This classic book is brought fully up-to-date as Peter Hernon and Ellen Altman integrate the use of technology into the customer experience. They offer solid, practical ideas for developing a customer service plan that meets the library’s customer-focused mission, vision, and goals, and challenge librarians to think about customer service in new ways, including:

- Distance education
- Use of library websites
- Partnerships and consortia for electronic collections
- Ways to effectively embrace change for continuous improvement

Senior librarians, library directors, and trustees will learn how to see the library as the customer does with the aid of dozens of tools to measure service quality—from mystery shoppers and benchmarking to surveys and group interviews.
ASSESSING SERVICE QUALITY

Satisfying the Expectations of Library Customers
Second Edition

PETER HERNON + ELLEN ALTMAN
Peter Hernon is a professor at the Graduate School of Library and Information Science, Simmons College in Boston; he previously taught at the University of Arizona and Victoria University of Wellington (New Zealand). He is the coeditor of Library & Information Science Research, founding editor of Government Information Quarterly, and past editor in chief of the Journal of Academic Librarianship. Hernon is the author of more than 285 publications and has received a number of awards for his research and professional contributions, including the 2008 Association of College and Research Libraries’ award for Academic/Research Librarian of the Year. The first edition of this book, Assessing Service Quality, was the 1998 winner of the Highsmith award for outstanding contribution to the literature of library and information science.

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At this time librarians are redefining their roles; seeing an expansion of the knowledge, abilities, skills, and habits of mind required for them to fill those roles; and engaging in profound change within their organizations as they cope with new methods of learning, information-seeking, source preferences, and forms of competition, as well as an ever-changing electronic information environment and changing expectations on the part of those they serve. As Duane E. Webster writes,

In today’s rapidly changing information landscape, libraries face opportunity and challenge. The only constant in this landscape is uncertainty. . . . More than in any preceding era, we know that libraries must change, but we do not know how to make this transition . . . to organizations that can thrive in dramatically different conditions.1

Clearly, libraries are now engaged in much more than the preservation and transition of the cultural history and having a nebulous role in meeting the needs of society and the institutions they serve.

In such a time of transition, why should librarians and students in schools of library and information science be interested in yet another book about the evaluation and assessment of library services? Perhaps the better question is, why should they be interested in a revised edition of a 1998 volume? We will address this question by reinforcing our approach. Instead of presenting a cookbook of measures to apply to various services, we identify some touchstones critical to the well-being of libraries: customers, service quality, satisfaction, loyalty, and reputation. The concepts of loyalty and reputation are relatively new in the professional literature. Although a number of librarians dispute the notion that library users are customers, this book endorses the use of that word. Furthermore, we distinguish between satisfaction and service quality; much of the literature confuses or ignores the distinction between the two.

Many in the profession strongly believe that only they, the professionals, have the expertise to assess the quality of library service. Such a belief may have
validity in the abstract, but it fails to acknowledge reality. Every customer evaluates the quality of service received and decides when (and if) she will seek further interactions with the library. Behaviors and attitudes toward the library over time influence both customer perceptions about the library and the views of stakeholders who make decisions affecting the library's funding.

Service quality, as presented here, views the service provided by an organization from the perspective of the customer. It encourages the organization to meet specific customer expectations and to increase the number of customers who are loyal and delighted with the services provided.

The purposes of this book, both first and revised editions, are to

- suggest new ways to think about library services
- explain service quality and further the development of its theoretical base
- clarify the distinction between service quality and customer satisfaction
- identify strategies for developing a customer service plan that meets the library's customer-focused mission, vision, and goals
- identify procedures for measuring service quality and satisfaction
- challenge conventional thinking about the utility of input, output, and performance measures, as well as public library role adoption or service response
- suggest possible customer-related indicators that provide insights useful for library planning and decision making
- encourage libraries to take action—action leading to improved service and accountability

Although the book focuses on academic and public libraries, the basic principles, strategies, and assessment procedures presented apply in other settings.

Traditionally, the amount of resources and productivity counts have been (and still are) used to evaluate the quality of libraries. Performance and output measures were developed as better indicators of service delivery, but they have been more discussed than used, as is confirmed by the small number of public libraries reporting them. Although performance and output measures serve an important purpose, the current cross-disciplinary evaluation literature lacks a standard nomenclature for such terms as performance measures and outputs. Given that different people use the same terms but with widely varying meanings, it is time to replace such terms with new ones, and to explore other ways of evaluating and benchmarking library services. In effect, it is time to develop new ways to look at service. As the book notes, it is also time to move beyond outputs to outcomes and address the perspectives of the stakeholders interested in libraries and their institutional context.

Because technology offers new methods of information delivery, traditional counts of productivity underestimate the actual volume of business performed. New issues, such as those related to distance education, use of library websites, and partnership and consortium arrangements for gaining access to electronic collections, make it clear that volumes of business are deceptive measures—ones becoming more complex to gauge. The library community needs to shift its focus from measures reporting volume of business, such as for circulation, to more meaningful indicators of customer loyalty, expectations, preferences, and satisfaction. The new indicators should report information about present and potential customers, their needs, expectations, and preferences, as well as the problems they encounter and how library staff handles those problems. Such information is useful for promoting customer loyalty, enhancing the service reputation of libraries, and planning and decision making.

Customers are more than a source for data collection; they are the reason for libraries’ existence. It is important (if not essential) to listen to, and learn from, customers and to use the insights gained to improve services. A number of libraries have ignored customers because they perceive customers as a captive audience. This book dispels that notion as it enumerates the many competitors poised to challenge the library's perceived monopoly.

As the twenty-first century unfolds, librarians need new ways of thinking and alternatives for applying a customer-centered model of service quality. We regard this work as one in progress, because it provides a base upon which others can build. The approach presented here recognizes that holistic evaluation involves the use of both quantitative and qualitative data, as each type complements the other. The approach presented here is too large and too complex for any library to undertake at one time. Rather, our intention has been to present some new ways to think
about service, along with some methods for evaluating and improving service. Libraries can select, from among the methods discussed, those most appropriate to their particular situation, and implement them at a pace that suits their needs. After all, libraries have become service organizations that function in a competitive environment, and librarians must create and perfect services that better match the information needs, information-seeking behaviors, and expectations of those they intend to serve.

If libraries do not try to be truly service-centered, what are they willing to commit to? What is the source of their service inspiration? What service reputation do they generate? The answers to such questions have a definite impact on the extent to which customers are loyal to the library, and on the number of customers who are delighted or completely satisfied—not merely appeased.

