that the customer is always the customer. Customers frequently want something and are bound and determined to have whatever the object of their desire. Professional librarians, however, are taught to draw out a patron's needs as opposed to wants and seek to fulfill those needs. However, in today's world, library staff should think of library users as "customers," not the traditionally termed "patron." Librarians should not seek to abandon the noble goal of helping discern what a customer needs and providing it. What they should seek to do, however, is to give the customer what he/she wants, but also provide access and guidance to resources and tools that they feel will give the customer what they need as well.

In providing customers the services and resources that they want, library staff should also be delivering those services in a positive manner. Libraries should adopt a "yes" mentality, as customers do not want to hear why they "can't" or the word "no." As Hyman suggests, libraries spending a great deal of time explaining why they

"can't" repeatedly about the same issue, should refocus and figure out how they "can" do what the customer wants!

Part of this "yes" mentality can be created from the feedback of the customers themselves. Customers always provide feedback to a service provider and that feedback should be used as a barometer for how the library is doing in providing service. Customers who do not speak up will frequently do so if a staff member asks them, "How did we do today?" or "Did we help you find what you need?" Staff must be encouraged to solicit this feedback from their customers, as it is a gift that will help the library hone its customer service mentality. That feedback should be passed along the appropriate chain of command in order for all staff to benefit from the interaction. According to **Julie Brewer** in her article "Service Management," "a customer-driven organization is guided by customer wants and needs. It views competition as a challenge...It views complaints as opportunities to be exploited and publicizes its improvements." (Brewer 2008).

Customers will frequently tell staff that the basic services are not enough. Customers thrive on additional services and libraries are notoriously well known for the value-added services they provide. Whether it is readers' advisory or providing bibliographic instruction, libraries have always gone beyond merely providing access. This tradition should be continued, expanded, and, in a new paradigm for libraries, promoted. Promotion

can take the form of marketing and public relations' campaigns, but a library's staff will frequently find that word-of-mouth about good (or bad) customer service will generate a great deal of promotion as well.

Customer service is much more than what is presented herein. While the above tips offers one a beginning at building customer-oriented library services, one must consider that a great deal of work needs be done. Customer service, to truly succeed as a mindset, but begin at the top of the organization, must be integrated throughout its departments, be provided by employees trained in customer service ideology, and focus on the details of provided services. While customer service may be a non-stop, never ending process, the above suggestions can be crucial to helping libraries not only survive in today's competitive information marketplace, but thrive as well.

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Oregon Trails — Books and Bookstores

by **Tomas Leonhardt** <twleonhardt@earthlink.net>

You can't always get what you want but sometimes you just might get what you need. Such wisdom from a rock and roll song but it has made sense to me of late, returning from Germany with no job and lots of time on my hands. I want a job but need the rest and am trying to make the most out of the sabbatical that I never got — until now.

Spending six months or so in Europe was good for me. I greatly improved my German, was introduced to **Zagreb** and the **Croatian** people, and learned to appreciate American higher education and culture more than I had before flying off to Bremen.

I also enjoyed direct access to shelf after shelf of German literature, books on language, mysteries, German children's books, and so on. I could walk from the **IUB** campus to **Veogesack**, a lovely town on the **Weser** River where the **Lesum** feeds into it. **Otto Buecher** was the bookstore in **Veogesack** and while it did not have the stock that I could

find in the stores in the center of Bremen, it was convenient and carried most of **Ingrid Noll's** books. If you don't know **Ingrid Noll**, I highly recommend her. Some in Germany consider her a **Krimi** (mystery) writer, but I consider her a good novelist who can draw characters the way **Georges Simenon** did, especially in his psychological novels although his **Maigret** mysteries are first rate. The only **Noll** titles I know of in English are *Hell Hath No Fury* (the German title is *Der Hahn ist Tod*—the rooster is dead). The other is called *Die Apotheke*, *The Pharmacist* in English. I haven't read the English translations so I can't vouch for the style but I can assure you that her stories are gripping and her female characters don't let men get in their way.

In addition to the regular bookstore in **Veogesack**, department stores and the **Deutsche Post** (the post office) also sell books, mainly mysteries and romances but

some remainders and reprints of classics in the public domain, too.

In downtown Bremen, my favorite bookstore was **Buchhandlung Geist**, what one would call a scholarly bookstore. It successfully tempted me with its **Germanistik** offerings, both language and literature. But to spread the wealth, my wife and I also frequented three other book stores in Bremen, **Thalia**, **Phoenix**, and **Storm**. Each of those bookshops and **Geist**, too, had an English language section where we could stock up on our favorite mystery writers. Some American and English classic titles were also carried, aimed not just at high school and college students but also to the general reader.

Thalia and **Phoenix** were practically next to one another and near the **Café Knigge**, with its outdoor tables in the **Fuessgaenger Zone** (pedestrian mall). We could make our purchases in one or both stores and then

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