

Pennsylvania Libraries: *Research & Practice*

Practice

Take Five for Customer Service

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Businesses leverage excellent customer service to improve profitability. Although not profit-driven, libraries should leverage excellent customer service to achieve their unique missions. Evaluating and improving customer service practices will help a library determine if it is successfully serving its customers. The library should review three areas to improve customer service: the physical space of the library, how library employees work with library policies, and the communication skills of the library staff. By using the Take Five model, the library can make immediate, no-cost changes or plan for future improvements by taking just five minutes, every day, to assess specific areas. Over a few weeks or months, these small changes will result in better customer service.

Take Five for Customer Service

Customer service is the most important, but often overlooked, element of running a business or a library. If a business fails to focus on customer service, it may lose sales, and thus, income. If a library fails to focus on customer service, it does not lose profits, but it loses good will, customers, and possibly even funding if the situation is bad enough. Small, incremental changes can lead to great improvements. Libraries can make customer service a priority by making changes in just five minutes a day, using the Take Five model.

Imagine this...

A customer who is lecturing you on appropriate collection development policies has cornered you, the library director. While listening to a discourse on proper social standards for libraries, you observe the following:

A woman, whom you later discover is Lisa Lane, Pulitzer Prize winning journalist, trips over the threshold of your library door, almost dropping a folder of loose papers. Lisa recovers her balance and strides to the information desk. You observe the library assistant, back turned to the desk, wearing headphones, and engrossed in the final moments of an eBay auction waiting to snipe the goods.

"Excuse me." Lisa says trying to hasten service.

In response, a single finger points in the air signaling Lisa to wait.

"Excuse me, I really need..."

"I said just a minute!" the clerk snaps at Lisa.

After taking a moment more than necessary to remove the headphones, straighten the perfectly arranged desk supplies, and stroll casually to the service counter, the clerk sweetly asks: "Did you need some help?"

"I need to review some records in the annex."

"The annex is closed for two months."

Lisa begs for access explaining that she needs to find the one secret needed to stop the villainous Lowther Corporation from taking over the world's food supply through a systematic use of honeybee queen clones injected with evil nanotechnology. The secret to stopping the nanotechnology is through strictly controlled nutrient feedings. The secret nutrient recipe exists only in the archived research notes of Dr. Awesome, which the library stores in the closed annex of the library.

The assistant, strumming his fingers impatiently as Lisa explains the situation, replies: "The. Annex. Is. Closed. For. Two. Months," with each word enunciated for emphasis.

"But..."

"CLOSED!"

Ok, so maybe your library's users are not out to save the world—at least as far as you know. Elements of the above scenario were probably cringe-worthy and familiar to anyone who has experienced poor customer service. After the first most important question plaguing libraries—"Where will we find more money to support our operations?"—the second most important question is "How can libraries provide excellent customer service?" One might be tempted to fall into old clichés and answer, "Give the customer what they want." Which customer? How do we know what they want? What about the next customer?

You might protest: "We have a café, group study spaces, a Facebook page, children's programs, book clubs, 3-D printers, and maker spaces, so we must have good customer service!" Having a fully staffed library complete with current materials, great services, and interesting programs does not equate to good customer service. Libraries need to develop strong customer service practices to create the highest standard of excellence for libraries and library employees. Take five minutes every day to keep excellent customer service a priority for the library.

Background

Business and Customer Service

Businesses understand the relationship between good customer service and profits. Some companies even promote their high standards for customer service through marketing and branding. Starbucks, Zingerman's Delicatessen, and Disney are just a few examples of companies that prioritize customer service in this manner. At Starbucks, employees are required to attend training which includes learning how to apply the following principles to create the "Starbucks experience": (a) make it your own, (b) everything matters, (c) surprise and delight, (d) embrace resistance, and (e) leave your mark (Michelli, 2007). Similarly, Zingerman's Delicatessen advertises the art of good customer service as part of its brand and trains its employees in its unique style of customer service, called "a recipe" for great service. The recipe is as follows:

Ingredients:

- An inspiring, strategically sound and clearly documented vision for great service

- Strong, service-oriented leadership
- Clear and well-communicated expectations
- Good training to share those expectations and to help people practice
- Giving staff the authorization to take action to make great service a reality
- Positive recognition and reward for great service-givers

Procedure:

1. Figure out what your customer wants.
2. Get it for them accurately, politely and enthusiastically.
3. Go the extra mile for the customer.

