

CUSTOMER SERVICE

Information delivery and web 2.0

Reference and information services. The words never meant much to me before I started working for City Libraries Townsville. I have an Information Technology background and directly supported the library staff and patrons from time to time with IT issues and problems as they arose. The amalgamation of our neighbouring councils, and therefore their library services, opened some interesting options for me and I moved into the library in a role supporting the network infrastructure, hardware, software, and staff queries. I also took the opportunity to work with the library's online presence.

Here in our library we have started to experiment with an online reference/information service using web 2.0 tools. We have figuratively stepped out of the building and have starting meeting people where they need the information the most. Using Twitter we have setup our very own library 'Twinformation' service (<http://www.twitter.com/townsvillelib>). People can ask questions and be sure to get timely responses from any of the three staff monitoring the page. We are no longer binding our patron's quick questions to a lengthy drive to their local library, now we ARE where our patrons are, but that's not all.

The point of this exercise is to provide information to the public in a quick and easily accessible way, but it's the way we are going about it that's different. We are now able to actively address the public by monitoring the "twitterverse" for potential questions and queries. By doing this we can respond and offer service in a way that we've never reached out before. Not only are we reaching out about book or research related queries, this has given us the ability to be excellent civic preachers by responding to questions regarding local history, restaurants, sports teams, and other attractions that locals and visitors alike may be interested in. The point to consider here is that we don't believe we can be an authority on everything. Therefore we use online tools and community collaborations to help justify our responses and provide reference to those tools where applicable. For instance, if someone was asking where they might find local campsites in the Townsville region, we might use the EPA national parks website <http://www.derm.qld.gov.au/parks/> to show a list of campgrounds based by region. This not only gives the end user something to look at right away, it helps them to help themselves.

With all these online tools how do we know which one to use and how best to use it? Twitter is only one method of delivery. There are new tools coming out that are showing promise. Google has been working hard on the web 2.0 front with their latest releases Wave and Buzz. Wave has the potential to go far with online collaboration and Buzz provides some good opportunities to connect with users (a la Friendfeed.) However there is no silver bullet in the case of what works. Do some research and find what will allow the best method of delivery for your information. What are you providing? Where does your target audience 'hang out' online and how can you use that to connect with them? These are the sorts of questions you should be asking prior to implementation. Other options may involve using a Facebook fan page as a means to connect with current and potential patrons, or setup a Flickr account for your library. Get the public involved with games and competitions. The idea is widely publicised but in any case it's a game of getting into the user space and out of the old ways of the past.

In my limited experience, it seems to pay to get back to basics. Don't be limited by policy and procedure, stop that stale thought process and start thinking about what the customer wants, where they spend their time, and how they access online resources. Think of the best, most fun way to deliver information and remember that sometimes the simple answer is also the best one.

In our example, the Twinformation service took about three hours to set up, from the get go, including brainstorming implications, staff resourcing, and branding the page. The exact policy and procedures were developed and put into place in the days after the launch and as issues arose.

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Summer enhancements to Curtin clients' virtual and physical experience

While the majority of Curtin Library's clients enjoyed a break from study and teaching over the summer months, library staff prepared to improve both their virtual and physical experience in 2010.

The library overhauled its website (<http://library.curtin.edu.au>) with changes that are far more than cosmetic. Usability testing, card sorting, and analysis of usage statistics for the library's previous website revealed that it needed to be simplified, and content needed to be de-jargonised and reorganised to improve accessibility.

Taking a fresh view of the website was important so library staff worked closely with web-design experts within the university's Digital Media Unit. Our aim was to develop a site which is far more intuitive and user-friendly and better meets the needs of our diverse clientele.

The comments from clients have been overwhelmingly favourable. "I love the new look," said one client, with others commenting: "It's much easier to navigate and directions are clear and user-friendly" and "What a breath of fresh air this new site is!"

Physical facilities were also significantly upgraded with enhancements to two floors. The library's entry level now provides a vibrant area ideal for interactive study. Medium and large tables to accommodate study groups of various sizes have been extended throughout the area, while custom-designed booths and benches provide opportunities for group discussions. Comfortable flexible seating abounds, with some placed strategically near lifts, stairwells, and entry points to allow clients to catch up with friends or work while watching the world go by.

Another level has been reconfigured to consolidate it as an area for quiet study with plenty of individual workstations and larger, powered carrels installed to provide students with enough space to accommodate books, papers, laptops, and other mobile devices.

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