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## More Input, Less Guessing: Using Customer Suggestions to Develop Programs and Services

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# More Input, Less Guessing:

## Using Customer Suggestions to Develop Programs and Services

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### Introduction

A perennial question of the library profession is relevancy. For many years this question was primarily about technology and modes of information and entertainment delivery. How would we stay relevant in an ever-changing world of e-books, Google, YouTube, Netflix, and the myriad other sources which vied for our customers' attention and offered to meet their information and entertainment needs? More recently, this question has focused not just on maintaining our relevancy but also on keeping taxpayers and government officials apprised of that same relevancy. One way we have addressed the question has been to augment our traditional offerings. Some of us put coffee shops in our lobbies and rewrote policies about food, drink and noise in less severe language; many of us offer downloads of audio or e-books or check out other less traditional items, like video games or laptops. We market our services as the reliable alternative to Google and offer classes in computer use and job searching. We also offer entertainment in the form of story times, movie nights, book clubs, literary events, and free coffee during finals week. Despite various worst-case scenarios, the numbers—headcounts, program and class attendance, and checkout statistics—show that our efforts to stay relevant and involved in our communities' lives are working extremely well. Especially in these tough economic times, people are using libraries and their services more than ever.

Of course, as the economy presents challenges for our customers so it presents challenges for libraries. We are serving more people in more ways with less money and less staff than we may have had during economically flush times. Thus, it is critical to develop approaches that provide a consistently high level of service without overtaxing already stressed staffs.

One way we provide high quality service is to develop and offer programs and services that are responsive to our population's needs. Whenever adding a new program or service, though, there are several questions to consider. Who will use the service or program? What will it cost the library? How many people have to attend a program or to use a service to make it "worth it"? How will the new offering affect current staffing levels and existing workflows? These questions are even more important in tough economic times, when our willingness or ability to experiment confronts the realities of both shrinking budget lines and stagnant staff numbers.

This is a key time to think about the source of ideas for new services and programs in our organizations. Is the source the library board or upper level management? Or, is it librarians and paraprofessional staff who generate the ideas and propose them to management? The former approach is often referred to as the top-down approach, while the latter is frequently known as bottom-up. I have generally been in favor of the bottom-up approach, believing that the staff who interact with customers and who perform essential routine procedures often have an uncannily accurate sense of what those customers want or how efficient and effective a new procedure will be.

Another method might be called the outside-in method. It involves asking the people we're serving, who I'm going to call customers, what kind of services they would like to have and then acting on their suggestions. While the word customer may have unpleasant associations for some library staff, it probably best describes the way that our users think about themselves in relation to us (Hernon and Altman, 2010). They aren't thinking of themselves as patrons or users, and that affects the kind of service they expect. Jeannette Woodward (2009) notes that customers, "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" (178). I use the word not to suggest a commercialization of libraries' services but instead to emphasize our obligation to provide exceptional services that take into account our service population's needs and desires.

Perhaps the primary benefit of the outside-in method is that it shifts the cognitive workload of brainstorming new ideas to the customers. Additionally, it provides a very specific direction for services, saving time and money spent on services later deemed unsuccessful or unnecessary. The suggestion box—either in physical or virtual format—is a common feature in libraries, and it is a useful way to get customer feedback; however, there are other methods for collecting customer feedback that are higher volume, livelier, and more inclusive.

Of course, the outside-in method requires staff work: it is staff that must solicit customers' suggestions, keep track of the results, and translate suggestions into services that support the library's mission. However, the process needn't be an excessive amount of work. Often, we form committees, task forces, or sub-committees to carry out initial research and craft surveys or polls that a less-than-statistically-significant percentage of our customers respond to, at which point we discover that no one has time to tabulate and analyze the data. Half the battle is getting everyone to set aside time in their busy schedules for committee meetings. Then, we form more task forces to implement change. By the time we get around to acting on the suggestions, customers' needs and desires have changed, or, in the case of com-



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munity college libraries, the customers who made the suggestions have transferred to other institutions or entered the work force. No doubt we have only the best of intentions when we start these processes, but the problems inherent in this method are well countered by the outside-in method.

### Getting Customer Input

Anyone who has spent a decent amount of time at a service desk—circulation or reference—knows how much customers have to say about the library, good and bad, and, let me note, it is a very worthwhile exercise to record customer compliments; not only do they make staff feel appreciated, but they also let the library track what it's doing right. The circulation desk, particularly, is an underutilized area when it comes to acquiring customer input. Though self-service kiosks have perhaps changed traffic patterns at circulation desks, many customers find they still need to visit that desk frequently. I use the word need intentionally: while customers often have some degree of choice about whether or not they ask a reference question or just flail around in the stacks themselves, they literally have to go to the circulation desk. While performing routine tasks like checking out, picking up holds, getting change, asking directions, or paying fines, customers will often make suggestions to circulation staff. Treating these casual interactions as information gathering opportunities and keeping track of the comments via a staff blog, SharePoint, Intranet, or some such similar method reveals customer needs, likes, and dislikes. Additionally, staff in the stacks also receive not only customer suggestions but also questions that, if tracked, can lead to the discovery of service failures (like unclear signage) and service improvement opportunities.

