

5 Services to users

We now turn to the range of services offered to users by library and information units.

Customer care and communication skills

A considerable percentage of library and information staff at most levels find themselves dealing directly with their users in a variety of contexts. This is particularly true of paraprofessional staff, who are usually the staff who operate counter services or deal directly with users in other face-to-face situations.

An increasing emphasis on the necessity of a high level of appropriate interpersonal skills has become a feature of the sector in recent years, partly as a result of the business ethics now applied – it is likely that the users of library and information units will be termed clients or customers rather than readers or users – and partly as a result of the influence of American attitudes to customer/provider relationships. Many organizations within the UK library and information sector require their staff to attend customer care courses as part of in-service training, or to undertake Customer Service NVQs. Communication skills also form part of the current City and Guilds 7371 syllabus.

What, then, are the interpersonal skills that library and information staff need to bring to their interaction with their users? It is sometimes difficult for those of us who work in them to realize that libraries do not always seem to be friendly and welcoming places. Surveys all too frequently reveal that users are reluctant to ask for help, partly because

they do not want to look foolish and uninformed and partly, for a variety of reasons, because they do not see library staff as approachable. We will be discussing later in this chapter the ways in which library design can help to overcome this image problem, but clearly the most significant way in which the situation can be improved is by setting high standards of interpersonal skills for library and information staff.

Library and information staff need to be polite (but never obsequious on the one hand or patronizing on the other), friendly (but always professional) and always able to behave in a courteous, patient and tactful manner. This behaviour must be able to accommodate the particular requirements of a wide range of users (hearing-impaired, sight-impaired, with learning or mental health difficulties, wheelchair-bound, elderly, with a poor command of English or speech difficulties). This is emphasized by the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act.

The amount and level of help given in meeting the needs of the user should be precisely that which is required, always bearing in mind any inevitable time constraints and the need to balance the needs of the customer with the needs of the organization. Library and information staff need to give the user their complete attention – with proper but not excessive eye contact – during the interaction. To deal with that interaction, even if it consists only of issuing a book, while simultaneously having a conversation with a colleague is extremely poor in terms of customer care.

There are specific techniques appropriate to the handling of reference and information enquiries which will be discussed later in this chapter. However, clear diction and expression, focused attention, sensitive questioning, an ability to adapt one's approach according to the particular user requirement and an emphasis on keeping the customer informed are important in all interactions. Library and information staff need to be able to deal appropriately with stressful situations, remembering the impropriety of any dispute being conducted in front of other users, the need to defuse problems through a tactful and sensitive approach and the need to observe confidentiality.

The normal guidelines for face-to-face contact may be adapted to telephone contact and to some extent to written, fax or e-mail contact, where clarity, accuracy, correct English and appropriate format are also important.

It is also part of customer care to monitor customer satisfaction – normally done in a library context through user surveys – and to take

action to improve problem areas. Most organizations also operate a complaints procedure.

Many organizations operate a dress code intended to give the user the right message concerning the efficiency and professionalism of the staff. Others regard a dress code as an infringement of personal freedom and rely on staff behaviour and approach to deliver the same message.

Although it is clear that the skills we have discussed are both necessary and appropriate – indeed we should welcome this focus as helping to relegate firmly to the past the ‘dragon’ image of female counter assistants – we should also realize that though clear basic guidelines are necessary, we each bring to our relationships with our users a unique approach that springs from our individuality. No-one would suggest that the current detailed focus on customer-care skills means that we should all react and behave identically. There is also within the sector some unease concerning the appropriateness of customer-care skills designed for business sectors (in the main, retail) to a library and information context, where to some extent a different culture prevails. Should library counter staff, for example, address their users as ‘Sir’ and ‘Madam’, or has the deference (even subservience) that lingers on in commercial contexts no place here?

Lending

Historically, libraries were the conservators of material: their lending function, in the sense we use the term today, is comparatively recent and developed with the establishment and growth of the public library movement over the last 150 years. Today, libraries fulfil many aspects of their leisure and educational roles through lending services.

