

What I love about working in libraries... and what I hate

I'm really passionate about libraries. I know that might sound like an obvious statement, but I say it to explain why I occasionally get worked up about things. Wise people say that you can only love and hate things that you care about, and I sure do care about libraries.

So I bring you the things that I love and the things that I hate about working in libraries. You'll be pleased to note that there's more to love than hate.



The things I love

Books

The fact is I love books. I know we'd all be millionaires if we had a dollar for every time someone said they'd love to be a librarian because they love books, but it's also true that lots of us *do* love books. I love the variety in books – there's a book on anything and everything. I love the obscurity of some books, and that fact that they are sometimes so interesting because of it. I love the way that reading a book opens a whole new world, and that reading a book can also create visual images, smells, sounds, and tastes in your mind. I love the smell of old books and the feel of an old leather binding.

Freedom of access to information

I adore the fact that there are strong principles behind our profession, principles that matter and that people fight for. I don't have the stomach to be a doctor, nor the patience to be a teacher, but I can still be part of a profession that stands for something and makes a difference. I love that one of our core values is freedom of access to information, and that we believe that information should be accessible even if you can't afford to pay for it. I'm proud to be a part of a profession that claims this is important.

Library tourism

Have you ever gone on a trip away, and visited other libraries? It's gotten so that every time I go overseas I try to arrange a visit to a library or two, and I love the fact that other libraries are so welcoming. I find it interesting to see how other libraries are run, and to watch the locals in the reading rooms. I've never been told that I can't visit a library, and I've always been welcomed and treated like an honoured guest. Library tourism rocks. I dream of one day building a world trip all around beautiful libraries.

Professionally engaged library folk

There are some engaged, creative, intelligent individuals in our profession who make it better for the rest of us. They're the ones that organise group events and activities, for no reward other than the fact that they get to share in the experience with other people. They're the ones that are generous with their time, ideas, and contacts. They're the ones that take existing technology and play with it, making something new, and then share it. Sometimes we get too involved in enjoying the fruits of their labour to remember to appreciate the work that they've done, so I'd like to do so here. Thank you for making my professional life better!

The things I hate

"Lights off" librarians¹

You know who you are. You're the ones who believe that libraries are places where only serious people should be allowed to do their serious work, and that you are the gatekeeper of all information and you might, might give some of that information to someone, if they show you proper deference. You believe that the rules should be followed because they are the rules, that individuals cannot be trusted to use information sources, and that your way is the right way. You believe that information belongs to you, and you find the democratisation of the web very, very scary. With all due respect to your good work in the past, it's time you dealt with the fact that you're not in charge of it just because you're the only one that knows how to use the card catalogue.

The image of librarians

I can't decide what I hate more – the way librarians are stereotyped by the general public, or our constant obsession with it. Yes, we are seen as boring and dowdy, yes, we're not respected for the vast knowledge and skills we all hold, yes we're seen as dinosaurs. But we're also seen as trustworthy, intelligent, and sometimes more than a little bit sexy. I'd rather be stereotyped as a librarian than as a used car salesperson, a lawyer, or a dentist. And I'd like to quit navel gazing and just get on with doing my job brilliantly, and thus changing people's perceptions through action.

Library marketing

With some exceptions, libraries aren't the best marketers. The problem is that we see marketing as advertising, and we fail to recognise that marketing starts with knowing your customer, and designing your offering around their needs and wants. We tell people what services they can get from us – we don't tell them what we're going to do to make their lives easier or better. We tell them where to find the 610 books, but not where to find the medical books. We spend hours designing and delivering tutorials on how to use a library catalogue, instead of designing catalogues that don't need instructions. We forget that we are a service profession, and as such the customers, clients, patrons, whatever, need to be the start of our work, not the end.

¹ A reference to Bernadette Rosbrook's conference presentation at ALIA Biennial 2004 – a fantastic paper that sadly wasn't available on the conference website.

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...gives a voice to the new generation of library and information professionals. If you have any suggestions or topics for this column, please contact the column co-ordinator Naomi Doessel, naomidoessel@gmail.com