(Weinzweig, 2004, p. 38)

Finally, a former Disney executive sums up good customer service in the simplest terms—“be nice”—before he explains his other 39 rules of good customer service (Cockerell, 2013). These are just three examples of businesses that market excellent customer service and understand that, in order to be profitable, they must encourage their employees to interact with customers in ways customers deem appropriate.

Libraries and Customer Service

The body of literature on customer service in libraries reveals a similar assumption: There is a direct correlation between a strong customer service ethic and increased customer satisfaction with the library. Based on the obvious parallel to libraries, one might assume a well-established set of customer service principles exists for libraries. This is not the case; approaches to customer service in libraries vary widely. Many authors suggest that libraries simply apply customer service practices used by for-profit companies, such as the ones described above (Bell, 2011; Bernstein, 2008; Fry, 2009; Hilyard, 2010). Woodward (2005) argues that libraries must mimic the practices of bookstores and provides a detailed comparison of the failures of libraries and the successes of Barnes & Noble. In particular, Woodward (2005) is deeply concerned about the failure of customer service at the circulation desk, where the least qualified staff will have the most contact with customers (p. 31-32). The Jacksonville Public Library, following common business practices, went a step further, and created a comprehensive marketing brand called “Get to Yes” to transform its customer service by creating a toolkit and training its employees to provide excellent customer service (Block & McNeil, 2015). Schmidt and Etches (2014) take a different approach, however, and argue that libraries should analyze customer service as a user experience in the same way designers evaluate software or websites. The authors also provide an extremely detailed plan for evaluating the user experience in libraries. The approaches discussed above adapt businesses models of customer service to libraries and, notably, most of these authors discuss public libraries.

The literature on academic libraries and customer services varies widely. Much of the literature discussing academic libraries and their customers focuses on individual parts of the library or on specific services, such as reference, distance learning (Steiner, 2013), or chat services (Kwon & Gregory, 2007). Considering the academic library holistically, Matteson and Boyden (2014) argue: “Customer service in libraries is something of a foregone conclusion in library service philosophy. Ask any librarian, and she will tell you that providing high quality customer service is an important value of the profession” (p. 433). Gorman (2012) also views service as the guiding principle for all work in academic libraries. However, in practice, academic libraries are failing to provide good customer service. With a familiar argument, Woodward states, “I am convinced that the survival of the twenty-first-century academic library depends on people, library people.” (Woodward, 2009, p. 152). This is especially true at the circulation desk, where student employees staff the desk so that full-time employees can do “real work” (Woodward, 2009, p. 153). Perhaps the problem is that libraries assume staff will strive for good customer service but do not provide clear guidance to make that happen.

Defining Customer Service

Excellent customer service is not a foregone conclusion. A library must define “excellent customer service” for its unique community, whether it is a public library, an academic library, or a special library. Unfortunately, the concept of customer service brings to mind business models based on a consumer goods environment in which items are bought and sold for profit. This strong connection between customer service and sales raises many questions about the applicability of the concept of customer service to the library setting. Is a library patron a customer if they are not buying anything? If the patron is a customer, are they always right? Who sets the standards for good customer service? To begin answering these questions, start with the basics.

