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The Library Collection as Service

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Excellent customer service is at the forefront of what is vital in the public library. Our customer service, the way the staff presents itself to and interacts with the public, is visible to every person who walks through our door. We are friendly and courteous, and give the customer the information or entertainment he or she is seeking. In this same way the overall collection at each public library is a very visible service we offer to our patrons. Our collection represents what is best about our library because it has been consciously designed to try to meet the needs of every person, regardless of age, who walks through our door. And not only is our collection a visible service, it is the largest service we offer.

Nordstrom's department store has long been regarded as an industry leader in customer service. That service is emulated and copied by businesses throughout the United States. As Nordstrom was expanding its stores in the 1960s, it became the largest independently owned shoe store in the United States, stocking 150,000 pairs of shoes at a time. Its goal was not just to sell shoes to established customers, but also "to sell shoes to everyone in Seattle" (Spector, 1995). In the public library we can take that same philosophy of customer service and apply it to the way we select the items for our collection.

Just as Nordstrom set out to sell a pair of shoes to every person in Seattle, the library's collection should aim to meet the needs of every person in the community. We order books and other materials in a variety of formats that will reach everyone when they come in the door. Most importantly, we try to have something there for the person who has never visited a library before. By having a broad collection, we anticipate the needs of patrons before they do. But this can be dangerous when we begin to have collections that don't reflect what our customers want. When we buy our collections based on a "just in case" rather than a "just in time" philosophy, we run the risk of housing a collection of items that may not be used as much as we would like. It is important to evaluate our collections on a continual basis to weed out items that don't circulate. Careful analysis can also tell us exactly what our patrons are checking out. We can use this information to assess areas of the collection that need to either grow or be reduced. With a philosophy of continual evaluation and weeding, and being willing to change our buying patterns based on usage, we will provide collections and formats that are relevant, useful, and used.

In addition to collecting the items that we know patrons want and use, we also provide great customer service by decreasing the response time to acquire these items. Like many other libraries, Hillsboro Public Library established a collection development method that quickly and directly responds to our customers' requests. In addition to inviting patrons to submit requests for purchase through an in-library print form, e-mail, or a form on our library website, we also turn certain Interlibrary Loan (ILL) requests into an automatic purchase request. This applies to requests for items not owned by the members of our library cooperative and its shared ILS. We believe that if one person is asking for a title, chances are good that there are other patrons who would also be interested in that same item. By considering each ILL request for purchase we are able to add unique items to our collection that increase the breadth of the collection while directly affecting the patron who made the original request. The Library Assistants in our Interlibrary Loan office forward the ILL requests to the appropriate selector who then determines whether the item will be bought, contingent on its meeting our selection criteria. If the item is to be purchased, it is put into a virtual cart and a hold placed for the patron who made the request. If the selector does not



purchase the item, it is placed back in the ILL process. This process ensures that patrons are receiving the items they wanted in whatever manner is most appropriate.

After about a year of following this procedure, we undertook a study to determine the effectiveness of this service. We wanted to be sure that we were providing improved service to our customers by getting requested items to them quickly. We found that on average it took 12 days to receive a book through the ILL process and 93% of ILLs were received within 21 days. In contrast, purchasing the items took an average of 56+ days to deliver to the customer. We also discovered that ILL costs were less than purchasing and processing costs, although purchasing an item provides us with holdings that will have continued use. After investigating further, we determined that our practice of ordering monthly was reducing our ability to provide patrons with these requested items in a timely manner. In response, we implemented a new procedure at the beginning of FY 2011–12 called the “Request to Buy” program. Modeled after a similar program presented at the 2010 Northwest Interlibrary Loan and Resource Sharing Conference (Sylvester, Anderson, Kochan, Duncan, Fagerheim, 2010), our new procedure gives ILL staff the budget and authority to place orders for items requested through the ILL process without receiving selector approval. Under this new program, orders are sent to Acquisitions staff on a weekly basis, cutting down the time an item is in a selector’s virtual cart. The ILL staff makes independent purchasing decisions following these guidelines:

- Published within the last two years
- Published in the USA
- Cost of the item is \$25 or less
- Not in a foreign language
- For films, the item was not released straight to DVD, unrated, or NC17
- For series, WCCLS libraries own copies of the previous editions in the series

For items that do not fall into these parameters, selectors are contacted for approval, and, if approved, the item is included in the weekly order. Evaluation of the “Request to Buy” program one month after implementation shows that we have reduced our response time for buying requested items to an average of 12 days, making this on par with the ILL process. If this rate continues we will have successfully met our goal of faster response to our patrons.

Library collections, in all formats, will continue to be the largest visible service we offer. Patrons who come into the library or who search our catalogs online need to know that they will find items they want and need. By carefully selecting materials based on our continual evaluation of the collection, and by purchasing items our patrons have requested, we will continue to be relevant to our entire community. And being relevant is the best way we can provide service into the future. 

References

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