

Surviving the ages

Throughout history, libraries have always maintained high levels of customer service. It is a part of our heritage and, from this glorious past, we can derive great examples of customer service still easily applicable in the modern world.

Individual attention to client needs is a key component in providing quality service in any industry. Much like today, many libraries' continued existence is owed to a higher funding body, and to the clients it serves. Regardless of individual rank or title, it is long-established tradition that kings, queens, and chief ministers are always accorded equal respect when they came to the library. Even today, councilors and junior ministers are also accorded the same respect as was paid to royal families and nobility.

Libraries in the past also understood the need to innovate and change according to available resources. Around the twelfth century, service standards began to be applied to the books that many libraries had acquired. The chaining of books to shelves or a reading desk ensured these limited resources were protected from willful damage, and that members could obtain access to the largest collection of knowledge at any single time.

During this time, loans policies also began to be applied. Monastic libraries required surety (in the form of land) before loaning could occur to individuals. Instead of fines, borrowers faced excommunication, damnation, or anathema if items were not returned in good condition. In 1212 the Council of Paris decreed that the threat of anathema should be removed from lending conditions.¹ Later this interpretation was rescinded by executive management in organisations where the libraries serve a higher purpose. Pope Sixtus (1585-1590), for example, decreed that no book should be removed from the Vatican Library under pain of anathema.²

Many libraries however, made do with various curses that were as individual as the scribes who replicated books. These have now been removed but what librarian would not want to include something like the warning below in a loans policy, to ensure that all library materials would be returned on time and without damage?:

Who folds a leafe downe
Be divil toaste browne,
Who makes marke or blotte
Be divil roaste hot,
Who stealeth thisse boke
Be divil shall cooke.³

Libraries have always assisted people regardless of political or religious views. From Hulagu Khan (grandson of Genghis) to General Franco, the destruction of libraries has always provided an important focal point for armies, conquerors, and reformists. The destruction of the Royal Library of the Samarid dynasty and the burning of the Jaffna Public Library in Sri Lanka⁴, are two examples of the need to destroy cultural history that has made libraries a prime target in militant situations. This service, although intrinsically counter-productive, demonstrates that libraries can be useful in a variety of situations, including warfare.

To a lesser scale, libraries have also had a historic but central role to play in censorship. Book burning, for example, has long been a pursuit advocated by both theologians and dictators. It has often provided a rallying point for rampaging mobs, and, happily, libraries have always been seen as ample providers. Again, this type of need has resurfaced across history – from Emperor Qin Shi Huang's decision about all books not written in Qin⁵, or Hitler's anti-Semitic crusade – and has been met by a variety of libraries.

So where to next for customer service in libraries?

Given the recent interest in visual displays, floor-walking attendants, and a single library card – retail stores should continue providing a lead in this area during the first decades of the twenty-first century. Promotional offers or giveaways, colourful advertising brochures, and better use of space through floor plans based on client needs rather than traditional expectations are all on the cards. A rising number of Generation X and Y households don't want to spend their leisure time waiting in queues, and collecting books from the library may be a secondary activity to walking the dog or going for a run.

But just be wary of any customer service activity that involves 'Ask Me How' badges, or any form of head-gear which repeatedly emits fluorescent light or sound every 5-20 seconds.

Trust me, the Mongols will be knocking at the door soon enough.

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1. Gertrude Burford-Rawlings, *The story of books* (New York: Appleton and Company, 1901), www.aboutbookbinding.com/story/15.html (accessed on 21 February 2010)

2. Allan Kent, et al, *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science*, Vol 4. (New York: Marcel Dekker, 1970), http://books.google.com.au/books?id=xVlsuPvNxnAC&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_v2_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q=&f=false (accessed on 21 February 2010)

3. Arnovick, Leslie K. "Whoso thorgh presumpcion ... mysdeme hyt: Chaucer's poetic adaptation of the medieval 'bookcurse'" in *Placing middle English in context*, by Irma Taavitsahen et al (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2000), http://books.google.com.au/books?id=SlzqSvfvp0C&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_v2_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q=&f=false (accessed on 21 February 2010)

4. Wikipedia book burning entry. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book_burning (accessed on 21 February 2010)

5. Ibid.

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The Gateway - Randwick Library, NSW

The Little Spot (Children's Area) - Randwick Library, NSW

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