Most people who become librarians do so from a desire to connect people with information—a concept that is the cornerstone of service quality. But, somehow, along the way, the profession has gotten caught up in bean counting: how many of this and how much of that, as though the items counted exist in a universe totally unto themselves. It is our hope that the ideas presented here will encourage librarians to remember the ideals that attracted them to the profession and to abandon such misperceptions as “customers cannot judge quality,” “customers do not know what they want,” and “professional hegemony will be undermined by kowtowing to customers.”

A critical question that many readers will ask is, how does this edition differ from the previous one? We kept the same framework but differentiate between evaluation and assessment, address new developments within and outside the profession, and continue to raise issues. Revisiting the content of the first edition, we find that assessment has assumed a new meaning as discussed in chapter 4. Perhaps Addressing Service Quality is now a more appropriate title, but we decided to keep the original title. Since we wrote the first edition, we see that libraries have tended to back away from explicit service promises and that there is still a definite preference for conducting surveys. We encourage librarians to pursue other choices when relevant and to gain a good understanding of the concepts they are addressing. As we continue to remind readers, satisfaction and service quality differ. It is important to focus on the customers of individual libraries and realize that comparisons to other libraries (and use of mostly generic data-collection instruments) assume that customer expectations have little variation.

Note
Historically, the quality of a library has been measured by the size of its collection. The acquisition of the millionth volume was cause for celebration, and press releases flooded local and national news media. The millionth volume or a million-dollar “book” budget gave bragging rights to the library’s director. For decades, library directors, upon retirement, wanted to be known for the number of titles added during their tenure.

As collections grew, space became a problem, so library directors pressed for bigger buildings to house the increased number of volumes. Bigger collections meant the need for more staff and furnishings, especially shelving. Several other factors influenced collection building, especially after World War II. The expansion of colleges and universities in response to the GI Bill meant more faculty had to be hired, and they were expected to “publish or perish” to receive tenure. Of course, each author wanted the library to purchase his published works. Several publishing companies were started to translate and reprint works held by major European university libraries that had been damaged during the war.

By the 1970s, many university administrators regarded academic libraries as bottomless pits because of constant entreaties for more money to keep up with the publishing output. In the 1980s and 1990s, the pleas for more money centered on the large annual increases in the prices of scholarly and professional journal subscriptions and the need for electronically delivered resources and their requisite infrastructure.

More recently, libraries have expanded their involvement with consortia and partnerships as they seek more electronic resources while focusing on their customers’ information needs and the affordability of those resources. The cost for colleges and universities has increased for nearly everything, including faculty and staff benefits (e.g., health care) and debt services on borrowed money. Issues related to debt services, the size of endowments, and cutbacks on staffing and operating costs became more pronounced during the economic recession of 2008 and 2009. Some estimate that it will take academic institutions at least four years to recover; this is especially true of those institutions that are heavily funded by
tution dollars and are in the process of major construction projects.

Some critics note the fallacy of equating collection size with quality—not all libraries count items in the same way, while others keep outdated and unwanted books to boost their volume count. Obviously, the sheer number of volumes does not necessarily mean that the library collection matches readers’ interests, and many titles go unused—they do not even circulate. In the age of widespread access to digital resources, volume and title counts become less important, unless the institution is threatened by accreditation standards that set expectations for collection size. Academic libraries experience broad and extensive use of digital resources even by the faculty, who now access materials in collections miles away.

SERVICE QUALITY

Because of the previous focus on collection building, library quality has been synonymous with collection size—an assessment of what the library has—rather than with what the library does. Yet library quality and service quality are very different measures. A parallel can be drawn with the observations made by Raymond F. Zammuto and others, who studied student services offices in universities: “The idea of service quality as opposed to educational quality has not received much attention in higher education.”

That situation is changing as most academic institutions now strive to attract and retain students. Service quality has become a topic of considerable interest for many service units on campus.

In the past several decades, as budgets for the purchase of materials have shrunk, the phrase “access not ownership” has become common. The means to achieve that access—interlibrary loan—did not change radically until recently, when the Internet became widely available to educational institutions. The result has been a major shift in resources, attention, and interest from the library “collection” to the Internet. How to use it, which websites are good, and a myriad of associated topics fill the pages of the professional literature and now seem the prime preoccupation of the library community. In all likelihood, access to Internet and associated resources will equal, if not surpass, physical volumes in the collection as the new standard of library quality. Yet such a focus still says nothing about the quality of service provided and received.

For a library, service quality encompasses the interactive relationship between the library and the people whom it is supposed to serve. A library that adheres to all the professionally approved rules and procedures for acquiring, organizing, managing, and preserving material but has no customers cannot claim quality because a major element is missing: satisfying people’s needs, requests, and desires for information. Maurice B. Line defined librarianship as “managing information resources for people.”

How the library sees and interacts with those people—customers—clearly affects the quality and nature of the service rendered. As Françoise Hébert notes, “When library and customer measures of quality are not congruent, the library may be meeting its internal standards of performance but may not be performing well in the eyes of its customers.”

PATRONS, USERS, CLIENTS, OR CUSTOMERS?

Organizations refer to the people they serve by many different terms: clients, patients, students, readers, passengers, visitors, guests. Such terms make these individuals seem something other than customers. Librarians often prefer the terms patron or user, perhaps to avoid the implication of an exchange occurring between the library and the people using the service. Yet, both words have rather negative connotations, as Darlene E. Weingand points out:

The word patron is associated with the act of giving support and protection, such as occurred in the Renaissance between royalty and artists. The impression here is one of unequal status, of the powerful protecting the less powerful. This is not the type of relationship that puts libraries on an equal level of partnership with their communities. Further, while user accurately describes someone who uses the library, the term is quite unspecific and is widely associated with the drug culture.

Special librarians and subject specialists in university libraries probably come closest to treating their users as clients. In the case of subject specialists, faculty and doctoral students who are repeat users become clients. These librarians know their clientele personally and have insights into their research and related interests. Yet, being a client does not preclude one from being treated like a customer.
Public libraries have different types of customers with different types of interests. These range from the preschoo ler who comes to a story hour, to the homeless man who wants to read the newspaper, to the businesswoman who needs tax regulation guidelines. All have different interests, but most want materials, information, or a place to sit and use library resources. A customer is the recipient of any product or service provided by the organization. That recipient might be either internal, such as a coworker in the same or another unit, or external—one in the community wanting materials or information.

Weingand notes that:

the word customer, which implies payment for a product or service, is a better reflection of what actually transpires between the library and people in the community. With this term the mythology of the “free” library is dispelled, and a more accurate metaphor for service is substituted.

