The irate patron is right

Try putting yourself in a student's shoes

by Marilyn Christianson

When your coffee machine and your Coke machine are both out and it's midnight and finals are tomorrow, your irate patron is right.

When you buy $300,000 worth of books a year, but not much that's actually in demand, your irate patron is right. When two of four books requested from compact shelving are nowhere to be found, your irate patron is right.

The sorriest discovery I've made since graduating from library school lo those many years ago is that angry patrons are justly so. Oh sure, from time to time a student refuses to understand why you won't tell him the answer to his math homework and the person on the telephone gets huffy when you won't give her a simple yes or no regarding the heritability of high cholesterol. But customers have legitimate complaints.

Legitimate complaints don't necessarily mean the library is at fault. Most of us work for libraries within institutions whose well-intentioned rules wreak havoc with effective service. The people who make those rules don't mean to ruin quality. Still, it doesn't take long for employees to become discouraged. Enormous emotional resources are required to change one tiny thing.

Examine your assumptions

It is hard to change the rules because so many assumptions lie behind their creation. Examining assumptions is hard.

The U.S. automobile industry was forced to reexamine its assumptions about saleable products after imports seriously hurt the business. Imports still cut deeply into the automobile market, but the engineering of the U.S.-made cars improved dramatically.

The painful competition from the Internet has enabled some academic libraries to reexamine their rules about food and drink. Customers prefer to sit at their own workstations with their snacks at hand seeking information. Yet home and office have distractions. Maybe patrons would prefer to get away from the yelling kids or the office piled high with unread student papers, if we served coffee and tea at public workstations. Perhaps around finals time we should offer anti-stress snacks and drinks.

What other assumptions can we challenge?

1) E-mail users should be regulated out of the library. Why don't we think of e-mail as a godsend that delivers unto us those who

About the author

Marilyn Christianson is coordinator of Science Collection Development at Louisiana State Universities Libraries, e-mail: mchris@lsu.edu

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might not otherwise darken our door? Public libraries long ago decided to listen to the research that told us reading popular material develops young readers. Perhaps the habit of seeking information is what we academic librarians are developing in users of e-mail and Internet browsers.

2) Popular computer books are b-a-a-a-d. Maybe we should stop thinking the person who wants a computer book is someone trying to get out of buying a manual. Maybe the student who just complained beggared himself to buy six computer books last year and now needs to wrestle with different software for a few weeks. How did we decide that our novel readers were short-term users but our computer technology readers wanted semi-permanent bench tools?

3) We have to charge more than anyone else for our bad photocopies and printouts because our volume is low. We can't do anything about the excessive downtime. As any first-year economics student can tell you, maybe your volume is low because your price is high. If the students tending the machines are held responsible for testing and calling for repairs every afternoon, maybe you could get to midnight with a few still working. Is it everybody's and therefore nobody's job to make sure the repairperson comes?

Live by your own rules

Here is an experiment that will run you smack dab into the assumptions behind your rules. For your next research project, completely restrict yourself to what your patrons can do. Let's presume you don't usually use relational databases but have to for this project. You know the library's Collection Development Policy 33.B.2.8 prohibits buying actually useful books. Still, you go to the stacks to try to find some. The few relevant volumes are missing and too old anyway. The one newer book is on two-hour reserve. You know you can't figure out the procedures in two hours.

Go buy the $47.95 handbook that you think has the answer, and then go buy the developer's manual for $39.99 that really does. This is, of course, after wandering around the Internet for hours looking fruitlessly at the sites that purport to tell you all about that software. A library collection of software e-books, multiple copies please, suddenly looks quite reasonable.

Now, following library rules, try to look up the articles you need for this project. Use the library outside normal work hours like other students. No, no, you can't slip into the staff area to use the nice photocopier. No, no, you can't use your authority to check out a non-circulating journal. You have to get in line for the one photocopy machine out of six that's working at 9 p.m., even if its copies are lousy.

The student working for the outsourced photocopy/printing service hasn't been trained to check all the machines before he/she leaves, log problems, and call for needed maintenance. Or if he or she has been, no follow-up is in place to make sure the system works.

So what if the change machine is out of change and the circulation desk doesn't handle money. You can just sit down and take notes, thank you, if you haven't planned well enough to have brought the $17.80 in coin it takes at ten cents a copy to copy all the articles you need.

You have no choice but to copy them, since your pen just ran out of ink and your carpal tunnel syndrome makes it hard for you to use the golf pencils they hand out. As it is, three newly indexed articles are away being bound and ILL will not get them for you, since the library owns them. When you ask why such recent articles are being bound, a staff member tells you that the library is doing it to make sure the issues survive to be in the library when you need them.

Next you need a government publication. You steel yourself to use the microforms. You know that the problem employee your institution is too afraid to fire is working that desk tonight. Indeed, he looks down his nose at you as he says, "Don't you know it's now on the Web?" You wonder how he'd treat Jane Q. Public. You imagine her trying to find patents on DVD with his "help."

The soft drink machine in the small basement room with the stinking trash can is likely out of anything you can stand to drink. Remember, for this experiment you have to live by patron rules. If it's dark and cold outside, you can't slip into your office to use the microwave for coffee. Hike three blocks to the Union with your police whistle at the ready.

Carry your papers with you, no matter if the rain ruins them. Don't stick them behind a service desk. Your patrons can't. When you get back it will be too late to do much because you forgot they start turning off the machines and the lights 30 minutes early, which means 40 minutes if they don't think you're watching.

Because it took so long to get coffee, you got behind and now it's too late to call your cousin to tell her you can't make it to the birthday party tomorrow. But hark! You can e-mail her from a public workstation, except that e-mail is not permitted out there, and for this experiment you can't use your office.

Indeed, he looks down his nose at you as he says, "Don't you know it's now on the Web?"

You are sure you have thoroughly learned your lesson. You vow to look at things through patrons' eyes forever and ever amen. But the next day the last lesson awaits. You are three buildings away in the office of a friend in the Psychology department. You have time to kill and decide to find some last-minute articles for your paper. You try using the electronic journals whose site licenses you struggled so hard to afford. Three of the ten you try actually work. Some of the misbehaving journals demand user's IDs and passwords, even though the publisher promised they wouldn't. Acrobat can't load the files of the others. Unfortunately your friend has brought in students to see you "do the future."

At last you yourself have become the most irate of patrons, and you are right. ■

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