

Customer service in libraries — a question posed

I noted with interest the focus on customer service in the September issue of *inCite*. As a patron in a library, what do we expect as a reasonable level of service? What is an acceptable level of professional education demanded of the library?

This is a question I've come to ask myself of late as I visit my local public library and have seen a decline in the level of customer service. It's not that the staff aren't helpful and friendly — it's just that they're not librarians or even technicians. By and large, they're pages.

Does this shock you? It has shocked and saddened me. The branch I visit the most (the biggest in the district) has always had the best ambience for a library that any patron could wish for. Warm wood stacks, professional and knowledgeable staff, and a wide range of services. This was true for all the branches in the district.

Over the last few years this has changed. Several branches have been 'consolidated' under one manager, self check-out machines reign, you can pay your fines via the district website using credit card (a good thing perhaps?), no more security gates at the entrance/exit, a confusing and overwhelming home page for their website, the slow

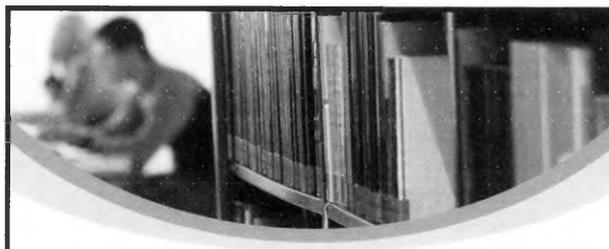
erosion of quality professional staff on public desks, and the latest — all calls to the branches now go to a call centre and the receptionist then directs the calls around the district. The librarians rotate around all the branches in the district, so it is harder to forge relationships with patrons, especially in the readers advisor area, where knowing your customer's tastes makes for a satisfactory visit.

I recently had the unfortunate experience of needing a replacement book on tape. The replacement had to be brought in from outside the district and the staff member handling my request placed a hold at another library but never asked the basic question of what format I needed it in and did I want unabridged? He had to back track and call me back after checking that he had requested the format I wanted when he eventually did ask the question. It was frustrating for me, since it was an obvious and elemental question.

The district's policy has been to make some of the branches have the ambience of a book shop. Is this what the patrons want? Not particularly from what I hear from some of the staff. Don't get me wrong — there have been some good things they've done. Being able to place holds from home via the online catalogue is great, and I love it. I can also keep track of what I've borrowed.

But what I want most when I go to the library (which is becoming less often) is help from someone who's been trained and has some level of qualification in librarianship — and not just has a few hours of training. I'm going to the library to get help with an information problem — not to the grocery store and wanting to know what aisle the coffee is in.

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Your letters on any issue of relevance to the library and information sector are welcomed. Opinions expressed in the magazine are those of the authors and not necessarily the official policy of the Australian Library and Information Association. All letters should be addressed to the *inCite* editor and may be e-mailed to <incite@alia.org.au>, or faxed to 02 6282 2249, or posted to: Your voice, ALIA, PO Box 6335, Kingston 2604. Letters will be accepted for publication until the 10th of the month. Please include your name and postal address.

How much ground has been lost?

I have been a member of ALIA since 1997 but stopped reading *inCite* some years ago, as I became disillusioned with ALIA's apparent lack of concern when I notified them of the 'de-professionalisation' of librarians at The Australian National University (ANU). The reason given by ALIA, in 2002, was that it was difficult to make representations on behalf of an individual rather than a group. Copies of *inCite* have gone into the bin until I received this month's issue with the theme 'Customer Service'. Customer service is something I feel strongly about in my work, so I browsed the pages looking for new ideas. I was astounded to read under the heading 'Professional Standing', in the 'Workwatch' column, that ALIA is acting to represent members facing widespread loss of professional recognition and regard for their qualifications and experience.

Over seven years I studied to obtain my Bachelor degree in Library & Information Studies but now work in an institution which refuses to use the library stream classification (still present in the current ANU Enterprise

Agreement) to recognise such qualifications — but which awards similar qualifications to its students. I first directly corresponded with the ANU Librarian about this matter in 2004, but in his reply he did not acknowledge the use of the general administrative officer stream, rather referring to it as the 'ANU Officer scale', and not adequately addressing the issue of subsequent downgrading of most Library position levels. In addition to the ongoing lowering of morale among staff, it is also the case that staff have left the University for posts elsewhere in Canberra where, at least until now, they have received due professional recognition.

I understand that this 'dumbing down' trend, enabling the employment of non-qualified staff for librarian positions, has occurred in many organisations across Australia. I maintain my membership of ALIA in the hope that ALIA will properly represent its members' concerns regarding their professional standing.

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Editor's note

ALIA welcomes letters from members about workplace issues, however publishing such letters in *inCite* depends on appropriateness and editorial decisions, the individual's situation and available space in the magazine. Alternatively, members may contact ALIA's Industrial Relations Advisor to discuss the matter personally — phone **02 6215 8228**.

While ALIA cannot act as a personal legal representative in industrial matters, representations can be made on behalf of members to a range of bodies, including employers, government agencies, trade unions and other professional bodies. Letters of support may be provided when a case is justified. These can be made available directly to you for your use in a way you believe is appropriate. Alternatively, submissions can be made directly to employers setting out concerns the Association has on your behalf.

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