



Volume 55 | Issue 1

Article 5

5-2012

Techniques for Providing Outstanding Customer Service

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Recommended Citation

Morrison, Dr. Ray L. (2012) "Techniques for Providing Outstanding Customer Service," *The Christian Librarian*: Vol. 55 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/tcl/vol55/iss1/5>

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Techniques for Providing Outstanding Customer Service

Introduction

Large corporations such as Wal-Mart, Target, and K-mart have small customer service departments which handle various issues, but the rest of their personnel really do not participate in customer service. In the world of academic libraries, the ENTIRE staff should be looking for ways or techniques to promoting better customer service for their patrons. In fact, their motto should be, "Customer service is not a department, it's an attitude" (Anonymous)

Task Force

In the spring of 2009, our Associate Library Director felt there was a need to organize a sign committee and examine the internal signs because there were so many signs located throughout the facility. The committee inventoried all the signs in the building, took photographs and met to discuss their findings. However, the consensus was that there were more issues to be dealt with than just signs, thus establishing a Customer Service Task Force. This group was made up of ten librarians, a staff member and an administrator. The task force met monthly (year-round) and has been one of the most enjoyable groups to serve on. Customer service issues were identified and discussed as a group and then the best ideas enacted upon them without a lot of lag time to completion.

The first major task for this new group was to survey task force members as to what tasks needed to be done and prioritizing them onto a list. The group started working on these issues and came up with the following projects (all by the main entrance signage has been completed):

1. Maps – New directory was produced and mounted on a pillar near the main entrance. Maps were placed at the entrance of each floor and the elevator in plastic-coated holders.
2. Library handbooks – Brightly colored handbooks were produced and handed out at library orientations.
3. Main entrance – There was currently no building identification, so we have been working with the campus graphic design department to develop some attractive signage.
4. Interior doors – There were five or six miscellaneous signs on each door on the third floor stacks area. All the signs were removed, doors repainted, and only a few signs reattached.
5. Signs – Quiet study signs were added to the third floor along with new decals on the fire extinguisher boxes. The exit doors were repainted and reflective signs placed on them. The old reserve sign was removed as reserves are serviced at the main circulation desk.
6. End panel signs – A number of clear magnetic signs were purchased and attached to the end panels so they could be move when necessary. A series of signs were creatively designed to explain such information as food policies, semester schedules, or new services.
7. Bookmarks and posters – The READ poster concept used by ALA was borrowed and localized by using pictures of our faculty and staff holding their favorite books. Bookmarks were then made from these posters and handed out at the circulation desk.
8. Bulletin boards – A bulletin board policy was developed and the boards kept neat and attractive. Any campus group could put up their materials, but we monitored the boards and removed items that were out-of-date.
9. Informational signage – A television monitor was installed in the central part of the library displaying services, librarian

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ABSTRACT

Providing exceptional customer service should be one of the primary goals for all academic libraries. However, with the day-to-day interruptions, librarians sometimes forget all about customer service. By developing a Customer Service Task Force, Penfield Library has been able to develop a number of projects in the past two years to greatly improve its reputation. Such methods as surveys and small and large focus groups were conducted to determine what projects needed to be addressed. Tips and tricks to providing quality customer service in a small college/university library are also presented.

profiles and even the weather radar. Also, new services were promoted via this technology.

10. Walker sign hangers – This was a sign-hanging system that allowed art to be hung throughout the library making putting up posters and art prints a breeze.



11. Conference rooms – A variety of conference rooms were developed – some with TV/computer monitors and others with comfortable furniture.

12. IGLU's (Innovative Group Learning Units) – We live in the Snow Belt so the best acronym we could come up with was IGLU's. These units were similar to conference rooms, but are more portable. They included TV/computer monitors, white boards and are very sound-proof. Students loved them and used them on a first-come, first serve basis.

13. Study areas with great views – Housed on third floor, this is also our quiet area. On this floor, one could relax on couches (or go to sleep) while admiring the view of the lake.

14. 24-hour study room – Half of this room had computers, while the other half contained study tables. This room allowed the students to study all night long and was extremely busy during Finals Week. A closed-circuit TV system was set up in place and was monitored by Campus Police.

15. Lake Effect Café – This café has been housed in the Library for three years now, but is now more than a place to just purchase food. Concerts, art shows, speakers, receptions and even karaoke were shared in this location.

