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Feedback to your Board of Directors

Board members welcome your comments and feedback. Please feel free to contact a Board member at any time.

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My friend Regina and I identified each other as kindred souls over the tea urn on our induction day with the then-named NSW Agriculture, when we posed the question, 'do you believe all the evangelistic gumpf we've heard this morning?' She also acknowledges that she decided to be my friend when she found out that I was a librarian. A friendship based on profession may seem an odd approach, but as Regina tells it she was scarred for life by her encounter with a librarian during her postgraduate studies who "treated her like a fool", a sanitised version of her rather colourful description which has become an urban legend. Thankfully time, and subsequent adoption into the library family (at one stage my staff presented her with a 'library monitor badge' in appreciation of her help at functions), has blurred her memory of the seminal incident. However the fact that she still bleats on about it 25 years later is evidence of the result of bad customer service.

If asked I believe we'd all say we give great customer service and point to surveys that describe libraries as safe, welcoming spaces. But safe and welcoming doesn't necessarily equate to good customer service. I would suggest that we've all been too busy listening to our own self-promotion and have become a little complacent, that the concept of excellent customer service has the potential to pass us by. Maybe I'm becoming a grumpy old woman; increasingly I react against poor customer service and dispatch e-mails and letters outlining my gripes. Equally I feel it's important to recognise excellence and to emulate the standard of others.

I'm currently working with a project manager on extensions to our building. He's long been a library supporter so I was somewhat taken aback last week when he asked, "why do you library people confuse the public by what you call things?" In response to my shocked look he pointed to our main desk, "Why do you call it a circulation desk? Fair enough you don't have a sign that calls it that but I've heard you all direct people to it by that name which is even more confusing, and what exactly does it mean?" This started me thinking about much of the signage in libraries, which can be decidedly customer unfocused from the 'do not', signs to the library terminology for materials. Reference means 'stays here in the library' to us, but our clients view it as resource they can refer to. Why not simply say 'not for loan' – that spells it out loud and clear. Some of us are getting into the bookshop mood and moving away from the traditional terminology, but even then we're often going for trendy versions of existing library language with no constancy across the board.

Having just worked with Kevin Hennah, staff at Central West Libraries are always on the lookout for examples of best practice. Last week we gave a big tick to the street level signage at the Stanton Library in North Sydney which clearly indicates the hours of opening and the fact that the returns shute is available outside these times. I immediately made a 'note to self' to introduce something similar for my branches. I've been downstairs before opening too many times over the years and seen someone park their car, get out, and walk across to our doors only to find

that we're closed. It's OK if they want to return items – the shute is there – but if they want to collect a reservation, undertake research, or use the internet they're not going to be too happy, and rightfully so. It's enough to make you want to stand still and blend into the shelves, so they won't see you and fix you with an accusing glare!

As I write this both of my parents are in hospital: Mum in Sydney and Dad here in Orange. It's been a hectic couple of weeks. The two hospitals are very different and reflect the variance of the Australian health system, but the customer service experience in both has been outstanding and has given me cause to reflect and interpret for the library situation. Everyone along the way has introduced themselves and taken the time to explain what is happening and why. Do we do that? Hospitals are intimidating, especially when you enter via Accident and Emergency in the back of an ambulance as Dad did. For many people libraries too are intimidating places that reflect bureaucracy. There are unfamiliar layouts and signage, not to mention highways of rules and regulations. Let's be honest, some of our colleagues hide behind these rules or use them as some kind of perceived power. I think it is time to examine our attitudes and procedures and draw on customer service methods in the wider community.

If you read the ALIA Board Blog you will know that while I was in Melbourne in January I had the need to request a room change. The young woman on reception accomplished this with minimum fuss and a great deal of grace. That she was able to do so reflected that she was equipped with the authority to be able to make that decision and act accordingly. Do we delegate that same control to our staff so that they can act quickly and address an issue before it becomes a situation? What those delegations are will depend on individual libraries, and the people best suited to tell you about the triggers are front line staff. It's a conversation I'd recommend.

I will freely admit that despite 35 years in the profession, I still feel wary of using some libraries due to their signposting layout and customer interaction. Possibly a politically unpalatable thing for the ALIA President to say, but the truth no less. If I feel that way, how do our communities feel?

Oh and for the record despite the unusualness of the name, the Regina of this story is not Regina Sutton, State Librarian and CEO, State Library of NSW. However the two have met and refer to each other as 'the other Regina'!

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