Not everyone will share their idea with staff, which is why libraries provide suggestion boxes. And, obviously, in the era of blogs and social networks like Twitter and Facebook, there are other ways of soliciting customer feedback—and many libraries have employed this method successfully. But, there are also customers who lack the skills, time, or effort to log on and post comments. Even tech savvy customers, like college students, may simply lack the time or inclination to volunteer their opinions to the library. A colleague, InterLibrary Loan (ILL) Coordinator Lynne Hart, returned from a Northwest ILL conference with a simple, ingenious solution to this problem. Lynne suggested placing one of the library's large, mobile whiteboards in various locations around the library with a sign on it saying, "We want your comments." Then, customers could write directly on the whiteboard. It was quick, easy and an extremely low barrier for our customers. We put it far enough away from a desk so that customers wouldn't feel like they were under surveillance but close enough to keep an eye out for inappropriate graffiti. This method produced many useful and enlightening comments. Surprisingly, customers engaged with one another on the board, often supporting or weighing in on a suggestion that was someone else had written. Not only did we get novel ideas, but we also discovered which of our existing services patrons didn't know about. We had a student worker transcribe the suggestions and comments into a word document, but another quick and easy method of documentation would be to take a picture of the white board. After the data transcription was complete, we'd erase and roll it out to a new location.



In his now classic book on Web usability, *Don't Make Me Think*, Steve Krug (2006) makes a convincing case for doing very simple usability testing in the name of getting good, quick feedback. Similarly, libraries can deploy simplified and informal versions of more formal research methods, such as the tried-and-true survey. During spring term 2009, my library developed a time-sensitive need to better understand how students were using the various library spaces available to them. I put together a short survey, printed it out, and it was handed out to students who were currently in the library. An additional stack of surveys was placed on a table in the middle of our entry way. By the end of the day, I had 100 completed surveys in my hands. Student workers tabulated the responses and transcribed the comments. The resulting report told us what our customers really wanted, versus what we assumed they wanted—and provided valuable guidance as to where we should direct our efforts at working to improve the library's service to students. Our customers wanted more quiet space, more individual study space (as opposed to collaborative work space), and stricter rules about cell phones and noise. Even if students were meeting for group work in the library, as many indicated they were, they seemed to perceive the library as a place to get work done, and they wanted an environment that was conducive to productive work.

### **Acting on Customer Suggestions**


Acquiring customer input is only half of the work. While that's the half that customers can help us with, we need to respond and act on their suggestions. This will, in turn, get our customers to do more work for us—but more on that later. Many of the customer suggestions required only minor changes and were often low cost. Some of the suggestions indicated that we needed to market some services more actively and required no new service development at all. One example of a low-cost, high-impact change was converting the library's second floor to a quiet zone. We added signage to the area and advertised it around the library and on the library's Web site. Because we knew this was something students wanted, the staff time put into this project was an effective and economical use of time. The response has been overwhelmingly positive; students appreciate the clear designations between quiet space and our information commons collaborative work zone on the first floor.

In this case, we were able to act on the suggestions relatively quickly; it is important that customers see us in action. Even if a suggestion can't be acted on immediately, it's important to let customers know that we have heard their suggestions and are working on making progress towards implementing some of them. For example, I also added a page to my library's Web site that draws an explicit connection between the second floor quiet space and the library's recognition of student needs. The worst thing we can do is collect suggestions and then do nothing with them. The customers will notice, and it will hurt the library's credibility.

If we act on customer suggestions and make clear our commitment to satisfying our customers, then they will do some more work for us. Those customers will spread the word about the quality of our services and the relevancy of the library to the community. When tough times present funding challenges, those satisfied customers will be vocal advocates and supporters of the library, again lessening the workload on library staff.



### Conclusion

Indubitably, it takes work to solicit, collect, and analyze customer suggestions. However, it takes more work to develop a service, market it, and then assess its value—a process that front loads the work process for staff but often leads to services that are canceled, scaled back, or changed significantly when customer input is finally gathered. Getting customer input doesn't have to be difficult or time-consuming. Methods for input should encourage maximum customer participation: the simpler, the better. Of course, this doesn't mean that we should completely discount innovative staff-generated ideas or that we should cease trying to educate our customers about new and better resources and methods for learning. But, in tough times, when we seek to do more with less, we should opt for more input and less guessing and employ the outside-in method for developing services that will be useful to and well used by our customers. 

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