16. Seating – A variety of seating has been added to our facility. We added bean-bag chairs, round chairs, canvas chairs, and even rocking chairs.



17. Cell phones – Cell phones were allowed to be used in the facility, as long as the conversation wasn't too loud. Our cell phone policy had to be changed for this procedure to take place.

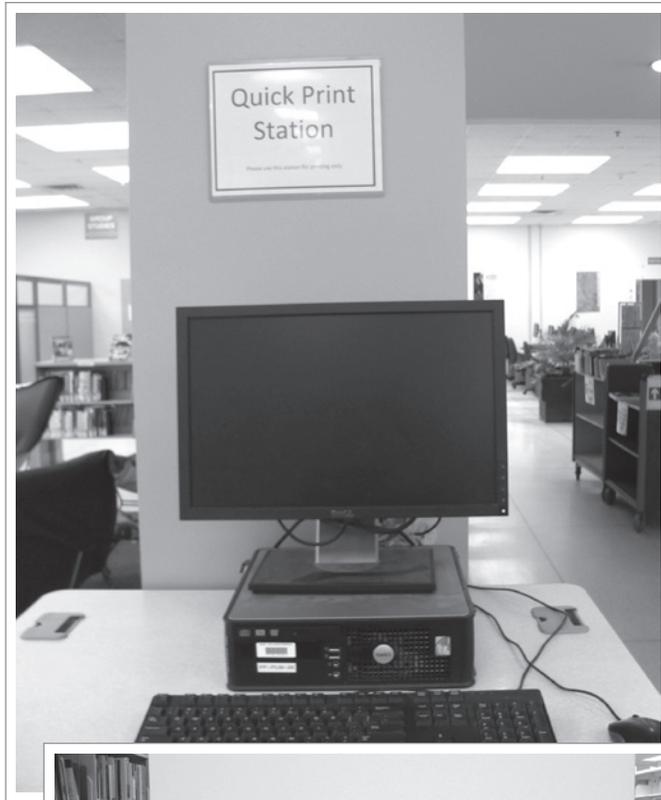
18. Quick print computer – Two quick print computers were installed so students could come in and make copies of their papers without tying up a computer in the computer lab. There have been lines of five to six people at one time waiting to use our quick print computers as they didn't want to waste precious time waiting for a computer to boot up in the lab.

19. Hand cleaners – Hand sanitizers were installed throughout the building along with bottles of GermX at all the service desks (circulation, periodicals/media, and reference desk). Kleenex was also a very popular item and we supplied it for the students.

20. Carpet repairs/Elevator/Roof – These projects were completed this summer to make our 1960's facility more aesthetically appealing to the students.

21. Special events – For the past two years, a "Penfield Loves You" reception has been a special event in the library. Held on Valentine's Day, the staff provided a table full of treats while the Provost provided the coffee. It was our way to thank the students and faculty for their patronage. An April egg hunt was developed this year promoting our new texting program. Paper eggs were placed all over campus so that when a student found one of these eggs, they texted us with the code. The five winners discovered over 30 of the 50 eggs and received free campus sweatshirts.

22. Book sale – Two book sales were held each year using donated and/or weeded books. Each sale netted several thousand dollars that was applied towards the purchase of new materials. Plus, the students loved adding books to their collections.



23. Library home page – The library webmaster was constantly making sure the website was up-to-date and appealing to the students. The home page was very comprehensive and has now becoming easier to navigate.

24. Websites – The Library was added to Facebook this past year and was a place where library announcements and new services were shared with the readers. Also, all librarians developed LibGuides this past semester for the departments they work as liaisons and used them in library instruction.

25. Electronic books – Several Kindles and Nooks were purchased for reserve materials and recreational readings. They were so popular that more readers were purchased.
26. Community computers – Two computers were added exclusively for usage by local citizens. Their use was monitored by the staff. It freed up the computers in the computer lab so our students could work on their projects without additional visitors.
27. Browsing area – A browsing area of books and media was created and some comfortable seating was added to make it inviting to our students.
28. Free coffee, donuts and ear plugs during Finals Week – Each evening during Finals Week, students could get free coffee and donuts in the Library. If the noise gets too loud, they could also get free earplugs from a dispenser at the reference desk. Needless to say, all three items were consumed each semester.