In support, Jeannette Woodward argues that it may be time to replace the word user with customer; the word customer “reminds us of . . . [the] new emphasis on running higher education as a business enterprise.” She continues,

Many of us find this idea repugnant. However, to survive and prosper in the twenty-first century, librarians will probably have to put aside any affection they may feel for the ivory tower library of the past. We know that customers make demands, but we rarely think of patrons demanding anything. Instead, the term brings to mind individuals who give rather than receive. You might think of patrons of the arts, for example. Their role is to support the arts, not make demands of them. Customers on the other hand, demand high-quality facilities, resources, and services. They want a library that is focused on their needs, and they have no intention of going out of their way to meet the library’s needs or expectations.

Some academic librarians argue that students cannot and should not be regarded as customers. Yet students surely are potential customers when they select a school to attend. During high school, they are bombarded with advertising from colleges eager to enroll them. They are customers in the bookstore and food courts on campus, and when they purchase tickets to college sporting and entertainment events.

Another interesting notion, now widely accepted, is that organizations have internal as well as external customers. Internal customers depend on or receive work from another unit of the library. Such work can include information or reports, or processes and activities to be performed. Outsourcing may be one way to meet the needs of internal customers in a timelier manner. Public service staff members are customers of the various units that acquire, catalog, process, and shelve materials.

Whatever the term used to describe the individuals that libraries serve, the people who interact with any library service are the reason for the organization’s existence. Therefore, their needs and desires should drive the service. Although the total quality management (TQM) movement has focused attention on customer service, the idea is not new.

As Arnold Hirshon notes, “Customer service was not a concept invented by total quality management experts.” The concept dates to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and to practices found in retail trade and hotel management. Other chapters in this book offer further evidence of why the concepts of customer and customer service are applicable to library and information science.

Some librarians dislike library service being equated with “customer and commodity.” They perceive libraries and their activities to be on a higher plane than their retail or commercial counterparts, and decry the evaluation of rather basic processes, functions, and services as pedestrian and unsuitable. Indeed, one library educator has criticized suggestions for measures that reflect the percentage of students and faculty who check out library materials or the number of courses requiring use of library resources as having “no direct connection to learning, research or intellectual activities in general. Rather they deal with the handling of things.”

What that author fails to understand is that the library’s contributions to facilitating education, promoting a love of learning, and aiding research very much depend on how well the library “handles things.” None of these higher-order conditions can occur unless the library handles things in such a way that individuals find and are able to use the materials and information they seek.

We also want to nip in the bud the idea that higher-order conditions occur by some sort of intellectual osmosis. The truth is that unless customers and the collection come together in a way both interesting and meaningful to customers, the library is nothing more than an expensive warehouse. Hard work, much of it “pedestrian,” must be performed before this coming together can occur—even in the Magic Kingdom. “As Walt Disney once said, there is no magic to magic. It’s in the details.”
It should be clear by now that the library as a vast collection, a warehouse filled with books and other printed materials, can no longer be justified as either a concept or a reality. The economic pressures on higher education and local government are causing both academic administrators and elected officials to question long-standing assumptions about many of their units. These units are now being scrutinized for their actual value to the sponsoring organization. The severe recession of 2008 and 2009 has resulted in massive cuts to local governments and state-sponsored universities. As a result, among other things, there have been a curtailing of hours of library operations, unpaid furloughs, job losses, and reductions in spending on library materials. At the same time students’ tuition costs are soaring, while public libraries are experiencing a significant increase in the number of people coming to the library asking for service.

Obviously, adding value, service quality, and customer satisfaction are pressing concepts, as they are vital to the continued well-being of libraries. After all, “the consequences of un-quality are customers who leave disappointed, who tell others about how they feel, and who may never return to the library.”

It is not our intention here to delve into the reasons for these pressures to improve service quality, but rather to concentrate on how libraries can evaluate and improve customer satisfaction, enhance service quality, and add value in ways meaningful to their sponsoring organizations. The first principle is to focus on the purpose of librarianship—“managing information resources in ways that will serve people.” This purpose incorporates Ranganathan’s five laws and allows people who seek material or information to receive it—that is, to obtain certain types of materials within certain parameters.

THE LIBRARY CUSTOMER IS STILL THE CUSTOMER

Some librarians resist the notions of customer and service quality because they equate them with the principle that “the customer is always right.” Customers are not always right, but they do have a right to express their opinions and to learn about the library’s service parameters.

Most customers have expectations about service, though sometimes those expectations are unrealistic. Nor are we referring here to problem patrons who engage in irrational, prohibited, and, in some cases, illegal behaviors. Customers, as defined here, are individuals who want some assistance or materials that the library might or might not hold. They might not know, however, what is unrealistic until the library tells them. This requires some thinking on the part of library administrators to distinguish between core and peripheral services and to identify those that will not be offered. This also requires notifying the community about those decisions and perhaps even gaining support for them.

The library service responses (see figure 3.1) developed for the Public Library Association lists eighteen roles or missions that a public library might assume. Obviously, it is neither practical nor realistic for any one library to undertake all of them. Therefore, it is important to choose those responses that a library believes important to its community and concentrate on doing those well. However, it is equally important that the library indicate which of the responses it is not prepared to assume so that customers will understand that every desire cannot be satisfied. For example, many libraries offer federal and state income tax forms and explanation bulletins during the first quarter of the calendar year. However, no library offers tax preparation advice to its customers. Some customers expect to find out-of-state tax forms and are annoyed that these are not available. As a result, some libraries have stopped carrying any tax forms or bulletins.

CUSTOMER SATISFACTION AND SERVICE QUALITY

Many library surveys ask about customer satisfaction, sometimes in a general context and sometimes in relation to specific services. Usually the questions about satisfaction allow for scaled responses (e.g., ranging from not satisfied at all through partially satisfied to satisfied and completely satisfied). Too often, satisfaction surveys are really intended as library report cards. In fact, some surveys actually ask participants to assign the library a grade from A to F. There is usually no intent to take any remedial action based on replies to these questions, but rather to use the responses in negotiations with administrators in the sponsoring institution.

There is increased interest in satisfaction with libraries and their services, but the concept is not well linked to customers. The terms satisfaction and service quality are frequently used interchangeably; this
Satisfaction is an emotional reaction—the degree of contentment or discontentment—with a specific transaction or service encounter. Satisfaction may or may not be directly related to the performance of the library on a specific occasion. A customer can receive an answer to a query but be unsatisfied because of an upsetting or angry encounter. Conversely, although the query might remain unanswered, another customer might feel satisfied because the encounter was pleasant and the helper interested and polite.

Service quality, on the other hand, is a global judgment relating to the superiority of a service as viewed in the context of specific statements that the library is willing to act on if customers find them of great value. The inference is that the satisfaction levels from a number of transactions or encounters that an individual experiences with a particular organization fuse to form an impression of service quality for that person. The collective experiences of many persons create an organization’s reputation for service quality.