Initially, the lending function of libraries was confined to books, as library stock consisted only of books. In the UK, the Public Libraries Acts have established that the lending of books to people living or working in the catchment area is a free and mandatory service. The development of the lending function and its establishment as, in the public view, the major part of library provision have had, as one would expect, a major impact on the organization, administration and management of public and academic libraries. The development over the last century of subject-based classification schemes, for example, was in part sparked off by the subject-based demand of library borrowers. The development of issue systems, from simple self-service through manual ticket systems such as Browne to the present range of computer charging systems, has been necessitated by

the lending function, as has the need to establish guidelines concerning borrower eligibility, number of loans allowed and length of issue period.

The lending function has always had to strike a balance between the educational and the leisure and recreational functions of library services. During the first half of the 20th century, circulating libraries such as those in *Boots the Chemist* played a large role in serving the recreational needs of readers. With their demise, public libraries have in the main tried to provide their readers with what they want, be it light romance or monographs to support Open University courses, and to balance these demands within financial constraints without in any way making value judgements as to their relative importance. Recent government initiatives have emphasized both aspects. Libraries are clearly seen as vital players in the development of lifelong learning opportunities, and equally as tools for social inclusion (see below).

The modern lending function in both public and academic libraries has come a long way from the rather unsophisticated provision of books only, often in drab bindings and labelled with fierce warnings about infectious diseases, to its present ambitious state. It now embraces a wide variety of non-book material such as videos, compact discs, DVDs and slides – a development which not only widens the range of cultural provision on offer but which also provides a useful opportunity for income generation. Computerized library systems have made it possible to establish various categories of reader with different borrowing entitlements, and various categories of lending stock with differing loan periods. This latter is particularly useful in academic libraries, where it is common practice to have short-loan collections, with loan periods ranging from an hour to a day, in order to meet the borrowing needs of students. The range of loan services currently available is further extended by the interlibrary loan services already discussed.

In short, the lending function of libraries is now impressively comprehensive in terms of both type of material and subject coverage, and in its operation, which can be geared specifically to the needs of individual types of user: the operation of the lending function has been improved immeasurably by the computerization of issue systems.

Reference and research

We have already discussed the stock provided for reference and research purposes in Chapter 4: here we consider the utilization of that stock for the benefit of the user.

Most library and information units operate a reference/research service, ranging from dealing with quick reference queries at a general counter in a small public library, through the provision of separate reference and enquiry desks in larger units, to the detailed and specialist subject-based service, involving complex literature searches, translations and the provision of abstracts, offered by university and special libraries. In all cases, the basic function is the same. To quote the Introduction of a previous edition of Tim Buckley Owen's *Success at the Enquiry Desk* (2003) – a book we would thoroughly recommend as an ideal introduction to working at a reference desk – ‘Mediaeval monks in chained libraries wrestled with exactly the same problems as online searchers do today – how to satisfy your enquirer with the right information at the right level, on time. The only difference is that we now have infinitely more flexible tools with which to do the job.’ The tools of reference work are not only more flexible but also infinitely more complex and varied with the development of electronic sources such as CD-ROM and the internet.

Successful reference work has been likened to solving the plot of a detective story, and the apparent ease with which reference staff provide obscure information usually impresses the customer! For many library and information staff this is one of the most rewarding and enjoyable elements of their role. Whether in the general reference and enquiry work of public libraries, or in the specialist services offered in information units and academic and special libraries, there is a great deal of job satisfaction in gaining the expertise that offers an informed and professional service.

Even when an enquiry cannot be immediately answered from existing resources, the reference/information assistant should be in the position, to paraphrase a well-known advertisement, of knowing a man who can! In other words, they should be familiar with the use of external sources of information.

In order to ensure that the reference service meets the needs of the customer, it is necessary not just to provide the reference stock, be it specialist or general, printed or electronic, but to ensure that the staff providing this service are able to exploit fully and appropriately the resources available to them, either directly or indirectly.

