

Revitalising libraries for the self-serve generation

In November 2008 I was awarded the Margery C Ramsay Scholarship by the Library Board of Victoria for my application entitled *Revitalising Libraries for the Self Serve Generation*. My plan was to look at libraries in Australia and New Zealand to identify what is working across the country to ensure that libraries continue to develop, stay relevant for their customers, and become the third place in the lives of their communities. I was also interested in how we, as library professionals, adapt to provide services in what is becoming an increasingly self serve environment.

I visited libraries across Australia and in New Zealand, and discovered that while we are making great bounds in innovative spaces and technologies, we are often leaving our staff behind. On many visits I asked, "what did you do with staff around these changes?" or "what training did you give to staff to support customers?" Often little or no training was given, sometimes they just 'got used to it', other times staff had training in the use of the equipment with little thought put into to how these changes may impact workflows and the interactions between customers and staff.

In many libraries, when we take on a new staff member we train them in the system, we train them in our processes, we have them shadowing on desk, and then we let them loose on our customers. We focus heavily on how things work, but in an environment where most things work on their own, we need to start putting more emphasis on where staff fit into service delivery and how service excellence can be achieved when staff are not needed in the same way.

In short, we need to change the way we deliver our training. Above and beyond the basics, we need to coach staff in being able to identify opportunities to interact and support customers within the self-serve environment, more than knowing the processes; they need to be confident with the technology, the environment, and themselves.

In a place that has many more books and computers than staff, we need to guide staff to the understanding that they are the most important part of our service. As part of my research I undertook customer surveys on the shopping experience at book and AV retailers. Overwhelmingly customers expected staff to be available, friendly, and knowledgeable. While traditional training covers the knowledge of processes and systems, ways must be found to model service delivery with regard to accessibility and relationship building.

Self-serve technologies are actually removing staff barriers to interacting with customers. With the reduction or removal of traditional desks, staff have the opportunity to floor walk and interact with customers among the shelves. Self serve options for customers offer staff freedom from repetitive circulation transactions to talk to customers about the variety of services and activities available at the library and within the community.

While the changing library environment supports this new way of working, it is important to be mindful of staff, to ensure that staff are supported through changes. Staff who have worked in a traditional library environment for some time will need training not just how to use a new piece of technology, but how to work it to their advantage, making positive changes to their workflows and interactions with customers.

From my research I have designed a training package specific to the self-serve environment, offering staff the opportunity to workshop their individual customer service experiences and identify a consistent approach to creating positive customer

interactions. In addition I created team games to make the learning of technology more engaging and give staff the opportunity to start sharing new skills immediately.

In March 2010 Hobsons Bay Libraries will open a fifth branch and I will see the culmination of my scholarship research. Altona North Community Library is adjacent to a P-9 school and busy shopping precinct. Within the space there will be themed subject lounges, quiet study areas, meeting rooms, a gaming zone, children's library, and a café. Technology wise it has all the bells and whistles including RFID self serve terminals, PC self booking, wifi, and a print management system with self-serve recharge. However for me the most important aspect of the new library is not what can be seen, but what can be felt. For me success will be the seamless integration of technology and customer service – confident and knowledgeable staff, creating a welcoming vibe and a positive experience for customers.

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