**SERVICE QUALITY—PERCEPTION IS REALITY**

Every organization’s service has a quality dimension—ranging from wonderful to awful. Service and quality cannot be disconnected. Quality is the manner in which the service is delivered, or, in some cases, not delivered.

Service quality is multidimensional. Two critical dimensions are content and context. Content refers to obtaining what prompted the visit—particular materials or information, study space, or an acceptable substitute. Context covers the experience itself: interactions with staff, ease or difficulty in navigating the system, and the comfort of the physical environment.

Customers who come into the library as well as those who “visit” through an electronic highway experience both the content and context of the service. From these interactions, customers form opinions and attitudes about the library. Customer expectations can influence satisfaction with both content and context. These expectations may or may not match what the library thinks appropriate, but nevertheless they represent reality for the customer.

Expectations change according to what customers want and how urgently they want it. Sometimes they are seeking a quiet place to read, sometimes just a book for enjoyment, and sometimes a vital bit of information. Importance and urgency, though seldom considered, are likely to have a strong influence on customers’ satisfaction with a service. The prevailing custom has been to treat all searches or inquiries with equal priority, except those from persons of special importance to the library, such as an administrator in the sponsoring organization. The concept of equal treatment should be reconsidered because of its impact on consequences to the customer. If the level of service for all is high, exceptions become detrimental, costly, distractive, and unnecessary.

Service quality is a complex concept: It has several dimensions beyond the content/context and the performance/performance-expectations gap. Service quality is both personal to individuals and collective among many customers. In a number of instances, impressions of service quality can be changed; perceptions move up with positive experiences and down as a result of negative ones. Chapters 6, 7, 8, and 10 present some techniques for assessing service quality and satisfaction so that libraries can review their mission and vision statements, and evaluate their service reputation and image, while adapting goals and objectives to cope better with customer expectations.

**WHY INVESTIGATE QUALITY?**

Libraries have gathered and reported statistics about their collections, funds, and staffs for decades. These statistics have, however, concentrated primarily on finances, the resources purchased with those finances, and workloads. Nevertheless, an information gap remains. These traditional statistics lack relevance. Most of the traditional statistics do not measure the library’s performance in terms of elements important to customers. They do not really describe performance or indicate whether service quality is good, indifferent, or bad. Even worse, they do not indicate any action that the administration or any team can or should take to improve performance.

Libraries need measures to evaluate service quality on a much broader scale than resources held, resources acquired, and activities completed. The current statistics for both academic and public libraries emphasize expenditures. Focusing on money can be dangerous, because it emphasizes the cost of the
library to the sponsoring organization at a time when
top administrators are looking closely at costs and how
to contain them. Even businesses that have relied on
financial data as the ultimate indicator of performance
now recognize the need for broader measures.

THE BALANCED SCORECARD

Many businesses have adopted the concept of the bal-
anced scorecard as a method of management. The
balanced scorecard is a “matrix of measures that can
show the performance of the organization from the
perspective of each of its stakeholders.” The score-
card examines different perspectives:

*The learning and growth perspective* includes
employee training and corporate cultural
attitudes related to both individual and cor-
porate self-improvement. This perspective
involves more than training; it includes the
availability of mentors and tutors within the
organization, the ease of communication
among workers when they need assistance,
and the availability of technological tools.

*The business process perspective* refers to internal
business processes and how well the busi-
ness operates, and whether its products and
services conform to customer requirements.

*The customer perspective* focuses on meeting or
exceeding customer expectations, namely
service quality and satisfaction.

Undue focus on the business perspective leads to an
unbalanced situation with regard to other perspec-
tives. In fact, the customer perspective should be the
central perspective with other ones revolving around
it. As a consequence, it is important to know the
answers to the following questions:

- How do customers see us?
- How do we look to decision makers and
  the community? (business perspective)
- What must we excel at? (This question
  looks to the internal working of the or-
  ganization.)
- Can we continue to improve and create
  value?15

The balanced scorecard is essentially a tool for
strategic management. Implementing the balanced
scorecard necessitates that the administration answer
the four preceding questions in terms of the present
situation and desired outcomes for the future. The
next step is to define the factors critical for success
and then to identify measures that indicate success.

Measures relating to customers might indicate,
for instance, the percentage of repeat customers, the
percentage of customer complaints, and the number
of new registered borrowers. Internal measures might
focus on cycle times and employee productivity and
skills. At the end of the specified time period, all the
measures are combined to produce an overall score.
Although we are not advocating adoption of the bal-
anced scorecard, its principles have merit in that they
encompass a wider variety of factors than do the tradi-
tional counts reported by both public and academic
libraries in their annual reports and in national compi-
lations of library statistics.16

The University of Virginia uses the balanced score-
card and has developed a series of annual metrics for
each perspective. Those metrics are viewed in the con-
text of goals, targets, and methods of gathering appro-
priate evidence. The Orange County Library System
in Orlando, Florida, which also relies on the balanced
scorecard, annually makes a report on its accompli-
ishments within the context of five perspectives: internal
operations, library resources, library finances, cus-
tomer satisfaction, and library staff. For customer satis-
faction in the report for 2008/2009, the library asks,
“How well are library customers served according to
the library mission? What does this mean to you?”

We want to be sure that we are meeting your needs.
We have set some standards to measure customer sat-
isfaction. These include the following:

- Availability: days and hours the library is
  open and the website is available.
- Customer feedback: We look at customer
  surveys and have a secret shopper program
to find out your opinions on how we are
doing.
- Usage: We measure how many people have
  library cards and how many people are vis-
  iting the library.
- Programs and classes: We count how many
  people attend library events.

Also meriting mention is the library staff per-
spective: “Are staff available, trained, and ready to
achieve the library mission? What does this mean
to you?”
We use a variety of measurement tools, such as employee surveys, turnover rate, and a customer service shopper program to help us measure whether or not the library provides staff who are trained and ready to provide the best possible services.\textsuperscript{18}

**OTHER DIMENSIONS OF SERVICE QUALITY**

Marketing consultant George E. Kroon offers four other ways to look at service quality: conformance, expectation, market perception, and strategic.\textsuperscript{19} (Because the last of these measures applies only to commercial establishments, we will not consider it here.)

*Conformance* requires that standards for quality be set for many processes and functions. The intent is to reduce mistakes (shelving errors), streamline workflow (cut backlogs), and establish required behaviors on the part of staff (ask if the customer got what was desired). Setting standards for service quality, as opposed to targets for work productivity in technical services or restrictions on the time allowed to answer reference questions, is rather a novel idea for libraries, but one whose time has come. The library has considerable control over quality as conformance to standards that it can use to improve service in many areas.