All the interpersonal skills discussed above come into play in the efficient operation of a reference service. In addition there are specific skills and techniques required. Whatever the nature of the reference query, the reference assistant (using the patience, courtesy, tact and adaptability already discussed) must bring into play the focused listening

skills required to clarify the nature of the enquiry. A number of questions may need to be answered at this early stage:

- 1 Who needs the information? It is surprising, especially in general reference work, how often the person asking at the reference desk is not actually asking on his or her own behalf.
- 2 At what level is the information required? It is one of the pitfalls of reference work, particularly for the inexperienced member of staff, to misjudge level (to offer, for example, the *Dorling-Kindersley Pocket Book of Butterflies and Moths* instead of a postgraduate monograph on the cabbage white, or indeed the other way around).
- 3 In what detail is the information needed? It would again be unhelpful to offer a brief encyclopaedia entry on, for example, Impressionism to an enquirer writing a thesis on Monet or, equally, a postgraduate thesis on terrestrial crustaceans to a seven-year-old doing a school project on woodlice! Information overload is as unacceptable as an inadequate response.
- 4 What precisely does the enquirer want? This again may not be straightforward, as a surprising number of people have a lateral and/or imprecise approach to the information they need and careful and patient questioning may be needed before the true nature of the enquiry emerges. For example, the initial enquiry may be for material on guns while what is really required are newspaper accounts of tragedies such as Hungerford or Dunblane involving the use of firearms. Tim Owen identifies seven types of enquirer who can cause problems in this context – types that reference and enquiry staff will immediately recognize – of whom careful questioning may be needed before we can establish exactly what is wanted. Perhaps the most common of these types are: the generalist, who asks for material on art in general when s/he needs to know precisely which gallery houses Rembrandt's *The Night Watch*; the muddler, who does not know exactly what s/he does want; the obsessively secretive; the know-all; and the casualty of words which either sound very similar or have more than one meaning – for example, whales and Wales, or China as in the country and china as in porcelain. We once spent some time finding information on the philosopher Nietzsche for a bemused enquirer who had actually asked, in an unfamiliar accent, for books on nature!
- 5 How quickly is the information needed? It would be futile to respond to an enquiry with the offer of an interlibrary loan if the information is required immediately. It is part of appropriate customer care to inform

the enquirer of the progress of the enquiry if it cannot be satisfied straight away.

- 6 In what form is the information acceptable? It would be useless to provide a microfiche if the enquirer had no access to a microfiche reader.

It is not, however, normally part of our responsibilities to ask for what purpose the information is required except insofar as this information helps us to gauge the detail and level of the information required. This can be difficult in sensitive areas such as child abuse, where the same information may be requested for both perfectly legitimate and less wholesome reasons. Neither should there be any favouritism in our dealings with users – all enquirers should receive the same sympathetic and informed attention whatever their perceived status.

Our initial questioning of the enquirer to establish the precise nature of the enquiry needs to be sensitive, appropriate and non-intrusive. Once we have, to our satisfaction, determined this, an established, efficient, systematic and flexible search strategy should be followed. Most large reference services use enquiry forms to record the name and full details of the enquirer, full details of the enquiry, sources consulted and action taken. It is clearly essential to record in this way for a number of reasons – to prevent duplication of effort, for example, and to record types of query for stock provision purposes.

A search strategy should start with sources available in the organization's own stock (and this would include any specialist subject knowledge possessed by individual members of library staff) and proceed where necessary to outside specialist sources. In fact, part of the expertise of a reference assistant is detailed familiarity with outside sources of information as well as with his or her own reference stock.

Finally, successful fulfilment of reference and information queries is one of the performance indicators of an efficiently functioning service, and certainly one of the aspects of library and information work that most directly affects user satisfaction. While it should be our aim never to send away a dissatisfied customer and to achieve a 100% success rate, in reality we must accept that some information for which we may be asked does not actually exist in the form requested. At Somerset College of Arts and Technology a student was once sent to the reference desk by a lecturer to ask for the immediate supply of statistics concerning the number of people in West Somerset who went on wine-tasting holidays in Burgundy in 1967! Part of reference work, therefore, is, as Tim Owen says, to prepare your

enquirer for disappointment if this should on rare occasions prove necessary.

Information

There is clearly an overlap between information giving and reference and research services. In this section we will concentrate on specific information services as distinct from the more general reference and research support offered in most types of library at a range of levels.

Digital information services

A significant development over the past decade has been the emergence of digital reference services. These services first became popular in the academic sector but more recently they have been adapted for use in the public sector and are now increasingly offered as part of the core service.

