Pleasing the Patron: Customer Service in Public Libraries

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LIS 601: Introduction to Reference & Information Services

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**Introduction**
As an employee of a public library, I was taught that libraries are about people, not books. Even though we do not consider our patrons “customers,” we strive to provide quality customer service to each individual. While a part of having good customer service skills come from one’s ability to empathize, the other part can be learned through training and the availability of credible resources. The purpose of this paper is to present some of these resources in an orderly bibliography and the methods used to find them or similar sources.

This bibliography plan is inspired by elements found in the “Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers.” The guidelines’ intent was “to identify and recommend observable behavioral attributes that could be correlated with positive patron perceptions of reference librarian performance” (Reference and User Services Association).

This plan is intended for librarians, library staff, students of library and information science, and anyone interested in working in a public library. While most of the information in this bibliography is geared toward public libraries, staff from all types of libraries can gain knowledge from the resources listed.

**Citation Style**

**Coding Key**
Subject headings and controlled vocabulary terms are presented in all CAPS. Boolean connectors will appear in CAPS surrounded by quotations marks. Terms in natural language will appear in lowercase italics.

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**SEARCH STRATEGY**

**Search Terms**
The search process began by using the “Linked Data Service” page on the Library of Congress website to find relevant subject headings. The first term I searched was “CUSTOMER SERVICE.” I narrowed the search settings to only show “LC Subject Headings.” What came up was “CUSTOMER SERVICES.” I clicked on the record, and found out that a broader term is “CUSTOMER RELATIONS.” While this was the preliminary step, I ended up finding the best controlled-vocabulary terms and subject headings by actually searching the online databases and catalogs. The most effective CV terms I used were CUSTOMER SERVICES “AND” PUBLIC LIBRARIES.
OPAC/ UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII VOYAGER
I used the University of Hawaii’s OPAC catalog to locate books, and as a starting point to this project. Using controlled vocabulary, I searched “PUBLIC LIBRARIES “AND” CUSTOMER SERVICES and got a total of about twenty results. I noted of some titles that I found interesting, like Customer Service: A How-To-Do-It Manual for Librarians by Suzanne Walters. I looked through the book’s OPAC record and found other controlled vocabulary terms like LIBRARY SERVICES. Substituting PUBLIC LIBRARIES with LIBRARY SERVICES brought up the same titles. I also tried CUSTOMER SERVICES “AND” libraries. This search brought up more than 150 titles, but most of them were unrelated to my topic. At this point, I decided to go directly to the stacks to see what other books I could find that were located near Customer Service: A How-To-Do-It Manual for Librarians. The Walters book’s call number is Z 711.W275, which, falls under REFERENCE SERVICES (LIBRARIES).

DATABASES AND INDEXES
Academic Search Premier
This database is usually my “go-to” database for finding articles for research papers. Finding a good set of articles on customer service in public libraries is a bit tricky. I first did a search for CUSTOMER SERVICES “AND” PUBLIC LIBRARIES. In addition to articles on my topic, there were many articles related to medical and academic libraries. One of these unrelated articles was “The Health Association Libraries Survey: Finding Clues to Changing Roles.” I clicked on the record to find that CUSTOMER SERVICES and PUBLIC LIBRARIES were not listed anywhere under the “Subject Terms.” The closest sounding terms were CONSUMERS and LIBRARY (public services.) Since these were in “bold,” I concluded that my subject terms brought up other similar ones, but for the purposes of this assignment these related subject terms were unusable. I had to figure a way to keep health and academic library articles from showing up on my search results. What I did next was search CUSTOMER SERVICES “AND” PUBLIC LIBRARIES “NOT” MEDICINE “NOT” ACADEMIC LIBRARIES.” This whittled the results to a set of relevant articles. One thought provoking article I chose was “Through the Eyes Of A Secret Shopper.” Natural language searching of customer service in public libraries only brought up mediocre results.
Alt PressWatch
This database specializes in articles from the alternative and independent press. I was interested in finding out about what articles I could find here that were relevant to my topic. I first searched CUSTOMER SERVICES “AND” PUBLIC LIBRARIES. This brought up zero results. After checking with the thesaurus, I found out that PUBLIC LIBRARIES is not a subject term in this database. Other libraries (academic, school) do have their own subject headings. In Alt PressWatch, LIBRARIES is an umbrella subject term. CUSTOMER SERVICES “AND” LIBRARIES brought up two articles. One of the articles is “Library 2020: Today’s Leading Visionaries.” Describe Tomorrow’s Library/Reflecting on the Future of Academic and Public Libraries.” It touches briefly on customer service issues but for the most part, is about future services and technology that libraries might offer. Natural language phrases like customer services in public libraries brought up over a thousand irrelevant articles.