First, consider the best word to describe the people who use the library. Schmidt and Etches (2014) argue that the term “patron” is old-fashioned and “customer” has too many transactional connotations, so they conclude that the term “member” is optimal because of its inclusive nature. Schmidt and Etches also like the term “user,” because it is the term of choice in the field of UX (user experience); the authors apply both terms to their discussion of customer service by referring to library patrons as “members” or “users” (Schmidt and Etches, 2014). Use of the outdated term “patron” should be discontinued by libraries in spite of its common usage. Unfortunately, the terms, “member” and “user” might also be problematic. Referring to library patrons as “members” raises the concern that patrons will be even more demanding, because as a “member,” they have certain rights. This is similar to the argument one may encounter in a public library when a patron justifies certain demands with the words “I pay your salary.” In an academic setting, there may be resistance to referring to students as “customers” even though student tuition payments ultimately fund the library. The term “user” simply has too many negative connotations related to addiction for it to be appropriate for libraries. While “customer” may not be the optimal word to refer to library patrons, until a more neutral and descriptive word is commonly applied, the best choice to use when discussing library patrons is “customer.”

Next, having established that library patrons are actually customers, a working definition of “customer service” is required before developing a framework for excellent customer service. Each library should develop a definition of customer service that is adapted to the unique setting and characteristics of its customers and library. A proposed definition of customer service in a library is *the practice of providing library customers with the resources they need in the most professional, efficient, and courteous manner possible*. This definition is the core of customer service, but should be refined to address the specific needs of an individual library and its customers. With this foundation established, each library can then develop a unique plan to improve customer service.

Customer Service and the Take Five Model

The Take Five model¹ is a simple plan to take five minutes a day to address customer service issues in three specific areas, which will result in no-cost or low-cost changes that significantly improve customer service. The *First Impressions Checklist* is the starting point for asking questions designed to improve customer services. Use the checklist and take five minutes to find out what your library is telling your customers.

The first step is to define what customer service means in your library. A library should establish what excellent customer service will look like, keeping in mind that customer service problems fall into one of three broad categories: physical space, library staff and policies, and communication. Because evaluating customer service in an organization comprised of people, places, and things that operate as a whole, each of the components will necessarily overlap. To get started immediately, use the above basic definition as a placeholder until the library develops a more specific definition of customer service.

Keep in mind that customer service encompasses a broad range of topics in libraries, including the timeliness of responses to reference questions or even dealing with dirty restrooms. If you identify a customer service issue that

can be easily fixed, seize the opportunity to make a high-impact, low-cost change without engaging in long-term planning or committee work. Seeing immediate improvement from small changes may provide the inspiration to create a structured plan for customer service. Developing a formal plan is especially important for changes that cannot be made immediately or quickly but will, potentially, have great impact and should be pursued in a strategic manner, such as ongoing staff training and policy review. Several resources for creating a detailed plan for customer service have been included in the “Customer Service in Libraries” section of Appendix A, Suggested Additional Reading.

The second step is to use the *First Impressions Checklist* as a guide to analyze the three broad areas of customer service: physical space, staff and policies, and communications as explained below. The *First Impressions Checklist* of the Take Five model is a practical guide to use each day to improve customer service, not an exhaustive analysis of customer service in libraries. Appendix B is “The First Impressions Checklist: What is Your Library Telling Your Customers?”

Use the checklist every day over a few weeks or months in order to complete a full evaluation of the library. By spending only five minutes a day, the project will not feel overwhelming, and you may find that some areas need more work or consideration before making changes. Completing the checklist is about fully considering each question and its implications, rather than finishing the list quickly. Take time to think about each question and consider several options for implementing change.

The third step is taking action. Identify problems and fix them or make concrete plans to fix them in the future. This is not the easy step, but fixing problems will improve customer service, and that is the goal of the Take Five model.

First Impressions

Physical Space

The first area to consider is the physical space. The physical space of the library encompasses everything from the parking lot to the dust bunnies under the display cabinet. Think of the physical space of the library as everything that is tangible and connected to the library with the exception of library materials or people. The library should be welcoming, accessible, have adequate lighting, have sufficient signage, and provide customers with easy access to staff (whom we will discuss in the next section). Additional requirements should be tailored to the circumstances of the particular library and its customers.

