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Library Service in Rural County: Why I Never Really Consider Myself Off-Duty

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Library Service in a Rural County: Why I Never Really Consider Myself Off-Duty

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The other day as I was on my two-block walk to work, I was hailed by a patron who also lives near the library. I'll call her Sue. "Hey, Christy!" She shouted from up the hill, "I have a reference question for you." I stopped and waited for her to catch up. Sue wanted to know if I vegetable gardened and more specifically if I could tell her when onions might be ready to pull. I confided that this was a question I had, too, this being the first year I have ever planted onions. She told me all the different advice she'd been given. I said I would look in *Rodale's Organic Gardening* as well as some other print and online sources and try to have an answer or answers for her (and myself) by the time we opened.

Sue kept talking to me as I unlocked the door to let myself in the library and she put her returned materials in the outdoor book-drop. I had not traversed more than 10 yards into the building when I heard banging on the door. Sue had accidentally put all her outgoing mail and her newspaper in the book-drop. I reassured her she was not the first person to ever do this. I went and got the keys, retrieved her personal items, and, after checking in and checking my e-mail, started researching onion harvesting.

From my perspective, which I have cultivated by monitoring the responses of our patrons for over fifteen years, service that is considered *excellent*—in our medium-sized library, located in our rural county of 65,000—is service that is very personal. For much—but of course not all—of our service population, anonymity is not the relationship that is desired. At all points of public service in our libraries, knowing someone's name can be just a start; knowing their children's names, the breeds of their pets, what neighborhoods they live in, a few of their hobbies and, of course, their reading, listening or even viewing preferences, is the familiarity level preferred by many of the patrons we encounter daily in our county service district.

I am accustomed to being stopped in the grocery store or on the street and asked a reference question. I am often queried about a service or asked if we have a certain title in our holdings. I pull out my smart phone and, while talking to them, show them that I'm e-mailing their question to my work account and that I'll get back to them as soon as I am able to do so. If my internal memory of our catalog doesn't serve me, I'll also pull up our actual catalog on my phone and check for them, right there on the spot, as to whether we have the title. If the library is open when this occurs I just call in their request to the person on the reference desk. The occasional look of amazement and the inevitable thank you make these interruptions of my personal time quite worth it.

When I go about my personal business in town, whether I'm at a restaurant, the mechanic, the bank, or the tailor, I almost always tell people where I work. I usually get some sort of response – from how much they love and use the library to some confession about how they have an overdue fine or haven't been through the doors in ten years. Sadly too, I am now often questioned by admitted non-users as to whether books and libraries are dead. Regardless of the comment or question, I am determined to find a way to answer it that puts my workplace in a positive light and expands their notions of what a modern library is and what it has to offer them.

Seemingly regardless of how many feature stories our local paper runs about the library's offerings of downloadable audio-books and our huge selection of popular music and films, most non-users have serendipitous reactions when I tell them that we offer these materials and so much more. If they seem genuinely impressed I go on to tell them about our



book clubs, movie nights, lectures and writing workshops, and youth programs, as well as our free holiday craft nights. By this point I feel I have sealed the deal. I honestly have some faith that they are now going to do some combination of three things: use the library, say good things about the library, or at the very least, think happy thoughts about the library.

Do I always enjoy this blurred boundary, this lack of delineation between my work and personal life? No, I don't. There are times when, unlike the seeming majority of our patrons, what I would most value is some anonymity. I've entertained the idea of a wig and sunglasses in public, but never too seriously. However, sometimes I will skip the Saturday farmer's market in the summer because I am simply feeling too overexposed to the public. If a person approaches me to tell me that they were treated less than optimally at my library, it's sometimes all I can do to not say, "I am off-duty right now. Sorry." But I never do. I don't feel servile because of this. Instead, I choose to feel empowered that they believe in me enough to think I can fix it.

When I try to solve a patron's problems, whether I am on duty or off, I feel elegant and energized when I pull it off, even if I am sometimes hiding a somewhat clenched jaw behind my smile. I remind myself often that I am unequal parts researcher, diplomat, cheerleader, teacher, free speech advocate, social worker, technical whiz-bang, and, ultimately, a Jungian librarian archetype upon which a patron will project whatever it is they need me to be. Lest I've misled you, I am no saint by any stretch, and I admit I sometimes find myself muttering, "I'd like to thank the Academy..." as I'm walking away from an difficult interaction that I've had to address using my very best acting skills.

In helping the rural library user, finding the balance between delivering what they're really seeking and staying within the boundaries of professionalism is an art. Many of us discover that sometimes the best way to approach the rules of art is to bend them. There are times when a library user asks for something that the rules say we should not be giving them or doing for them. Yet who among those of us who serve the public has not occasionally sat down and done something such as fill out a free e-mail account application for someone? Why do this? Because we know that to wait for patrons to type it on their own would take up their allotted internet time for the day and frustrate them—and us—further. I knew a librarian who once made a loan to an elderly woman to pay for heating oil one winter because she knew the bureaucracy was failing this patron as surely as she knew she would be repaid. I am not suggesting you go this far. However, service delivery that can make your library the place for which a user is grateful and even happy to pay taxes, is sometimes service that might be a bit outside of the box.

One of my favorite services to provide is direct but casual education regarding intellectual freedom. While professionalism in the library is a flexible art, adherence to the principles of privacy, confidentiality, and the freedom to read and seek information are not to be compromised. When a patron is disappointed that we don't keep a record of all the books they have checked out in the past, I like to explain to them how this is really in service to their privacy. I give them ideas about how to keep their own lists if they are still disgruntled, but usually they are relieved to know that even though they can't know what they read last year, neither can a government agent.



Perhaps the greatest challenge in the delivery of excellent library service is simply how hard it can be to get out the message that the library has some service or services that everyone would be thrilled to partake in – if only they knew we were offering them! Really, it's only those who tell me they think libraries are dinosaur institutions or a waste of taxpayer money that bring me down. The challenge of encountering these attitudes is to convince those who hold them that they need to relinquish and transform them, and become *really grateful* for the existence of THEIR LIBRARY. I've made it my personal service mission to attempt to do something similar to the sentiment reflected in the old adage about diplomacy; the one where it is defined as the art of telling someone to go to hell in such a way that they look forward to the trip. So usually now, after I cheerfully illuminate to these doubters and naysayers just how much we have to offer them and just how wrong they were for thinking otherwise, many of them do seem quite enthusiastically ready for a trip to the library, or at least back to their gardens to harvest some onions. 🌿