The idea of conformance standards leads to consideration of three kinds of situations that might negatively affect service quality: predictable, foreseeable, and unpredictable. *Predictable* situations are those over which the library has considerable control, and thus can take action to prevent or at least minimize. *Foreseeable* situations are those that are likely to happen, but for which the time frame between occurrences is longer and incidences are fewer than for the predictable ones. To some extent, it is possible to plan for even *unpredictable* and unlikely situations. For example, staff trained to respond to certain disasters or crises, such as fire, bomb threats, and tornadoes, can greatly ameliorate the situation. Following are examples of each type of library situation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictable situations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>equipment failures (paper jams, burnt-out lightbulbs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>network crashes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no paper in photocopiers and printers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>staff absences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>patron ignorance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Foreseeable situations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>power failures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>weather problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>budget cuts and revisions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unpredictable situations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>natural disasters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>psychopaths</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The downside of concentrating solely on conformance quality is that the focus is internal and may not match customer expectations or preferences. Kroon cites the Swiss watch industry as an example; it set high standards for mechanical timepieces while customer preferences had moved on to digital watches. Although conformance standards are desirable, they should not be used in isolation.

The second dimension is customer *expectations*. Expectations are influenced by factors outside the control of management, such as customers’ prior experience, word of mouth, and competitor behavior. Performance that repeatedly, or in some particular way, fails to meet customers’ expectations is a clear signal to management that improvement is needed. Such improvement can be facilitated by training, technology, or conformance standards. Sometimes, however, customers have erroneous or unrealistic ideas about the service. In these cases, customers should be told why their expectations cannot be met.

The third dimension of service quality is *market perception*—evaluation against competitors. Libraries have not really thought about competitors; usually they look at the market in terms of peer institutions. Nevertheless, competition from super bookstores, online suppliers of journal articles, the Internet, and nontraditional colleges and universities, including the virtual university, may become more serious in the future. (See chapter 12.) Even other libraries can be competitors if customers have the option of using them. Figure 1.1, adapted from one presented by Kroon, depicts the differences in quality dimensions.

**THE PAYOFF FOR THE LIBRARY**

With all the techniques for better management (e.g., TQM, reengineering, and empowerment) and the new technologies that have been adopted, many organizations, including libraries, suffer from
what Tony Hope and Jeremy Hope characterize as “improvement fatigue.” These techniques hold out the promise of increased profits for business, but what can they offer to nonprofit organizations such as libraries?

Most librarians are not consciously aware of the two things that are basic to the success of their libraries—the attention they get from individual customers and their reputation. People have many choices about how to spend their unstructured time—they can watch TV or a movie, surf the Web, attend a ball game, or shop at the mall. In addition, as Ralph Norman describes it,

For a wide and complicated series of reasons, we are producing a much greater volume of text than anybody is reading or able to read. The intellectual sensorium is clogged, glutted, surfeited, full, overstuffed, bloated, teeming, overabundant, [and] overflowing.

Everybody is bombarded with messages and stimuli. Therefore, attention and time are two of the most valuable assets that individuals have. Those who choose to spend these assets in the library or using library resources should be regarded as precious customers.

Supermarkets began issuing loyalty cards several years ago. Showing this card to the cashier entitles the shopper to receive a discount on specific items. Airlines have long offered “frequent flyer” cards: fly the requisite number of miles and get a free trip. So many passengers became frequent flyers that it is now difficult to book a free trip at the time one chooses.

| FIGURE 1.1 |
| DIFFERENCES IN QUALITY DIMENSIONS |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DIMENSION</th>
<th>Conformance</th>
<th>Expectation</th>
<th>Market</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Viewpoint</td>
<td>Internal</td>
<td>External</td>
<td>Peers and competitors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key terms</td>
<td>Service quality</td>
<td>Expectations</td>
<td>Peer performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus of effort</td>
<td>Processes Functions Services</td>
<td>Performance gap</td>
<td>Peer comparisons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What to assess</td>
<td>Transactions Performance Context</td>
<td>Customer expectations vs. performance and vs. importance</td>
<td>Rankings/ratios with peer data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superior quality results in</td>
<td>Stakeholder satisfaction</td>
<td>Performance exceeding expectations Loyalty</td>
<td>Good reputation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inferior quality results in</td>
<td>Errors Higher costs Delays Lost customers</td>
<td>Bad word-of-mouth Dissatisfaction</td>
<td>Unfavorable reputation compared to peers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

to travel. Recognizing the value of repeat customers is important for the success of most organizations. Repeat customers, especially the more frequent ones, tend to be loyal. The library’s repeat customers already have demonstrated their interest in reading and seeking information. Loyalty means that the customers return repeatedly; they recommend the library to their friends and colleagues, and may be more forgiving when the system makes a mistake. Some of them will actively campaign for library bond issues or protest library budget cuts.

Libraries need to create more loyal customers, yet many public librarians seem to talk more about attracting nonusers than keeping present customers happy or finding out why previous customers no longer return. Academic librarians may take the short-term view—it is four to six years and gone for the largest number of students. Such an attitude fails to consider the ripple effect as former students tell friends and family about their experiences with higher education. Moreover, as these alumni prosper, the college or university will approach them as potential donors or contributors, but may encounter resentment for their past treatment. Research indicates that only completely satisfied customers can be reasonably classified as loyal. (See chapters 9 and 10.) This is a major reason why paying close attention to library service quality is critical.

The collective experience of customers creates a reputation for the library. That reputation will become known to the administrators who fund the library and to the library community—students, faculty, the public, and taxpayers. What kind of reputation does a library have? How well does that reputation match the one that library staff desires? If the library wants a better reputation, what is it doing to improve it? These questions need serious consideration. Librarians need to consider how to describe the benefits of their service better to the administrators who fund them.

Complementary to reputation is brand image. As Elizabeth J. Wood, Rush Miller, and Amy Knapp explain,

All market sectors dealing mainly in commodities—coal, sugar, soap, and similar offerings whose essential product characteristics are not easily differentiated or distinguished one from another—have difficulty attracting the customer’s attention and retaining the customer’s loyalty. To compete more effectively in such environments, marketers put a premium on building and maintaining a strong brand image, one that somehow sets them apart and above competitors.22

For libraries, the brand is typically books. People equate libraries with book collections rather than a service culture. A number of people are surprised to learn that libraries are prepared to answer factual questions, help find information, and offer DVDs and audiobooks. They are even more surprised to learn that they can reserve meeting space, or request specific titles, even from other libraries. That these services are a surprise to many people indicates a failure of libraries to publicize their services. If libraries want community support, they need to tell the community about the various services that are available and to do so in a way in which the public will listen.

