Be Our Guest:

Applying Disney Customer Service to Public Libraries

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Abstract

This paper approaches concepts of customer service at public libraries from the Disney model. Four areas will be covered. The first is the Disney notion of Guestology which relates to knowledge of the demographics of the service population. Second is that of the staff including information on orientation and training, establishing skill sets, and maintaining a professional attitude. The fourth will cover the process of serving the patron. And the final section will cover the physicality of the library environment demonstrating how this too affects customer service.

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For approximately twenty-five years Disney Institute has been providing training in customer service for businesses throughout the world. In 2001 the Disney Institute published a book covering this topic titled *Be Our Guest*. This book has been the starting point for the director of the Highland City Library, Utah, and my current boss, in his personal quest for excellence in customer or patron service. The book covers three main topic areas which it refers to as Cast, Process, and Setting. Correlating to public libraries in the areas of staffing, the process in which patrons are served, and the physical layout of the library. For this paper I have added the Disney idea of Guestology which relates to patron demographics.

According to the Disney Institute Guestology is defined as "the art and science of knowing and understanding customers" (2001, p. 30). Within the confines of the public library system this can take on a variety of factors first of which is to know the demographics of the community that the library serves. The items on the shelf, databases, or any other specific services need to reflect the community as accurately as possible. Larger library systems have branches that serve specific neighborhoods within the bigger community. These too need to reflect the particular neighborhood. Much of the demographic information relating to population size, age, gender, and ethnicity can be collected through federal census reports and any local government demographic collection devices. The library director should review demographics periodically to determine if the library is properly serving its community or whether a shift needs to be made in services and collection development.

Not only should the administration be aware of the community demographics, they should also have a basic understanding of the community. The Disney Institute (2001) refers to this as psychographics. Is this particular community highly religious with one religion more predominant than others? Is the community more conservative or more liberal? Is there a need for literacy, computer skills, career development, after school programming, etc.? This information can be found out most easily by studying those who come in to the library or call and what they are asking staff about (Disney Institute, 2001). Employees can then track service and collection questions.

Administration should, along with staff, observe patrons who are coming into the library and what services they are using the most, the least, and what times of day they are using the library. Other areas in which to gather information include: surveys of patrons and focus groups of both patrons (Disney Institute 2001; Matthews 2007; Todaro & Smith 2006) and employees (Mellinger & Chau, 2010). Information gleaned from these devices can give the library administration the necessary tools to note shifts in community needs and give them the ability to approach funding boards in order to better serve the community.

The all important ingredient in the day to day activities of the library rests on the staff and patron service should be an integral part of any library's mission (Disney Institute, 2001;

Todaro & Smith, 2006). This should not only be known to the library staff itself, but also to the public the library serves. It is essential that patrons know that the library staff is there to serve them and fulfill their needs. In this sense it is important that the staff is trained properly from the very beginning. While the first day of work is usually filled with a short tour, the filling out of forms, and instruction as to personal conduct little is done in the realm of customer service orientation. Policies and procedures abound, however points of common courtesy may be overlooked.

Disney has made customer service orientation of its staff a priority before the staff ever interacts with the customers. In *Be Our Guest* it states that the staff, "take a wide responsibility for guest happiness, by being friendly, knowing the answers to commonly asked questions, and when possible guiding guests to their destination" (Disney Institute, 2001, p. 61). Commonly asked questions in a library can include everything from where are the restrooms to what do you suggest as a good book to read? These questions should always be answered in the same manner with politeness and the utmost courtesy even if it is the hundredth time the staff member has answered the same question in the last half-hour. Guiding patrons is another highly desirable attribute in library staff. While the staff may know the library layout the patron is usually not at all familiar with their surroundings. When it is at all possible patrons should be escorted to the particular section or even to the item itself, asked if that was what they were looking for, and if there is anything else that can be done for them.

Julie Todaro and Mark Smith (2006) take the concept of courtesy one step further for libraries and note that it should include elements such as "technical skills, thoroughness, follow-through, dependability, and consistency" (p. 106). Staff should all know how to operate the catalogs, databases, and various other technologies in order to assist patrons in their tasks. An excellent practice for library staff is to walk patrons to catalog computers showing them how to find materials, place holds, and request materials. In this manner, the member of staff is not only assisting the patron in using the computer, but also in educating the patron. However, the patron should never be made to feel that they have to do everything on their own. Members of the staff need to make clear that they are available for any other assistance as necessitated.

Be Our Guest also provides a checklist of concepts that staff should keep in mind. These include:

- Make Eye Contact and Smile
- Display Appropriate Body Language at All Times
- Greet and Welcome Each and Every Guest
- Seek Out Guest Contact
- Provide Immediate Service Recovery
- Preserve the "Magical" Guest Experience
- Thank Each and Every Guest (Disney Institute, 2001, p. 86)

While related to the Disney Parks, librarians can apply the same attitudes and professionalism to the magical library experience. Principles of eye contact, smiling, and body language tell the patron that you are interested in them and interested in what they are saying. All patrons need to be greeted when they enter the library and made to feel welcome. In a survey conducted by the Online Computer Library Center Inc. (OCLC) one patron stated,

> I judge a store by how soon the employees greet me. If I can make it to the back of the store without a greeting, I leave. The last time I was at the library, I tore up my card and gave it to the employee. No one ever greeted me and I was treated rude. I bought a computer so I wouldn't have to go back. Be nice to people and greet them. (De Rosa, et al., 2005, p. 280)

Library patrons are the guests and they should be welcomed as such. Patron contact should be initiated whenever staff is near a patron. Assistance should always be offered in instances that patrons appear to need staff help at computers, other equipment, or in the library stacks. Persons with disabilities and children should always be acknowledged and offered any support that they may need.