Focus Groups

Last fall, our task force felt the need to survey the entire library staff to get their thoughts on customer service and have them buy into our projects. The staff was divided into eight focus groups (mixing in librarians, staff and administrators). These groups were given four questions and they wrote their answers on large writing pads. The sheets were then compiled by our group and results revealed at a large focus group meeting, consisting of the entire library staff. The four questions debated were:

1. Think about an experience you had with a business or service that made you want to return, or to recommend the business or service to your friends and family: What was it about this experience that made it a good one for you?
2. Where there things about the real and/or virtual space where this experience took place that you appreciated?

3. Now thinking about Penfield Library: What do you think are the service strengths of Penfield now?
4. What ideas do you have for improving our customer service?

A document titled “Penfield’s Promise to Patrons” came out of these focus groups stating:

- We at Penfield Library Promise to:
- Treat you as an individual, and work to understand how your situation fits within our policies
- Make sure the staff is knowledgeable about whatever Penfield does.
- Continuously work to provide better customer service and correct mistakes quickly
- Office high quality services and resources
- Acknowledge you at the entrance and be approachable anywhere in the library we provide services

This statement really puts customer service into the forefront of what we were doing at Penfield. Everyone on our library staff took it seriously and started looking for ways they could provide customer service in their OWN department as well as the library as a whole.

What’s Next

We have not exhausted our customer service tasks, nor are we going to disband our task force. Here is a list of items we are considering to work on in the future:

- Review and replace disability signs
- Using CR codes
- Remove suggestion board and move towards an online display
- Staff development workshop on Penfield Promise
- Essay contest along with more READ posters
- Expand current electricity – more wired tables

- Patching up and repainting needed areas
- Establish an information commons area

What's interesting about our unique group is that whenever we completed a task, we added several other items to our list. We make customer service a top priority in Penfield Library.

Ideas for Customer Service

There are several ways you can help promote customer service in your library, no matter how large or small of a library you work in.

- *Establish a customer service task force. Make it a priority.* Get people involved and have them buy into the customer service concept.
- *Add customer service to your library mission and goal statements as well as all job descriptions.* You need to add customer service statements to your goals and job descriptions. All our staff job descriptions have a customer service element built into them. That's how serious we are about this concept.
- *Use surveys and small/large study groups to address patrons.* We developed several surveys – one done during “Penfield Loves You” and another being a class project helping us to get feedback from our patrons. We took the results of these surveys and used those ideas we felt needed our attention.
- *Listen to patrons suggestions and implement the best ideas.* Have your staff document statements (both positive and negative) made by your patrons and then decide which ones to act upon.
- *Eliminate negative signs.* Either make your signs positive or eliminate them entirely. We reduced the number of signs in our library by at least 50 percent and it looks so much more attractive and gives a positive tone.
- *Train staff in customer service techniques.* We use workshops, webinars, or presentations to make the staff more sensitive about customer service issues.

- *Provide variety of technology services.* Purchase and loan out flip cameras, scanners, e-readers, etc. for those students who use these modes of study
- *Develop informative library webpage.* If you have a professionally designed page, it will attract more students than one which is mediocre. Services, hours, catalog, reserves, staff, and databases all need to be included in this product.
- *Publicize library services in a variety of formats.* This can be done with attractive handbooks, TV screens, newsletters, etc. Promote your library wherever you go – whether it is the classroom, faculty meeting, or even seeing patrons in the grocery market.
- *Be sensitive to special needs patrons.* Go out of your way to help special needs students. We will go upstairs and locate materials for wheel-chair patrons so that they don't have to try and get them on the top shelves themselves.
- *Provide non-traditional services such as music concerts and special speakers.* We have such areas as our Lake Effect Café and library instruction rooms for these types of events.
- *Be prepared to make changes.* Change is inevitable.
- *Enjoy your job!* Show some enthusiasm. Love what you are doing and this will carry over to your staff and patrons. Be positive and willing to listen.

There are other things you can do to provide great customer service. You don't have to duplicate every project listed in this article. Start small and work on one item at a time. Budget constraints must be considered, but many of these projects are very inexpensive to initiate. Remember, every little thing you do to help improve your patrons' lives will show you are a librarian concerned about customer service. Make customer service a top priority in your library today! †