**NATIONAL AWARDS**

Each year the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award recognizes outstanding American companies. The award covers seven categories: leadership; strategic planning; customer focus; measurement, analysis, and knowledge management; workforce focus; process management; and results. The first three categories represent the leadership triad, “these categories are placed together to emphasize the importance of a leadership focus on strategy and customers.”23 Totaling eighty-five points,

The Customer Focus Category examines how your organization engages its customers for long-term marketplace success. This engagement strategy includes how your organization builds a customer-focused culture. Also examined is how your organization listens to the voice of its customers and uses this information to improve and identify opportunities for innovation.24

Further, “customer engagement’ refers to your customers’ investment in your brand and product offerings.”25 Companies that have won this award, given since 1987, have enjoyed considerable success. Baldrige winners have included a wide variety of organizations. Recent winners have been manufacturers, health care agencies, schools, small businesses, and local government. Steve George, who has written four books about the Baldrige Award and has worked with some of the winners, lists several characteristics common among them. These include

- a genuine concern for all people using or working in the organization or its community
a strong desire to improve in every way
• a commitment to learning from other organizations and individuals
• use of data to measure and improve an alignment of strategies, processes, and activities with the mission of the organization\textsuperscript{26}

Within academic librarianship, beginning in 2000, Blackwell’s Book Services has provided the Association of College and Research Libraries, American Library Association, with funding for an annual Excellence in Academic Libraries Award to be given to a community college, college, or university library for outstanding accomplishments. Recipients, as reflected in the applications, have demonstrated some leadership but the applications do not tightly focus on the Baldrige Award’s triad.\textsuperscript{27}

The Public Library Association does not have an award similar to the one for academic libraries. The EBSCO Excellence in Small and/or Rural Public Library Service Award honors a library serving a community of ten thousand or fewer that demonstrates excellent service to its community. The Polaris Innovation in Technology John Iliff Award recognizes a library worker or library that has used technology and innovative thinking to improve services.\textsuperscript{28}

**A FINAL WORD**

The time has come to stop confusing means—process and functions related to the collection or to technology—with ends (i.e., purpose), or managing information resources for people. People are the reason for having a library; without them there is no need for any library. Service is basic to the customers’ satisfaction or delight with the library:

A service can be an idea, entertainment, . . . information, knowledge, . . . social innovation, circumstance, convenience, food, security, or any number of other things. Service may also be defined as a deed, a performance, a social event or an effort and output that is consumed where it is produced.\textsuperscript{29}

Service quality, a complex phenomenon, is composed of the content of the service itself and the context in which the service is rendered. It is also affected by the quality of the information supplied and used, and the expectations that customers have for the service. All managers should want to avoid situations in which library performance is poor and expectations are low, but customers appear indifferent or satisfied. Service quality is both individual and collective; the collective determination of service quality and satisfaction creates the library’s reputation in the community and for the administrators who fund the library.

Traditional library performance measures do not reflect service quality. Their focus is primarily on expenditures for resources rather than on delivery of service. For these and other reasons, library managers must look for better ways to measure and describe the quality of their services, and, in effect, demonstrate that the organization deserves the type of recognition bestowed on Baldrige Award winners.

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*Great libraries provide measurably superior service.* \textsuperscript{30}
Notes

13. S. R. Ranganathan’s Five Laws of Library Science are (1) books are for use; (2) every book its reader; (3) every reader his [or her] book; (4) save the time of the reader; and (5) a library is a growing organism. See also Maurice B. Line, “Use of Library Materials” [book review], College & Research Libraries 40, no. 6 (November 1979): 557–558.
20. Hope and Hope, Transforming the Bottom Line, 2.
24. Ibid., 13.
25. Ibid.


Chapter Two

A Look in the Library Mirror

A goal must be to empower our users and make customer self-sufficiency a priority; that is, make our libraries and services as transparent as possible and provide a suite of integrated tools that allow user-centered retrieval and management of information and knowledge resources without our mediation.¹

In the 1991 film *The Doctor*, John McKee (played by William Hurt) gets to experience the hospital where he is an esteemed heart surgeon from the perspective of a patient when he is diagnosed with throat cancer.² His long waits to see doctors, canceled appointments, and indifferent and sometimes rude treatment from both staff and physicians first anger him and then awaken him to the fact that all patients, including his own, are more than just sick bodies. The situations depicted in the film are familiar to many people who have interacted with medical facilities in recent years. Beyond hospitals, customer problems with banks, stores, airlines, and many other service organizations stem from one source—failure to view policies and procedures from the perspective of the customers.

The main reason for this failure is that the senior managers setting those policies and procedures are insulated from dealing with customers. Because many of these decisions are made in a vacuum, managers have little or no understanding of how these decisions impact customers and frontline staff. On the other hand, some organizations make a determined effort to inculcate senior staff in the reality of customer service. For example, Enterprise Rent-A-Car has a “work your way up” and a “promote from within” policy. All supervisors have had direct experience working with the customers of the company.³

Managers at both Disney theme parks do not hesitate to pick up trash or do whatever it takes to ensure that customers have a magical experience. Even big-name chief executive officers get involved in frontline service. Fred Smith, founder of FedEx, does not hesitate to ride with a courier, while Bill Marriott Jr., head of the hotel chain, sometimes works the registration desks.⁴

SELF-SUFFICIENCY

Because of stagnant or declining budget allocations, many libraries have made conscious attempts to foster customers’ self-sufficiency. Sometimes this self-sufficiency
is euphemistically called *empowering* customers. Whatever term is used, the result is that customers are expected to do more for themselves. Now, there is nothing inherently wrong in trying to promote customer self-sufficiency; most people are used to fending for themselves in supermarkets and gas stations. In fact, many customers like to be able to peruse the merchandise without sales personnel hovering in the background or actively trying to induce purchases. At some supermarkets and other businesses, customers can register their purchases with portable optical scanners and then make payment.