Disney's concept of Service Recovery refers to eliminating any small problems that may arise before they become big problems. For libraries this can include missing books, difficulties with computers or other equipment, issues with content, fines, assistance with rowdy patrons, etc. These issues need to be resolved quickly by the immediate staff member, specifically qualified staff members, or superiors. While complaints are inevitable and can signal a problem with a particular policy, resolutions should be sought out that serve both the patron and the library. This ability to resolve issues will leave patrons with a good experience that exemplifies the magic of the library experience while the staff leaves the patron with a sincere thank-you. After all without patron support there would be no library. Unfortunately the OCLC study (De Rosa, et al., 2005) revealed that a large number of negative views of libraries for U.S. patrons had to do with some form of rudeness by library staff.

Every exchange with a patron will be different depending on the specific needs of that patron. However, all patrons should be treated with the same amount of courtesy, respect, and service. This includes children, persons with disabilities, persons whose first language is not English, and everyone in between. Policies and procedures are put in place by the library in order to allow staff to know the rules and enact them fairly. The Disney Institute refers to this in the *Be Our Guest* book as the process of service delivery.

These policies and procedures set out by administrators and governing boards allow for consistency among staff at a particular library and multiple staffs within library systems. Still many directors do believe that library staff should be allowed the ability to be flexible (Campbell, 2010; Pruett & Ward-Crixell, 2010; Todaro & Smith, 2006) and according Gretchen Pruett and Kit Ward-Crixell of the New Braunfels (Texas) Public Library the policies are guidelines where

"the staff treat[s] every patron encounter as a unique situation that require[s] active listening skills, a problem-solving mind set, and a focus on getting to yes" (2010, paragraph 6). Therefore library staff will have the ability to make a case by case judgment in order to best serve the individual patron.

It is also imperative that in order to give the patrons exactly what they need, staff must be kept up to date as to changes in policies and procedures in the library. The administration has a duty to keep the staff informed and prevent them from relaying incorrect information to patrons. This can be done in a myriad of ways including daily or weekly emails, staff meetings, and continuing training. Yearly staff training programs should be provided to refresh the staff and remind them of their duty to good patron service. Directors and administrators need to also take a lead in promoting customer service in the library by working at reference and circulation desks (Pruett & Ward-Crixell, 2010).

The last area of customer service as it relates to the Disney Institute is that of the physicality of the institution or the setting and it is "vital that [it] be designed and managed to effectively communicate and deliver service to the customer" (2001, p. 107). While Disney tends to design areas within its parks around particular themes this can be related to various areas within the library including children's, teen, adult, non-fiction, reference, and computer labs. Each area can be designed in a unique fashion that exemplifies that particular part of the library.

Signage is also a key factor for libraries. It may be hard for patrons to find the reference desk or any other particular area without a sign, leaving them to wander, unsure of whom to ask for assistance, and becoming frustrated. Signage directing patrons where they need to go will eliminate this frustration. Signs can also enhance a library's Dewey Decimal System. Not all libraries have or will move away from using the Dewey Decimal System and signs on the ends of shelves and/or along them guiding patrons to cookbooks or travel books may go a long way for patron service (De Rosa, et al., 2005).

The physical layout of the library should allow for areas for staff only. Here library staff can work on other projects or relax and discuss work issues away from and without seeming rude to the patrons (Disney Institute, 2001). Other factors such as the actual physical layout of the building, the overall style or design of the library are important in patron satisfaction. A variety of things both internal and external to the library, including availability of study rooms, cleanliness of bathroom facilities, ADA accessibility, and even parking can have an impact on customer service (De Rosa, et al., 2005). If someone cannot get into the library because of issues with parking or an inability to navigate a wheelchair ramp they will not be using the library which adds up to bad patron service.

Many libraries have been around for a long time and have been set in their ways, however this does not excuse the fact that some libraries may be practicing horrible customer service. Library patrons are demanding more out of their libraries and some institutions may

have to become innovative to keep up with the trends of their communities. Kathryn Deiss notes in her 2004 article that, "innovation in the public sector must be about facilitating the work of our primary constituents in ways that are new and useful to them" (p. 19). Those institutions that do not innovate may see themselves as becoming less viable in the community in the long run. Ultimately good customer service is expected in every aspect of society. It is also the key to great public libraries and librarians in the twenty-first century. According to Bruce Massis

> Librarians provide a model of best practices in a milieu where they are expected to perform their duties effectively, but with far fewer resources than that available in the private sector. . . . Therefore, we must be more creative in seeking solutions to customer service challenges on a daily basis, thus supporting the librarians' case for the profession's continued relevance. (2010, p.436)

It is up to library administrators, directors, and managers to lead their staff in the best practice of patron service possible.

The Disney Institute's book, *Be Our Guest*, can aid library administration in accomplishing goals toward excellence in patron services. While designed mainly for the corporate sector the book allows for diverse applications including that of public libraries. Applying the Disney concepts of Guestology, Cast, Process, and Setting to the library structures of demographics, staffing, patron policies, and the library building mangers will be able to better serve their patrons.

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