Unfortunately, the physical space of the library is often at the mercy of budgetary allocations for repairs or restrictions from entities outside the library that control the library space. This does not mean that improvements are impossible. Individual libraries should strive to compensate for problem areas; quirky facilities should not detract from a great customer experience.

An easy way to begin thinking about library space is to examine each area separately. Think of the library as having external and internal aspects. Library space is naturally assumed to be the interior of the library, where the library materials live and much of the work of the library takes place. However, the exterior library space is the first physical area that library customers encounter when going to the library. The external space should have adequate lighting, be clearly marked, and most importantly, be safe.

Good lighting and well-marked library entrances are, hopefully, so obvious that an in-depth discussion should not be necessary. However, is the external space safe? The library cannot guarantee safety from others in the library parking lot. Nonetheless, elements under the control of the library should provide a safe route in and out of the library. The parking lot should be easily accessible, well-maintained, and navigable by anyone with a physical disability. Sidewalk sections should be even, without raised corners or cracks that could be tripping hazards. Sidewalks should also conform to ADA requirements for accessibility. Vegetation should not encroach on sidewalks or stairs or

be so dense as to provide a shelter for animals (or humans). Stairs should be even, contain no tripping hazards, and should have secure handrails. Doors should function and operate intuitively, meaning that the door handle should be an indicator of whether the door pushes in or pulls out to open.

Once customers have safely entered the library, what will they encounter next? The interior of the library is where good customer service will shine. The foyer or entrance to the library should have good lighting and be neat and orderly. The library doors and foyer often serve as a place for signs and notices. The signs will quickly become outdated, tattered, and give the library a generally shabby appearance if they are not regularly maintained. Consider whether an informational sign should be on the door, or if it can go elsewhere. Too many signs can create visual clutter and give the appearance of having equal importance due to their placement. Therefore, one should carefully consider the necessity of a sign and its placement relative to other signs. Creating a specific location in the library for announcements will result in a neat and clean library entrance, and using an internal space for notices will encourage library employees to be more attentive to the condition of both spaces.

The circulation or service desk is another place that can suffer from clutter in the form of signs and objects. The service desk should have only the signs necessary for customers to accomplish their tasks. For example, signs for checkouts, book returns, and traffic flow enhance customer service at the desk. Other signs may not be necessary and might crowd an already small space. Items such as office supplies, plants, flowers, or personal objects may also accumulate on the service desk. What do these items say about the library? Consider whether these objects enhance or detract from the customer service at the desk.

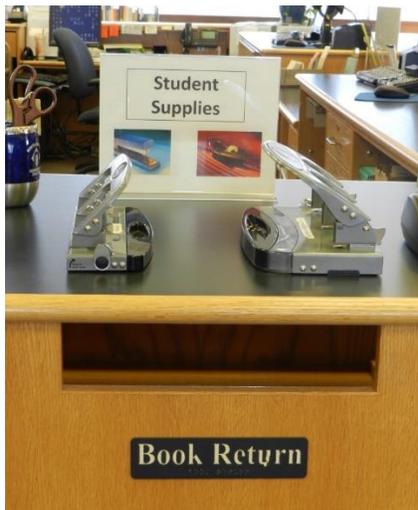


Figure 1
Using student supplies at the circulation desk will block book return

Directional signs may point to collections, offices, stairs, or restrooms and play a critical role in the library to help customers navigate the interior space. Are the customers reading the signs? Kasperek (2014) offers excellent advice on creating signs designed to get the reader's attention and succinctly convey information. Having clear signs will enable customers to navigate the library and use resources without seeking assistance. Improving library signage improves the customer experience of the library, since some customers will become angry and frustrated if they are not able to use the library without asking for help.