Libraries also permit self-checkout and the electronic filing of interlibrary loan requests; provide self-help guides (print and digital); and create other ways to permit customers to be self-sufficient. However, they should review their practices and policies to ensure that, when possible, visits do not become frustrating. *How the library helps or hinders navigating and deciphering the system alters customers’ perceptions of the quality of service provided and their attitudes about librarians and libraries generally.* This does not mean that libraries—their arrangement, staff, policies, diverse collections and services, and equipment—are responsible for any and all instances of confusion and frustration. Despite efforts to stamp out the popular stereotype of the librarian, it remains strong because people *can identify that image with their own experiences.* Many people find the library an arcane and frightening place.7 Indeed, a number of articles in professional journals have described the condition called “library anxiety.” Many customers are confused about how to locate what they want. It may be difficult to find a particular book in a library. Call numbers and online public access catalogs (OPACs), with the diverse resources available through them, are not easily understood by the uninitiated. In addition, customers may be unsure of the appropriateness of asking for help, especially when staff seems preoccupied with other tasks. And reports of unpleasant experiences by those who do ask are not uncommon.6

In the OCLC report *College Students’ Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources,* which surveyed 396 participants, it was found that their use of the Internet has dramatically increased and their use of libraries, newspapers, television, and radio has decreased. However, when they do visit a public or academic library, which is still frequently, they prefer to use the Internet, search engines, and electronic resources. They view the library as a place to study and do homework, and they prefer self-sufficiency. “When asked to give advice, many student respondents suggested increasing libraries’ open hours, improving the lighting and furniture, hiring friendlier staff and allowing food and drink in libraries.” Furthermore, they “trust information they get from libraries, and they trust the information they get from search engines. The survey revealed that they trust them almost equally, which suggests that libraries have no monopoly on the provision of information.”

“Self-service,” as Thomas Childers and Nancy Van House note, “limits both the library’s ability to serve and its ability to assess and represent its service.” All this underscores the importance of customer contact with library staff and the role this contact plays in service quality.

To promote self-sufficiency or “coproduction,” where customers participate in the service delivery process, it is first necessary to make the organization welcoming and easy to navigate, not hindering customers in their pursuit of materials or information.10 Following are ten practices that hinder customer coproduction and perhaps induce frustration:

1. Having unclear signage, which customers may ignore11
2. Not trying to simplify the layout of the library
3. Permitting long delays in reshelving items (i.e., books, periodicals, and videos)
4. Requiring customers to bring in items for renewal
5. Failing to monitor or restrict use of the OPAC and other workstations for receiving and sending e-mail messages, thus making queuing a problem as customers wait to use the computers
6. Having multiple interfaces for using online resources and electronic texts, thereby confusing customers
7. Providing poor quality printers for computer workstations
8. Not posting directions for obtaining a photocopy card on or near the copiers
9. Filling paper trays for copiers and printers only once a day, no matter how much the machines are used
10. Failing to post instructions on the photocopier indicating how to position the item to be copied. Sometimes the paper tray is in the portrait position, other times it is in the landscape position. Customers must guess, and half the time they guess wrong, and waste their first copy.

To summarize:

Library operations don’t occur in a vacuum. They take place within an institutional culture and physical environment. This institutional milieu creates the service atmosphere and significantly influences the approach that staff members take when performing routine tasks. In libraries where a commitment to service is present but at a minimum level, the institutional culture may be task-oriented; administrative and staff concerns are directed toward the successful, efficient completion of routine duties.

At the opposite end of the continuum the library culture regards customer satisfaction as the primary goal, and both administrators and staff direct their energies and activities toward that goal.

To enable customers to become more self-sufficient, libraries might, among other things, initiate online payment for fee-based services (assuming there is institutional support for this), and permit customer self-checkout and check-in. Most libraries are already providing numerous resources in digital form for customers to access remotely and on-site, as well as converting microfilm into digitized resources that customers can e-mail to themselves or others. It is important to remember that, on the whole, Generation Y (born between 1977 and 1994) does not prefer to learn by reading.

SIGNAGE

There are many instances of signs that are unclear, confusing, or assume knowledge on the part of the customer. Flickr captures some examples; a search of that site in April 2009 reveals 211 results matching library and sign and funny. The intelligent placement of well-designed signs ought to reduce customer frustration and enhance customer self-sufficiency. When signage is poor or limited, the library becomes a maze for many of its customers. It is not uncommon for libraries to shift collections but fail to update the signage.

Signs posted flat at the ends of stacks that indicate classification numbers are an annoyance. In some libraries, these signs have been removed or need updating, as reprinting them each time that books are moved from range to range is considered too much trouble. Some public libraries have abandoned this practice, instead opting for the bookstore model and using words like cookbooks, business, or biography. In large, multistoried libraries, a map on each floor showing layout empowers customers and answers many of their questions about location.

To lessen the need for so many signs and cope with the fact that customers may not understand library terminology, Hillman Library at the University of Pittsburgh added bright new signs to help direct patrons:

Located mainly on the ground level and first floor, signs stenciled on walls and wrapped around structural pillars in bold red, orange, green and blue have replaced an understated color scheme. Furthermore, the change also reflects simplified language University Library System has adopted in other areas, such as on its website. Some color-coding is at work: collection-related signage is blue; action-related signs are red. . . . The reference desk is located near a red “ask” sign; lending has become “checkout” and inter-library loan “requests from other libraries.” In the stairwells, patrons can more easily orient themselves with signs listing main areas and services as well as an indication of where the user is in relation to them.

Public libraries, especially those housed in storefronts, need to make sure that the hours of operation are prominently posted along with the library’s phone number so that passersby can make note of them.

STAFF

Because of financial stringency, students and support staff (many of whom are part-time workers) are now assigned to do work formerly handled by librarians or paraprofessionals. The proportion of students and part-time support staff working at public service desks is especially high on weekends. Some of the newer staff members do a good job. It is, however, disconcerting to encounter staff at public service desks too engrossed in checking collection order slips, chatting with friends, or playing games on computer terminals to answer customer questions. Clearly, expectations for proper service have not been made explicit, and proper training has not been provided to these employees. They need to be instructed so that they can be knowledgeable about both the library and how to access information to meet customer inquiries. The
training of support staff and new librarians is a major undertaking that needs to be assigned to a specific staff member so that information important to their jobs does not fall through the cracks.

A common practice in many public service departments was for the staff to make a tick mark for each question asked by a customer. At the end of the day, the number of such marks was tallied and added to the total for the monthly, quarterly, and annual reports. The library proudly announced that it handles x number of reference inquiries over the year. No distinctions were made between directional (e.g., Where is the bathroom?) questions and informational questions. No effort was made to check or to ensure that the questions were answered accurately or that the customers felt that the questions were answered completely. It was assumed that a question asked was a question answered.

Fortunately, now that attitude seems to be changing. A number of libraries use LibQUAL+ to review the personal service provided at the service desks. (See chapter 7.) Based on the results, a library might conclude that staff

- gives users individual attention
- deals with users in a caring fashion
- understands the needs of their users
- is viewed as willing to help users

Furthermore, as discussed in chapter 10, companies, in partnership with public libraries, are creating management information systems and capturing survey responses which are analyzed and graphically presented. For instance, with the customer satisfaction data and the library data management system provided by Counting Opinions, it is possible to create an array of performance measures and gain insights into a library’s customers and how that library compares with other libraries.

