I, User -- The Unbearable Lightness of Service: Notes on the Customer Experience

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ably-like fashion, with some attendees later complaining that waiters had taken plates away before they had finished eating.

The next day, the Egyptian press briefly reported that Mrs. Mubarak had visited the Bibliotheca to check on its status. "The First Lady didn’t mention her meeting with the friends. I was shocked," complained one Egyptian-American friend who attended the luncheon.10

At the friends’ general annual meeting on April 25, David Wardrop, a United Kingdom friends group member, gently advised the Bibliotheca administration to make the library more than just a repository for Alexandria’s history. Please, Wardrop added, give the friends more notice if still another date for the inaugural had to be canceled.

Seraagelden told the gathering that the library would be opened to the public in mid May and that Egyptian government was planning yet another official inaugural for next October. No one knows for sure if that will happen.

But when it does, the challenges for the Bibliotheca Alexandrina and its friends will have just begun. In the years ahead financing is expected to be the big challenge.

“A developing country like Egypt really can’t sustain a project of this magnitude by itself,” Harris said. “To sustain its operation and maintenance, we hope the international community will continue to provide donations, assistance and expertise.”11

Contributing Editor Ron Czepiesiuk has recently returned as Professor and Head of Special Collections, Winthrop University in Rock Hill, SC. He is also the author of 18 books and more than 2600 articles. He has been writing about the Bibliotheca Alexandrina since 1994.

endnotes
1. Interview with Samia Harris. April, 2002.
2. Ibid.
3. Information about the situation in Alexandria was gleaned from interviews, observations and reading of the local English-language press.
4. Interview with Rosalie Amer, April, 2002.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Interview with Mohsen Zahran in 2000.
11. Interview with Amer, April 2002.
13. Interview with source in Alexandria who wished to remain anonymous.

Richard Holmquist and Laila Dowidar:

I, User — The Unbearable Lightness of Service: Notes on the Customer Experience

by Rick Lugg and Ruth Fischer (R2 Consulting)

Here at R2 World Headquarters, the progress never stops. Since August, we have switched from dial-up to DSL Internet access. We installed a wireless LAN in our home and office. We turned techno-naturalists, “stalking the migrating email” as the mega-ISP that brought our mini-ISP turned loose our messages without even a GPS device to guide them. (“Sir, sometimes a few get lost along the way.”). We attempted, as self-employed citizens, to purchase disability insurance from a company subsequently featured in a “60 Minutes” segment, and still more dauntingly, to comprehend how to file claims on our non-standard health insurance policy. (“The best I can tell you, sir, is don’t!”)

To cross any of these innocuous-sounding tasks off our to-do list (and prevent them from reappearing there two weeks later) has required the resourcefulness and vigilance of a New Englander in winter...and the soul of a clerk. Although R2 is blessed with these traits in abundance (especially the soul of a clerk one), our business plan did not foresee that we would require them just to be someone’s customer! Perhaps the worst unintended consequence of a consuming, technology-driven, customizable-to-your-DNA economy is that no one understands how the whole thing works! (“Sir, we only handle billing here. You need to talk to Tech Support...or maybe Customer Care!”)

This refrain is so familiar that there are Muzak versions playing while we experience higher-than-average call volumes, but nonetheless R2’s DSL/LAN/Email record bears further listening. Because if you play the third cut backwards, it says “this is a problem in our industry, too.” Either that or “Wait Crawford wears white suits” — it’s hard to be sure! (Wasn’t he barefoot on the cover of American Libraries?) At any rate, the complexity of the customer experience continues to grow, as does the complexity of the customer service response. It doesn’t look like it’s stopping anytime soon, and as yet no company seems to have much of a handle on it. So let’s hit the play button again.