One particular type of sign that causes much confusion is the call number designation sign on the stacks. Does the library have a sign explaining call numbers? Do the call number signs include subject designations? As a finding

aid, the call number signs must be visible, legible, and accurate but will also benefit from the inclusion of the subject area. Confirm that call number signs are in order and fix any problems to ensure a good customer experience.



Figure 2
Obscured call number sign

Examine the condition of the rest of the library and look for areas of concern. Are there stains on the carpet? Is there enough light in all areas of the library? Is the furniture in good working order? Ensuring that furniture and fixtures are in good shape prevents the library from having a dilapidated appearance or even unsafe conditions. Make easy repairs and plan for repairs that represent significant cost by including costs in the next budget. The key to keeping these items in good working order is regular inspection and repair, not simply reacting when a customer expresses frustration that a chair has been broken for six months.



Figure 3
Duct tape covering electrical cords may be hazardous

The library makes customer service a priority when it creates a safe and welcoming environment. The easiest task on the *First Impressions Checklist* is a visual inspection of the physical spaces of the library. However, fixing problem areas in the physical space has the potential to be the most expensive and time-consuming category. Early identification of problems may save money by preventing costly repairs later and will allow the library to budget for capital expenses in the long-term strategic plan.

Staff and polices

The library staff is the heart of customer service. Without a dedicated, well-trained staff, a library cannot hope to provide excellent customer service. Woodward (2005) argues that libraries tend to staff the circulation desk with the

least qualified people resulting in customer frustration from poor service. Consider this argument when selecting employees to represent the most public facing positions in the library. Are they prepared to be the customer service representatives of the library?

Selecting the right person for a job is a challenge in any employment environment. One hopes that job applicants will be enthusiastic and engaged in their work; without these qualities, any amount of training will be useless. Training employees in customer service skills is the key feature of successful programs developed by businesses like Starbucks and Zingerman's Delicatessen. The first principle Starbucks employees learn—"make it your own"—is directly transferable to libraries. This principle instructs employees to be welcoming, genuine, considerate, knowledgeable, and involved (Michelli, 2007). Employees must possess most of these attributes *before* they begin training and learn about the company, its products, and its services.

Training employees to provide excellent customer service requires a strong foundation of library policies. Strong policies give employees the support they need to handle day-to-day operations, difficult situations, aggressive customers, or otherwise unexpected situations. Outward facing policies (how customers use the library) provide consistency for staff and customers to form a baseline of common expectations for library usage. Paradoxically, staff members also need to understand when, why, and how policies may be "bent" to resolve difficult situations. Without the flexibility to bend the library rules, as appropriate, library employees may give the impression that the library is more concerned about rules than providing good service. Giving library staff the tools they need to carry out regular library tasks and handle unusual situations is a balance that needs to be struck between library employees and library administration.

As libraries evolve, old-fashioned policies may make the library seem outdated, unfriendly, and lacking in customer service. Does the library need a strict "no food or drink" rule, or should the library make exceptions? Is there a "no cell phones" policy, or has the library created space for parents to make calls while continuing to supervise their children? Do library fines deter borrowing or disadvantage certain people? Does the library have space for group work, or is speaking discouraged in the library? The library should develop policies that encourage, or at least do not discourage, customers from using the library.

Inward facing policies, which apply to the library staff, are just as critical to good customer service, because they set the stage for interactions with customers. Do staff members have clear expectations about how they should serve customers? Do they come to work on time? Is the library open on time? Is a staff person available at the service desk at all times? Are employees encouraged to greet customers and ask if they need assistance? Do employees follow the same rules as customers with regard to food, beverages, headphones, and cell phone usage? When employees understand their performance goals and how library policies apply to them, they will be prepared to meet the service expectations of customers.

