Customer service?
Not really

By Irene B. Hoadley

Do we need to watch our phraseology?

The new byword in library literature is customer service—new customer services, improved customer services, services based on customer needs. The customer has become the focal point of libraries and many other service organizations.

For some time, the word customer has gnawed at me, somehow not feeling right. When I checked a dictionary, I knew why I was bothered by the term. A customer, by definition, is someone who "purchases a commodity or service." On the other hand, a user is someone who "carries out a purpose or action availing oneself of something as a means or instrument to an end."

Without question, libraries provide some services that are purchased by patrons. But, to the best of my knowledge, the large majority of library services are provided without a direct cost to the user. Libraries ordinarily do not charge for answering reference questions or checking out books or for using reference materials or government documents. So how can these individuals be called customers if they are not purchasing something?

Is this a case of the emperor's new clothes? Is anyone in libraryland willing to question this new terminology? It was in 1990 that library users began to be referred to as customers, a term borrowed from the quality movement which was burgeoning in the corporate world. "Customer satisfaction," "quality services," and

"total quality management" were the phrases of the day. A few libraries wanting to be on the cutting edge of management innovations began to discuss customer satisfaction and how libraries could address the issue. Yet, in some libraries, the main consideration is not the user. Public, special, and school libraries have always placed more emphasis on meeting the needs of users than have academic libraries, where collections have been the primary focus.

The move to focus on service is good and long overdue. The emphasis on quality service is also good. The recognition that those who use libraries have opinions about the quality of the service they receive is a step forward. Every library could improve its services, and not only reference service but also circulation, reserve, and interlibrary loan. Putting the needs of users before the preferences of staff has to be a first step. Another issue which does not get much attention is the need to take services *to* users rather than expecting everyone to come to one place to fulfill their needs. Libraries have traditionally had hierarchies of users rather than providing equitable service to all. There is still plenty of room for improvement.

In a recent article, Allen Veanor discusses the impact of vogue management techniques:[1]

I am very critical of all business management derivatives—they tend to be deterministic, highly reductive, and transient. But I do not suggest we cannot learn from business and industry or should not apply appropriate business techniques to managing

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academic libraries. The key is in the words appropriate and proper. (p. 398)

This is one more example of libraries jumping on a bandwagon, taking off some of the items, and putting them in libraries without thinking about what's being done. However, terminology that is both correct and appropriate in our environment is preferable to adapting the terminology of another discipline. It is not too late. Librarians can acknowledge the meaning of the word customer and stop using it to describe those who use libraries. Or librarians can continue to discuss customer service and be like the emperor without any clothes.

Note

1. Allen Veanor, "Paradigm Lost, Paradigm Regained? A Persistent Personnel Issue in Academic Librarianship, II," *College and Research Libraries* 55 (September 1994): 389–402. ∎

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editorial submissions, and electronic versions of a journal. We conducted a survey of the journals received on May 12, 1994, to determine how many of these titles provide e-mail addresses. Of the 77 pieces received for processing on that day, 9 (11.6 %) of the journals were found to have e-mail addresses. Those that do range across the spectrum in terms of disciplines. They include *Design News, Economics & Philosophy, Journal of Geophysical Research*; and *Journal of Sport and Social Issues.*

We repeated the survey on May 16th and found e-mail addresses for 18 (10%) of the 183 pieces received. As located, these Internet and Bitnet addresses can later be added in a note field on our check-in cards and used as needed to communicate problems or solicit information.

A single e-mail address is provided for whole organizations like the University of Texas, which publishes over 125 journal titles, and Meckler with 33 journal titles. Similarly Internet addresses are provided for the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers and the American Mathematical Society. Communicating with these organizations about any of their publications can conceivably be achieved by using the single e-mail address provided.

From the results of our survey, it is clear that Internet access is being provided by a variety of sources such as CompuServ, MCI mail, and research and education networks. One indication of the growing interest in Internet access is evident from Osherkoff's list of organizations whose primary business is providing access to the Internet and its list of organizations that provide Internet access as one of their services.[4] As more and more organizations seek to cut costs and improve communications, the use of the Internet will become a common tool for conducting daily business and will facilitate and enhance a library's ability to provide good service.

Conclusion

Access to the Internet is like having your own personal knowledge and information network for consulting other library catalogs, for sharing information on listservs, for communicating problems, and for identifying solutions. It is a powerful tool for testing ideas, exploring options, and collecting decision support for making more informed decisions.

Working on the Internet provides a cost-effective and invisible tool that can be used in serials management to quickly resolve problems that might take a long time or otherwise never be resolved. Now that serials check-in is displayed in real time in the OPAC, resolving problems quickly becomes even more important. As we use the Internet we have a greater appreciation for its potential in helping technical services librarians exchange knowledge and expertise, solve daily problems, test new ideas, and share information more fully and effectively than previously possible. Using the Internet offers a way of enhancing the quality of library service for all of us. Yesterday's vision of the Electronic Library is today's reality.

Notes

1. G. M. McCombs, "The Internet and Technical Services: A Point Break Approach," *LRTS* 38 (April 1994): 169–77.

2. E-mail message from Steve Cunningham (rsc@altair.csustan.edu), director of publications for SIGGRAPH.

3. E-mail message from Brigitte Latzel (Latzel@Springer.de), Journal Production Department, Springer-Verlag.

4. S. K. Osheroff, "Communications Vendors and Organizations Providing Internet Access," *Serials Review* 19 (Winter 1993): 43–62, 82-?. ∎