When public libraries first started supplying digital reference services they took the form mainly of e-mail addresses where enquirers could leave an enquiry and receive a reply by return. This has developed into live online reference services with most libraries using commercially available reference software. This offers opportunities previously unavailable with the traditional reference desk. Librarians using this technology can reach out to enquirers who cannot or do not wish to use the physical library. They can send URLs or take over the screen of the user and direct them through searches and web sites relevant to their enquiry. It offers opportunities for extended hours and appeals particularly to younger users – a traditionally hard-to-reach group – who are growing up in the digital environment.

Librarians, while fundamentally doing what they have always done, must now learn new skills to operate in this virtual transaction. They must learn to work without voice or facial cues from the enquirer and must also develop the skills to multi-task – using the software while answering the enquiry at the same time. They must be skilled in online searching, able to make a swift evaluation of a site and be proficient on the keyboard. There are similarities, however, with traditional services, and just as in a face-to-face service the success of the interaction will depend on cues and proficiency of staff.

An excellent example of a digital reference service is the AnswersNow service offered by Somerset Libraries in partnership with library services in Brisbane Australia, Richland County in South Carolina USA and

Christchurch Libraries in New Zealand. This service, which began in November 2002, uses the different time zones to offer a 24/7 enquiry service throughout the year. Dividing the day into four equal shifts, each authority staffs the 'desk' for six hours each day. The service is accessed via the AnswersNow logo on the webpage of each of the partner authorities, and during a shift the librarian on duty will answer enquiries from any of the partner authorities. Tutor.com, the company that provides the software for the service, also provides professional librarians to pick up any enquiries which come through when the libraries are closed. In this way a genuine 24/7 service is achieved throughout the year. The service is particularly suited to questions of a ready reference nature, with enquirers directed to their home library service for the answers to more in-depth research-type questions.

At the end of 2004 the first phase of a new national digital information service, The People's Network Online Enquiry Service, was launched to library professionals in the UK. Developed by the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) and managed by the Co-East development team (one of the sub-regional co-operative groups in the former LASER area), it was launched to the public in late Spring 2005, following a pilot period with participating library authorities.

Tourist information

In Chapter 1 we discussed the provision of tourist information by Tourist Information Centres and we noted that it is not unusual for these to be sited within libraries and operated by the same staff.

Business information

Libraries play a significant role in the provision of business information.

Clearly the library sector has two functions here. First, the commercial sector must be supplied with the information it requires, whether this is at a very local level, with a small public library meeting the information needs of local industry, or in a wider context, with major specialist libraries meeting the complex and extensive information needs of major industrial and commercial centres. It is significant that there is an increasing tendency to regard business information as a commodity and to charge accordingly, making a distinction between the free reference and enquiry service provided for the public and business information which is purchased by the commercial user.

Second, librarians can bring their expertise to help the commercial sector in the efficient and cost-effective management of its own information.

Community information

Libraries, especially public libraries, have a duty to provide community information, and this will be dealt with fully in the next section where we will deal with the community role in general.

Careers information

The other major area in which libraries provide information is that of careers. Careers information services may be found in careers offices, schools, colleges and universities as well as in libraries, and cover careers information, careers planning, loans, grants and sponsorship, employment and training, working and studying abroad, higher and further education, and graduate information. A wide range of information, both local and national, is supplied through printed sources, mainly frequently updated leaflets and reference material, and electronic sources such as the UK higher education courses database ECCTIS. Careers information is a specialist area – it has its own classification scheme, CLCI – and is managed by specialists.

Conclusions

In concluding this outline of the information provision function of libraries and information units we note two things. First, the sources used are increasingly likely to be electronic rather than printed. Second, while public and academic libraries perform an information-providing role among many other roles, in special libraries and information units the provision of information is frequently the major function.

The community role in the UK

Public libraries have always been seen as having a role in the community wider than that of the provision of books, and this emphasis seems currently to be very much on the increase for a number of reasons and in a variety of ways.

Any community role undertaken by local college and school libraries is likely to be decreasing in the face of financial pressures, although there are a number of jointly provided school and community libraries with shared budgets and staffing that operate very successfully in small communities.

How do public libraries fulfil their community role? There has long been a history of involvement with local groups such as playgroups, schools and local societies. This involvement has taken the form of joint activities, the provision of accommodation for meetings and the provision of display facilities. Library staff may be closely involved with local cultural and community activities. Local community information is normally displayed in libraries, and often directories of local information are compiled by and held in libraries. Legal and social security 'surgeries' may be held on a regular basis in libraries, and there is increasing pressure for libraries to involve themselves in this sort of activity.