**REDUCING “DUMB” QUESTIONS**

Many customers have never asked a question at reference desks or via e-mail and chat services. It has been speculated that the reasons are as follows:

- They do not want to ask a “dumb question” or appear incapable of doing the research themselves.
- Libraries and research make them anxious.
- They do not know they need help.
- They are overconfident.
- They really do not need our help.
- They forget that reference services exist.
- They do not know that reference services exist.
- They had a bad reference experience elsewhere that turned them off the service.

Despite the fact that many customers do not ask questions, the issue of dumb questions persists, at least in the minds of some public service staff. A question commonly perceived as dumb is “Where is . . . ?” Considering that libraries range in size from hundreds to thousands of square feet, it is not surprising that customers cannot find their way. “Where is . . . ?” is probably a commonly asked question in airports, supermarkets, restaurants, and museums. Lots of good signs, as in the approach adopted by Hillman Library, would minimize such questions.

Even customers who are fairly sophisticated about using the library get flummoxed trying to find back issues of periodicals. Suddenly issues are gone from the shelves. Taking issues from shelves for binding—and the length of time they remain at the bindery—are a mystery to most customers, even knowledgeable ones. One library shelves all bound periodical volumes by classification number, but unbound issues are held in a “current” periodical section on the ground floor and shelved by title. “Current” can range from the most recent issue to the last three years. Adding to the confusion, some titles are bound with issues for two or three years under the same cover, but this can be determined only by examining the bound volumes.

**MORE ON ANXIETY AND FRUSTRATION**

A body of research addressing library anxiety—“a psychological barrier to academic success among college students” and perhaps others—underscores that a number of students feel overwhelmed by the vast amount of information that libraries offer and staff whom they perceive as busy and unapproachable. Library anxiety affects student performance and the quality of effort they put into the completion of assignments; quality of effort, George D. Kuh and Robert M. Gonyea argue, “is the single best predictor of what students gain from college.” With increased attention being given to active learning and student learning outcomes, this is most likely an exaggeration.
Library Rx: Measuring and Treating Library Anxiety reviews the research on student reactions to the library environment, describes the findings of a research project on library anxiety, and presents ideas to cope with it.\(^1\) Clearly, library staff must be aware of library anxiety and review this work and the strategies it points out. At the same time, anxiety places more pressure on staff to recognize and deal with it. That staff, in part, might suffer from stress and burn-out, while having to recognize the difference between library anxiety and customer frustration.

Customer frustration, a rather common occurrence in both academic and public libraries, increases with the time and effort expended in an unsuccessful search for information or materials. Usually, time spent in a library is considered positive, but time spent looking for missing items or trying unsuccessfully to locate a specific piece of information is both unproductive and discouraging. This frustration has several causes. A principal one, inherent in the nature of libraries, is that demand for particular items frequently exceeds supply. Other causes of frustration are the customers’ inability to understand the system, library practices that hinder customers from obtaining what they want, and staff members who neglect to ascertain if customers found the information or the items desired. Because most frustrated customers simply leave without complaining, the library has no indication of the magnitude of this frustration. Complicating matters, the library may not be at fault as the customer never approached a staff member. On the other hand, it is important not to dismiss frustration (or the potential for it) as merely the customer’s fault. Why did not they ask for help? We are there to assist them.

Figure 2.1 illustrates some of the reasons for frustration. To this list, we would add computer downtime, the inability to borrow equipment such as laptops from the library, restricted borrowing time for that equipment, and the cost of basic services such as having to pay for paper to print downloaded items. Furthermore, the book may not be on the shelf despite the OPAC saying otherwise; the item might be misshelved.

Frustration is the obverse of service quality. Many frustrated customers never return, or if they do, it is infrequently, especially if they find no improvement in the situation. Worse still, they tell friends, family, and colleagues of their experiences, and word of mouth is a powerful factor in shaping the reputation of the library in its community.

As a result, librarians face a difficult task—providing a system that meets multiple needs, perspectives, and expectations. As Maurice B. Line has noted, A maxim that should be displayed prominently in every library is “It is better and easier to design systems around human beings than to redesign human beings to fit systems.” An ideal system is one that is designed to serve the majority of needs in the most effective and efficient way possible, but that also allows nonstandard needs to be met and nonstandard people to be served.\(^2\)

Although what he proposes may not be easy (or possible) to resolve, librarians should still review his comments and see what solutions they can adopt.

---

**FIGURE 2.1**

**CUSTOMER Frustration List**

1. Customer is unable to locate materials or information.
2. Telephone is not answered promptly when customer calls.
3. Length of time until a reserved material is available seems too long.
4. Library staff are not friendly or helpful.
5. Library staff appear to be busy or unapproachable.
6. Parking is not available nearby.
7. Line at checkout is too long.
8. Librarian is not available to assist in locating material or information.
9. Customers are notified at inopportune times that requested items have arrived.
10. Library staff interpret policies literally and display a lack of flexibility.
11. Library hours are not convenient.
12. Customer must wait at the service desk while staff answer telephone.

Some libraries have erected tall counters between staff and customers. Staff can either stand or sit on high stools. The intent probably was to allow eye contact between staff and customers, which seems perfectly reasonable, but tall counters might make customers feel disadvantaged or feel that asking questions is always part of a formal process. A counter can be a formidable barrier to customers who are short or to those in wheelchairs, who are considerably disadvantaged both by the arrangement and by the reluctance of staff to come from behind the counter to assist.

Darlene E. Weingand makes an important observation: “customer service excellence begins with a restless dissatisfaction with the status quo and the belief that one can do better.”21 The examples noted in this chapter are only intended as a reminder that library staff can always do better. Figure 2.1 offers further evidence that libraries and library staff might do things that confuse, hinder, or frustrate customers. Libraries, like any service organization, should seek to improve their performance and not be satisfied with the status quo. It is always possible to improve. Library staff should look into the library mirror and be certain that they see what customers see. Does this self-examination result in change?

Your customers are your [best] ad agency.22

Notes

8. In contrast, Information Searches That Solve Problems (a report of a national survey jointly conducted with Pew Internet in American Life Project, the University of Illinois, and Princeton Research Associates, December 2007) found that different segments of the American population, including Generation Y, still make frequent use of the public library. Compared to their parents, Gen Y members are most likely to use libraries for engaging in problem solving and for general information gathering. Furthermore, 40 percent of Gen Y said that they will use libraries in the future when they encounter problems, compared with 20 percent of those above age thirty who say they would go to a library.
10. Ibid.


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