Whether you’re a librarian or just an ordinary person, when you’re ready to buy, everyone is friendly, including the buyer. For R2, the promise of infinite bandwidth gleamed brightly, offering still faster access to the Anderson-Hamaker Listserv Debates, with Goodman and Waterkiss sitting in the booth, and Commissioner Myerson wondering whom to suspend; mps of last year’s ALA Discussion Groups or the all-important day three of an ILS vendor presentation; live streaming of colloquies on consortial collection development, meetings of standards bodies, and committee organizing sessions; bitmapped facsimiles of famous consultants’ reports — total, real-time professional development! We’ll hardly have time to work.

The ISP’s sales department answered all our questions, and our calls! They even called us back. Once our order was processed, installers came to run the wires and jacks. Now, with a

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<http://www.against-the-grain.com>
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The tiny DSL box on the wall, I, User, have morphed, steroid-like, into I, Broadband User! Life is good. Commerce is good. We are at least a beta site for satisfaction, though the production release is still weeks away.

Entertaining as it may be to someone not directly involved, we'll skip over the next stage, involving the many trials and many more errors of installing a LAN and configuring four computers (representing multiple operating systems and living on three separate floors) to see the DSL router and one another. Suffice it to say that "XP is smarter than you are, so shut up and stop whining" — at least I think that's what the error message said. Three days, four return trips to Best Buy, and 600 trips up and down stairs later, R2's spirits reached . Abbreviated Nirvana: DSL, ISP, LAN, not to mention WAN from all the effort.

Two days later, though, capital letters were flying like ACQFlash meeting announcements before ALA. Our ISP (known as MCT) went through an A&M (or was it an LBO?) and became TDS. "NF?" I wailed.

And on the sixth day began the great migration, with promises of limited down-time, plentiful grazing, redundant servers and the briefest of service interruptions timed to occur during our REM sleep. When the dream ended, phone calls and recriminations began: "Do you have a dial-up account with us?" Try this Webmail server. "Do we host your domain?" "The account is set up under your son's name — is that right?" "I don't know why that didn't happen." "It says here in the record..." "That sounds like a tech support issue?" "Let me send you another test message." "Did that one work?"

And, on the other line, R2's customers, friends and acquaintances: "Didn't you get my email?" "Gee, you usually respond when I send you a message;" "Listen, you SOB, you wanna be DOA?" etc. In short, a business-threatening, ulcer-enhancing problem that needed to be solved.

To be fair, people did try. Customer Care cared, at least in that far-off, wow, that's a bummer, sort of way. There were dozens of phone calls. We got our own Incident Number. People followed up. They instructed us to try the "legacy pop server," where we found a few ancient messages, a few duplicates, and enough debt-reducing, performance-enhancing spam to choke an inbox. After two weeks in "to serve you better" limbo, our current email was restored.

But in the end, no one could find the missing and missing messages. (That console jockey Case from Neuronmancer might spy R2's correspondence in the Arthur Anderson data cores—they do need the work.) Despite persistent pressure, along with customer service and tech support people who wanted to help, and tried to help, our email problem was never diagnosed or solved. Someone somewhere inside the mega-ISP knows what happened or didn't happen. For whatever reason, that knowledge could not be retrieved and used. This little anecdote, we imagine, repeats itself every hour of every day, in a pattern of muddle and frustration.

So how does all this relate to the library world, you may well be asking by now? And what is it about this pattern that is so disturbing? Here are a few balding, middle-aged observations on the subject:

The Environment
1. The information industry and profession grow more complex daily.
2. Although business is spread among fewer companies (big publishers, big vendors, big deals), products, versions, interfaces and add-ons proliferate. Content changes constantly. Mergers, acquisitions, and corporate designs are frequent, and lead to changes in procedures, policies, and terms, not to mention actual mistakes.
3. Vendors supply cataloging, order records, physical processing. Web systems and interfaces in addition to books and journals, e-journals and eBooks. Vendors have multiple contacts at the library; the library multiple contacts at the vendor.
4. ILS vendors supply not only OPACs and ILL modules, but linking systems, meta-search tools, digital content, metadata, and e-journal management modules.
5. Entire companies (cf. Serials Solutions) have sprung up to keep track of what other companies do.
6. The same content, in so many cases, be obtained from a publisher, an aggregator, a consortium. Licensing, hosting, and IP authentication may be handled at multiple levels. A single user or institution may have access to the material in multiple ways.
7. Virtually every interface can be customized to the individual user.
8. All combinations of systems and processes may need to interact at some point. ("How do I load my Serials Solutions record into my LinkFinderPlus knowledge base?")
9. Libraries must support bibliographic instruction across diverse and sometimes overlapping systems, content, and formats.

