

Putting the "service" back in library service

By Carol Goodson

*Patrons want more from us and
we should give it*

For most of my 20-plus years as a librarian I accepted the belief that our main task was to make library users independent—a concept we now call information literacy. My eyes have been opened to the inadequacy of this premise, however, by recent experience in operating what amounts to an information brokerage service for the benefit of the nearly 2,000 distance education students at my institution. The nature of the service is simple: in response to an off-campus student's request (consisting only of their research paper topic, approximate number of sources needed, and deadline date), we perform searches in appropriate databases and fax or e-mail the results to the individual for review. After the student marks the items that are wanted and returns the search to us, materials are pulled from the shelves, photocopied as necessary, and, if more items are needed, ILL requests are initiated for what we do not have. The material is sent by Priority Mail, UPS Next Day Air, or fax, along with an invoice for photocopy and search charges. The student now has all the information he or she needs. To say that this service is appreciated is a gross understatement: *they love it!*

Give them what they want

This may scandalize or perhaps even outrage some who are reading this, since the tradition, especially in academic libraries, has always been to teach users how to do their own research, not to do it for them. Nevertheless, I have come to believe that the level of service we provide to off-campus students is precisely what the majority of users really want and what we ought

to be offering them. In the modern service economy in which we all must now operate, the profession of librarianship will simply not survive unless we wake up and recognize that the era in which we could get away with insisting that customers come to our building in order to get our product is over. And if we delude ourselves about this too much longer, I assure you that people will find ways to get their information needs met by others who are more accommodating.

Think about it: when you compare what librarians do to the work of other professionals, it just makes sense. When you need help with your taxes, you don't go to a C.P.A. and ask to be taught what you need to know to do your Form 1040—of course not! You hand over your records with relief, trusting that the C.P.A. will use his or her specialized knowledge to solve your tax problems. The analogies could be multiplied, but you get the point: we are surely misleading library users when we tacitly assure them that they can acquire the same sophisticated searching skills that librarians have after only a brief bit of instruction at the Reference Desk or in a library instruction class—skills which we studied on the graduate level and then perfected in advanced workshops and many years spent on the job! Who in their right mind is going to believe that?

Willing to pay

Let's stop the endless whining about the negative stereotyping of librarians and repeated laments about our low status in the professional world. The truth is we have only ourselves to blame because of our dogged insistence upon pretending to users that the difficult and complex work we do is really easy, and by forcing people to try to learn to do their research and document retrieval themselves. Users know

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perfectly well that we can do it better and faster, and what's more, *they want us to do it for them*. Few have either the time or inclination to acquire the skills of a library professional in a crash course at the Reference Desk. They know we have superior skills and knowledge and they want us to use them on their behalf. Moreover, I have learned from countless conversations that the majority are more than willing to pay for it.

The number of jobs for librarians could actually be increased if we were to add to our services options such as reasonably priced information retrieval and document delivery—and use the funds generated to hire more librarians to meet the increased demand that will inevitably result.

Before you start addressing your mail bombs, allow me to say that I am not suggesting we stop teaching people how to gather information if they want to do it themselves or can't afford to pay us to do it for them. What I am saying is that it is no longer acceptable to demand that those who want our product *must* come to a specific place to get it, then do it all themselves under our guidance. Today's busy consumers expect to pick up the phone, recite their VISA numbers, and have the merchandise sent. Just imagine your reaction if you wanted something from J.C. Penney and the person on the other end of the line invited you to come to the warehouse and search out the item yourself. But we do this all day long to those who call our Reference Desks, don't we? Are you beginning to wonder how we stay in business?

What can we really do

As more and more information is available on the Internet and commercial online services, librarians are in great danger of being cut out of the loop completely—not because people no longer need us, but because they *think* they no longer need us. Why not? We have tried for years to convince them that this is true, that they can do it all themselves—and with many resources available as close as their home computers, I can assure you that these are what they will use—not because they are the best materials for their needs, but simply because it's convenient. The unique thing about librarians is that we are trained not only to find in-

formation and organize it, but also to evaluate its quality—but we have consistently abdicated these responsibilities in misguided attempts to make libraries more and more self-service. Again, as the availability of and access to information technology escalates, librarians have less

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and less time left to show people what we really can do for them. We are well on our way to extinction if we don't start changing the way we do things, and fast. ■

Join our virtual discussion

ACRL invites you to join a virtual discussion about the future of higher education and its impact on academic libraries. ACRL has published three papers that will be discussed at its 8th National Conference in Nashville, April 11–14, on its Web site at <http://www.ala.org/acrl/preindex.html>. Readers may post their comments before the conference.

- “Electronics and the Future of the Research Library” by Eli Noam, professor of finance and economics, Columbia University.
- “Restructuring Our Universities: Focusing on Student Learning” by Alan Guskin, chancellor and professor, Antioch University.
- “From Serial Publications & Document Delivery to Knowledge Management” by Paul Evan Peters, late executive director of the Coalition for Networked Information.

Both Noam and Guskin will join ACRL in Nashville. A panel of academic librarians will respond to the papers and the professors will comment on the responses.

Conference registration information is available on the Web site at <http://www.ala.org/acrl.html> (then select National Conference), in the January issue of *C&RL News*, and by contacting Darlena Davis at (800) 545-2433, ext. 2519; e-mail: ddavis@ala.org; fax (312) 280-2520.



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