Education Resources Information Center (ERIC)
My initial search of CUSTOMER SERVICES “AND” “PUBLIC LIBRARIES” brought up zero results. I then had to check ERIC’s thesaurus to determine this database’s controlled vocabulary. PUBLIC LIBRARIES is a subject term, however CUSTOMER SERVICES is not. The closest term in the thesaurus is CUSTOMER SUPPORT (Computers), which had nothing to do with my chosen topic. I ended up using PUBLIC LIBRARIES “AND” customer service. This search brought up about fifty resources but only a handful were relevant. LIBRARY SERVICES is also a subject term in ERIC, this had many articles about public libraries but it was very general, and it was difficult to pinpoint any customer service related articles. I added CUSTOMER SERVICES to LIBRARY SERVICES, but there were no results. Coupling it with customer service brought up about 200 results. Lastly, I used customer service in public libraries. There were only about 20, and only a couple were relevant. The most relevant article listed was “Make ‘Em Smile: 10 Essentials For Successful Customer Service.”

Hospitality & Tourism Index
What drew me to this database was Hospitality in its name. Would it be possible to find articles about customer service skills as it pertains to libraries? I approached the search process a little bit different with this database. I first checked the thesaurus. PUBLIC LIBRARIES is not a subject term, but LIBRARIES is a subject term. CUSTOMER SERVICES is a subject term as well. Searching LIBRARIES “AND” “CUSTOMER SERVICES” produced zero results. Searching just LIBRARIES produced about over 300 results, but were not relevant. Using natural language searching produced slightly better sources but the only one of the articles caught my attention. In “Bringing Books to the People,” the author talks about public librarians who service the community on their bicycles. This is somewhat related article, but not specifically about customer service in public libraries.
**JSTOR**
In the JSTOR database, there is no option to search by subject headings. What you can do is natural language searching coupled with Boolean connectors. Per website instructions, search terms with more than one word have to be inside quotation marks. Natural language searches like *customer service in public libraries*, without quotations will bring up thousands of results. I did a search of “*customer service*” “AND” “*public libraries*.” This search brought up relevant articles like “Customer Service: the Heart of the Library.” Changing “*public libraries*” to “*public library*,” brought up less results but were still relevant to my topic.

**Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts (LISTA)**
This database can be described as the “gold standard” for finding articles on library related issues. All searches using controlled vocabulary terms and/or natural language terms brought up relevant to highly relevant results. Searching for CUSTOMER SERVICES “AND” PUBLIC LIBRARIES brought up a wealth of articles and abstracts. Swapping CUSTOMER SERVICES with CUSTOMER RELATIONS brings up just as much resources. Many of the same articles from the previous search come up again. Doing a search for *customer service in public libraries* brought up relevant articles. Other search terms were used but they repeated the same resources as the first search (see appendix for other searches). You have the option of limiting your search to show only magazine articles or only journal articles. I also wanted to find some articles about dealing with difficult patrons as a sub-topic for this bibliography. For the best results I used natural language search of *difficult patrons*. One of the articles I chose was “Gypsies, Tramps and Rage: Coping with Difficult Patrons” by Sharon W. Bullard. The only problem with this database is that most of the entries are abstracts and few were full text articles. That being said, it is still an excellent starting point to find articles about customer service in public libraries.

**MasterFile Premier**
This database is designed specifically for public libraries. Whether or not it contained articles specifically about working in public libraries; that remained to be seen. My searches resulted in a couple of relevant articles. As usual my first search was CUSTOMER SERVICE “AND” “PUBLIC LIBRARIES.” This brought up about 80 results in which you had to browse through to find relevant articles. I added *training* to the search and it narrowed my results to about 20 articles. Out of these hits, only a couple were useful. One of the articles was “What is Your Library’s Friendliness Factor?” by Mary Wilkins Jordan. I checked the thesaurus and an umbrella term is LIBRARY. Coupling it with CUSTOMER SERVICES did bring up some results but you had to comb through about 380 results. Using *customer service in public libraries* did not produce relevant articles.

**Professional Development Collection**
I chose this database due to its name: *Professional Development Collection*. Customer service is a professional skill which is important when working in a library. I expected to find many relevant resources; however, my expectations were barely met. A search of CUSTOMER SERVICES “AND” PUBLIC LIBRARIES brought up about 50 results but only a couple were relevant. I noticed several of the articles were about academic libraries. I tried adding “NOT” ACADEMIC LIBRARIES but the results did not focus my search. Despite the sub-par amount of relevant articles, one article of interest was “Customer Service, One Technology at a Time” by Christine Hage and Larry Neal.
WEB RESOURCES

Amazon.com
I chose Amazon.com because I wanted to find books that were new and popular. Unfortunately, books from Hamilton Library were not as current as I would like them to be. Amazon does not have to option to search by subject heading; however, you can search keywords. In the search bar, I searched *customer services in public libraries*. I got over 80 results. They were automatically sorted so the books appear in the order of relevance. The first title was *Assessing Service Quality: Satisfying the Expectations of Library Customers* by Peter Hernon and Ellen Altman. Unfortunately, all of the copies in Hamilton Library were checked out.