The library administration must provide the staff with training on all policies and ensure that they are following them. This leads to difficult questions regarding staff behavior. Do library employees give special privileges to some customers and not others? How do they enforce the rules? Are some employees reluctant to confront individuals to enforce rules? Is that creating an uneven application of rules in the library? One hopes that library employees are applying policies evenly and consistently, but confirmation of the appropriate application of policies is critical to maintaining excellent customer service.

Evaluating the interactions between library employees and customers is one way to determine if policies are being enforced or ignored, or if policies are outdated. Taking a few minutes to (unobtrusively) observe staff members and policy enforcement practices can reveal a lot about customer satisfaction with staff, policies, and the library. A single observation is not justification for an intervention, but observing a pattern of behavior may be cause for intervention. One should be cautious about mistaking an unusual occurrence for regular behavior. Note unusual situations and make additional observations before taking action.

Of course, the most difficult part of evaluating the staff and policy area is dealing with employees who feel singled out or personally attacked when questions of policy application or behavior arise. Having strong internal policies and routine training regarding appropriate staff conduct will help employees maintain acceptable behavior and will provide a clear basis for intervention and enforcement from library administration. If the problems are library-wide, then any action should apply to all staff, and if the problem involves particular employees, speak with these individuals in private. Either way, consistent enforcement of both inward and outward facing policies will improve customer service.

Making excellent customer service the goal of policy review provides an incentive to ensure that policies evolve with the changing needs of the library and its customers. As with a complete inspection of library space, routine review of library policies will address immediate problems and, possibly, avoid bigger problems in the future. Reviewing policies on a rolling basis over a period of months may make the project more manageable than trying to address all policies at once. If scheduled appropriately, this method can result in a full annual policy review.

Communication

Communication is a vital aspect of daily life, and there is always a way to improve communication skills. For libraries, communication skills are a component of staffing issues and should be an important consideration when hiring and training employees. The previous section discussed the implementation of library policies, and this section will discuss communication at a more basic skill level: how the library employees are interacting with customers and with each other.

Communication is comprised of three parts: speaking, listening, and non-verbal communication. Each element influences the other two. One need not speak if no one is listening, and one communicates that they have heard either by speaking in response, through non-verbal communication, or both. All three elements must exist for communication to have occurred. However, the execution of each step can have positive or negative outcomes.

The ability to speak and make oneself understood is a distinct skill. Speaking requires an attentive listener, using appropriate language for the audience, and modulating voice volume, tone, and enunciation. There are some common types of speaking problems related to volume and enunciation, such as speaking too quietly or mumbling. Both situations can be problematic to individuals who have difficulty hearing and can result in miscommunication or no communication. Other speaking problems include speaking loudly or using inappropriate language or tone for the situation, which may result in giving the appearance of being aggressive and unapproachable. Speaking too loudly, too softly, or using inappropriate (not necessarily vulgar) language can create a barrier to good customer service. However, one should be cautious to consider any physical disabilities that impair communication when evaluating communication occurring between library staff and customers.

Active listening is critical to good communication and encompasses both the ability to hear what is being said and to make it clear to the speaker that they have been heard (Dieken, 2009). Being an active listener means engaging with a speaker through focused visual attention and responsive body language that communicates that they are being heard (Dieken, 2009). Non-verbal cues provide visual feedback showing that the listener was paying attention. In the library setting, active listening is the most crucial aspect of communication. People want to be heard; even if their problems cannot be fixed, they still want to know that they were heard.

Body language and non-verbal communication are vital aspects of speaking and listening. Meyers and Nix (2011) state, "...the art of delivery is learning to use your body in a way that is congruent with your message" (p. 117). Congruence means that one's body language matches the spoken words, thus, creating the appearance of integrity (Meyers & Nix, 2011). Otherwise, the body is communicating independently of the spoken words. Facial expressions that are not congruent with a statement can cause confusion or miscommunication. Other common forms of nonverbal

communication send a clear message. For example, slouching shows boredom, crossed arms show disagreement, and leaning forward shows interest (Sheldon, 2010). Becoming consciously aware of the meaning of body language will improve communication and customer service.