There is new pressure on libraries in the UK to respond more strongly and specifically to local community needs in the context of a variety of perceived social and economic problems, such as inner city deprivation, inequality of opportunity, truancy and 'latchkey' children, for example. Increasingly, libraries are taking a proactive rather than a reactive role and going out into the community rather than waiting for the community to come to the library. This is evidenced by the increasing popularity of after-school homework clubs and computer clubs, which have been particularly successful and effective in deprived and inner city areas.

Many libraries and library staff are responding in new and radical ways to these challenges, and this is clearly a focus for the future and part of what may be a shift of emphasis in the library role, as libraries try to shake off their undeserved stuffy and middle-class image, and emerge with new priorities to take a vital community role.

These initiatives take several major forms. Even younger children have been targeted by initiatives such as Bookstart, which started in Birmingham distributing free books, library membership cards and early reading tips to new parents in the area and is now being taken up by libraries across the country, involving co-operation between health visitors and librarians, and clearly bringing pleasure and social and educational benefits to both parents and children.

Community initiatives are not limited to conventionally deprived areas such as inner cities. Rural isolation and poverty of opportunity may also be addressed. Shropshire County Library Service has been at the forefront in developing rural community initiatives. Its library network has been

utilized to launch Community Information Points, allowing access to a wide range of community information.

Current government thinking emphasizes the role of libraries in achieving social inclusion, and the last few years have seen many significant initiatives undertaken to offer library services to all sections of the community. In May 2004's *Library and Information Update* there is an excellent article by Helen Carpenter (Carpenter, 2004) detailing the efforts of five London boroughs (Brent, Camden, Enfield, Merton and Newham) to improve services to refugees and asylum seekers through their Welcome to Your Library scheme. In *Library and Information Update* in January 2004 Tricia Kings (Kings, 2004) describes how public libraries can work with prisoners to involve them in their children's reading. The Big Book Share has been shown to strengthen both family bonds and prisoners' own self-esteem, making it more likely that they will settle back into the community after release.

There has also been a focus on services to the gypsy and traveller communities. CILIP's Libraries Change Lives Award for 2004 went to Essex for its Mobile Library Travellers Project. An article in *Library and Information Update* in October 2004 describes in detail this successful scheme (Baker, 2004). There is more prejudice expressed against gypsies and travellers than against any other minority group, with refugees and asylum seekers a close second, as John Pateman's recent article in *Update* shows (Pateman, 2004). Pateman argues strongly for the mainstreaming of provision for all socially excluded groups.

Library building and design

Current library building and design in the UK are clearly affected by two issues we have already discussed: the funding crisis and the changing nature of libraries themselves.

The funding crisis may be addressed to a small degree by changes in National Lottery award criteria introduced by the Labour government. Bidding for grants is now very much a feature, and when successful (as recently in Sevenoaks, Kent) can have great results. However, it is not difficult to find public library buildings which have become extremely shabby and run down.

As far as changes in the purpose and function of libraries are concerned, it is vital that current library design should be sophisticated, flexible and sensitive to the library's developing and rapidly changing role. To this end, it is vital that librarians act as consultants to the architects involved. Only

then will proper provision for new technologies, and new community initiatives such as those already discussed, be catered for alongside the traditional print-based provision.

Library building and design will also be influenced by the changing emphases on user friendliness and customer care. Old-style libraries, with their rigorous stress on regulations such as the much-derided silence rule, their often unwelcoming – even offputting – atmosphere and their separation of staff and customer, are now clearly seen as inappropriate. What is needed now is a more welcoming approach with an emphasis on accessibility and informality, an approach inclusive of the whole community served: design and buildings must reflect this, whether they be in the public or academic sector. It is becoming increasingly common to find libraries alongside supermarkets, or in shopping malls, such as in Cambridge. Health and safety issues are increasingly important, as are the legal requirements for access for the disabled.

The future seems likely to see increasing use of Private Finance Initiatives, which use private money to erect public buildings – for example, the splendid new library at Brighton was funded in this way.

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