The Problems
1. No one can know everything. (Except consultants.)
2. Customer service is often an entry-level position, and turnover is high. Training of customer service staff is time-consuming and expensive.
3. It's often no one's job to see the whole picture and coordinate an appropriate response. Referrals abound, due more to lack of information than lack of interest. ("I don't have access to that part of the system.")
4. It's no one's fault when the product or service doesn't work, so there's seldom anyone appropriate to unleash a tirade upon. By the same token, no single contact ever seems to be responsible for resolution of the problem.
5. New products lead to new and unanticipated problems. Both the library customer and the content or service provider need to develop expertise, which takes time, and leads to muddling through as an interim solution. (Not that there's anything wrong with that...)
6. When a patron, a user, a customer, or a business partner has a question or problem with the service provided, how can they know where to start? How can they ask the right question? Does good customer service require helping the customer express their problem in a way that can be diagnosed?
7. Increasingly, any service or product involves more than one company or provider. Who is responsible for creating and assuring the good customer experience? Who serves as the advocate, or the overseer?
8. There's always information — too much information in the customer relationship is as detrimental as too little. How to identify what's important?
9. It's not a question of intentions — for the most part, customer service people want to help. They don't have enough information, they can't see the whole picture, or it's so complex that they can't understand or explain it.

What's Needed?
1. A systems approach to customer service; that is, a way to see the whole picture. An overview of the customer's accounts and services. A way to coordinate all the necessary expertise. A "synoptic" view of the customer's activity.
2. A first contact that functions like an ombudsman — more highly-skilled and trained than typical first-level customer service. The best parallel may be the reference interview, where careful questioning of the "customer" occurs before resources are recommended. After this assessment, the Customer Ombudsman (Ombudsperson? Ombud?) can direct the caller to appropriate resources.
3. Vendors, content providers, libraries, and publishers need to design a customer service environment that's not just a call center or a CRM system. They need to understand the customer's world of configurations and options, explain it to them, then diagnose and solve the problem.
4. It's a two-way street. A library customer can help by providing an overview of its own big picture, and how all the processes, systems, and content fit together. When a vendor comes to call, that big picture continued on page 92
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can help make sense of separate conversations with Collection Development, Acquisitions, Serials, Cataloging, Database Maintenance, Systems, Preservation, and content partners.

5. The challenge for vendors/libraries is to learn how to shoot the curl of the information wave rather than be pounded into the ocean floor. (The challenge for writers is to avoid sentences like that one, but it's 1:10 AM, and the deadline was at midnight.) Both customers and those who serve customers (and we are all both) must work at the coordination, communication, and information sharing.

6. Consultants!

As the customer experience becomes more complex and frustrating, there is some risk for all providers of goods and services, including libraries. If patrons or customers receive unhelpful or partial responses or have to extract needed information piece by piece, they'll eventually give up, and will stop using that vendor or library. They'll switch to a competitor (Google!), or stop looking, or revert to the time-honored expedient of watching TV all the time. (Assuming, of course, that customer service can get their digital cable working.) You don't want that on your conscience now, do you?

But there is more good news here than bad. Now that technology, customization, and strategic partnerships have become the very air we breathe, competition can and will shift back toward service, toward helping customers and patrons get what they need from our products and services. The winners will be not only customers, but those organizations that can understand and simplify the customer experience.