WorldCat
WorldCat is an excellent online resource to find books on customer services in public libraries. Just like a subscription database, you can do Boolean searching, using controlled vocabulary. I searched CUSTOMER SERVICES “AND” PUBLIC LIBRARIES. It gave me a list of over 200 books. The majority of them were highly relevant sources. A search of LIBRARY SERVICES “AND” CUSTOMER SERVICES brought almost 400 titles, but they were only somewhat relevant. Doing a search for *customer services in public libraries* brought up thousands of titles. The first couple of pages contained books that were relevant, the remaining pages were not looked at. Since my first search produced so many relevant books, I felt it was not worth looking at the rest of the long thread. One of the first hits was *Customer Service in Libraries: Best Practices* by Harmon and Messina. I checked Voyager, but this book is unfortunately not carried by the UH Library System.
ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY


Management of a public library uses the “secret shopper” concept to survey the customer service skills of their staff. Discusses the reasoning behind the survey and the specific points that management were looking to improve. Some of these points included: circulation procedures, telephone reference and staff attitude and appearance. Results of the survey were not addressed.


Presents a thorough overview of customer service issues in libraries. Gives many examples of real life problems, and discusses the best ways to handle these situations. Readers may overlook this book due to its age but many issues discussed are applicable today, such as conflict management, non-verbal communication skills, and team building. Can be considered a good resource for a library management in the training of librarians and paraprofessional staff.

Sub Topic 1: Dealing With Problem Patrons


Discusses the increasing challenges that library staff face, when it comes to problem patrons. Several areas needing special attention are then addressed. These areas include creating codes of conduct, staff training and increased communication between staff and administration. Readers may be turned off by the negative tone in beginning of the article but the problem solving ideas of the article will prove useful.


Discusses a wide range of situations in which difficult patrons are involved. Offers concrete solutions to problems that arise and illustrates them with real world examples. Offers advice on creating library policies in order to prevent difficult situations from arising.
Sub Topic 2: Customer Service by Non-Librarian Library Staff


Discusses customer service skills that libraries are looking for in shelvers, clerks and branch managers. In job interviews, candidates are asked to role-play and act out hypothetical situations to test their soft skills and are scored according to how they handle the situation. Drawbacks to this method are also included, along with the results of several of these role-play interviews. Recommended for librarians who are in the position of hiring staff.


Examines the types of questions student shelvers receive and whether or not they were equipped to answer them. Provides plans for students to receive training and attend workshops to better their customer service skills. Students will probably pass on this article but does have it should have an interest with library management.

CONCLUSION

Creating this bibliography plan has taught me many things. First of all it gave me a taste of the work that some librarians do. It is a careful and slow process that can take countless hours. There are parts, which I found to be successful and other parts that I would like to improve next time I have a similar assignment. It was easy for me to adapt to the different types of databases. I could easily find the best search terms for each database. While each database had different features, most of the databases I chose were owned by EBSCO. I did not intentionally set out to use mainly EBSCO databases. I was drawn to each database by their individual names and I felt their names would suit my topic well. If there was more time, I would have browsed through more databases and made a conscious effort to find ones that were owned by other companies. I would also like to improve my annotation writing skills. I see it as an art form and with any art form; it gets perfected the more you do it.

Good customer service in public libraries calls for a strong sense of ethics. One of the first articles we read in LIS 601 was “Ethics and the Reference Librarian by Charles Bunge. In this article, he recalls a colleague making a statement that “human beings should be viewed as ends and never as means” (41). Customer service is a process. At the end of this process, the patrons’ needs are ultimately met. With this in mind, we can look at this bibliography the same way. Creating it was a process, which much is learned; yet, its ultimate goal is to serve the needs of the patron.
APPENDIX

Abbreviation Key:
- HR = Highly Relevant
- R = Relevant
- SW = Somewhat Relevant
- NR = Not Relevant

Results:
- Rounded to the nearest 10th digit

University of Hawaii Voyager Catalog

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Works Cited


*Academic Search Premier*. Web. 1 May 2015. (UHM Voyager lists this call number as “JOURNAL STACKS”)


Professional Development Collection. EBSCO Industries Inc., 2015. Web. 29 April. 2015