Attention to one's own communication skills is a good place to begin finding areas for improvement. Model appropriate communication skills before telling others how to improve their communication skills. When observing library employees note eye contact, body placement, and facial expression. Are staff members looking at the customer or looking at a computer or other electronic device? Eye contact clearly shows attention to the speaker. Have they positioned their body so that they are facing toward or away from the customer? Angling the body away may be a sign that the conversation is not welcome. Are they encouraging the customer to speak by nodding or asking follow-up questions? Are the follow-up questions appropriate? Facial expressions should match the tenor of the situation rather than express emotions indicating that they want the customer to stop talking or go away.



Figure 4
Modeling good communication at the service desk (Photo by Ian Bradshaw)

Observing how the library space contributes to or detracts from good communication is also an important element in improving communication with customers. When customers enter the library, can they make eye contact or even see a library employee?



Figure 5
Obstructed view of the circulation desk



Figure 6

Who will help the customer?

Is there a physical barrier to communication, such as a computer, positioned between the employee and the customer at the service desk? Does the location of the computer at the service desk require the employee to sit with their back to the counter, thus, requiring the customer to first gain the employee's attention before making a request? This may make the customer feel that they are interrupting the employee. Small changes to the arrangement of computers and desks can have a huge impact on improving customer service by making communication easier.



Figure 7

The hidden librarian

Good communication skills are at the heart of excellent customer service. Finding ways to improve communication skills is undoubtedly the most difficult task on the *First Impressions Checklist*. Modeling good communication skills is a good way to begin, while unobtrusively observing customer interactions in the library. Addressing significant communication problems will result in better communication skills and will improve customer service.

When presenting the Take Five model in a workshop setting, the most common feedback regarding communication was that library administrators need to communicate more with staff. The participants reported that

improved communication would include both more frequent and more thorough communication about everything that involves the library. Not only were library employees not receiving direction regarding customer service, they felt they were lacking any clear direction from library administration. Clearly, without communication and direction from library administration, a library will not be able to provide good customer service.

Making Take Five a Habit with a Power List

Cultivating key habits can lead to powerful results. Duhigg (2012) outlines several successful business outcomes based on the establishment of specific habits. Starbucks is profitable, because it made customer service a habit through skills training, Alcoa improved production (and sales) by focusing on safety habits, and Target leveraged the habits of its customers to create personalized coupons which drive purchasing. Companies are turning key activities into habits, which enable them to achieve much larger goals. Libraries can do this, too.

Using a checklist is a simple way to ensure that activities are completed. Gawande (2007) makes a powerful argument that doctors and other medical providers should use checklists to improve patient outcomes by reducing complexity and ensuring compliance with important procedural steps. Clearly, improving customer service is not the same as life-or-death medical situations, but the example shows the importance of using a checklist to ensure the completion of tasks.

Use the *First Impressions Checklist* in Appendix B to monitor areas that might need improvement. Make using the checklist a habit to keep customer service goals a priority in the library. Taking five minutes a day to focus on improving the library and taking concrete action whenever possible will put the library on a continuous path of improvement. This attention to detail will reveal problems as well as unexpected opportunities. A broken chair discovered before it collapses is a victory. Giving positive feedback to an employee who exhibits exceptional customer service skills may inspire others to identify and fix their own problem areas. By making it a habit to take five minutes to consider a small portion of the *First Impressions Checklist* every day, one will be able to complete a comprehensive review and make significant improvements to customer service.

Conclusion

Having a well-staffed library that offers great services is not enough; it is only the beginning. Libraries need to focus on customer service to ensure they really are providing excellent customer service. An easy way to make changes is to use the Take Five model and take five minutes every day to review a small portion of the *First Impressions Checklist* to identify problem areas. Immediately implement no-cost or low-cost changes to fix problems and address larger problems in an annual budget or strategic plan. By making small but noticeable improvements regularly, the library will consistently improve customer service.

Notes

¹ The Take Five model was developed by the authors as part of a project for the Pennsylvania Libraries Academy of Leadership Studies, to create best practices in customer service in libraries. The Take Five workshop was held at three separate Pennsylvania Library Association Chapter meetings. See original project at <http://sites.psu.edu/theyearofcustomerservice/bibliography/#overview>

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Appendix A

Suggested Additional Reading

Customer Service in Libraries

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- Siess, J. (2003). *The visible librarian: Asserting your value with marketing and advocacy*. Chicago, IL: American Library Association.

General Customer Service

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Appendix B

First Impressions Checklist: What is Your Library Telling Your Customers?

Give yourself five minutes each day to walk through the library and try to view the library as a new customer seeing it for the first time. The questions are prompts to evaluate the physical space, the staff implementation of policies, and their communication practices with customers. By spending only five minutes per day, you can focus on one specific question or item and make one change that may have a big impact. The goal is continuous improvement, not a full evaluation of all questions. By taking the time to see your library from a customer's perspective, you will notice unexpected problems, and hopefully, you will find excellent customer service already at work.

When answering the questions, consider the steps that will improve any problem. Alternately, if there is an area of excellence, consider why it is excellent and if those qualities translate to an area that is not working well.

Physical Space

Exterior of the Library

Is the outside of the library clean, in good repair, and have clear signage?

Does the parking lot appear safe and include walkways free of obstructions?

Is the entrance free of clutter?

- Are bulletin boards up-to-date and neatly arranged?
- Is entering the library easy for people carrying multiple items, pushing strollers, or using an assistive device?
- Do library employees promptly pick up newspapers or other exterior deliveries?

Interior of the Library

Is the foyer or immediate interior of the library bright, neat, and easy to navigate?

Is lighting sufficient in all areas of the library?

Directional signs:

- Are there enough signs for customers to find their way to key areas (reference, restrooms, study rooms, subject areas)?
- Is stacks signage free from obstructions and easy to understand?
- What can be improved?

Service or Circulation Desk

Is the service desk easy to locate?

Is there minimal clutter at the service desk?

Is there minimal signage at the service desk?

Library Staff and Policies

Customer Interactions

- Do library employees try to minimize wait time?
- Do library employees ask customers if they found the materials or information that they need?
- Do library employees offer help if items were not located or if customers need more assistance?
- Do library employees walk to the stacks, demonstrate on a computer, or otherwise physically assist the customers to find solutions rather than pointing or giving lengthy verbal directions?
- Are library employees well-trained, and ready to answer questions?

Library Policies

- Do library policies facilitate service, or create barriers to service?
- Do library employees value the needs of customers when enforcing library rules?
- Do library employees gratefully acknowledge and share suggestions with library administration?
- Do customers appear to be satisfied with the service they received even if they did not acquire the materials or information that they sought?

Employee Issues

- Are library employees punctual?
- Does the library open on time with everything functioning (lights on, computers on, employees ready)?
- Do library employees follow library and/or employee rules with regard to food, beverages, volume, and cell phone usage?

Communications

- Do library employees maintain good posture and appear non-threatening?
- Do library employees demonstrate good listening skills and restate questions or complaints?
- Do library employees show respect and keep calm even in tense situations?
- Is the employee knowledgeable and willing to ask a supervisor or coworker for clarification or help?
- Do library employees respond promptly and respectfully to customer requests?
- Do library employees speak positively about the library, its services, and leaders while in public spaces?
- Do library employees resolve customer service issues in a fair, consistent, and equitable manner?
- Do library employees answer telephones and online questions promptly?
- Does the library's automated telephone directory have a selection for asking general questions?
- Does the library have a standard/uniform phone greeting and do all library employees refer to the library by the same name?
- Do employees greet each customer with a smile or greeting?
- If appropriate, do employees welcome customers by name?
- Do employees ask what they can do to help the customer?