

2-22-2017

My Librarian Knows My Next Good Book, Does Yours?

Matthew Stefanik
Multnomah County Library

Recommended Citation

Stefanik, M. (2017). My Librarian Knows My Next Good Book, Does Yours?. *OLA Quarterly*, 22(3), 29-30.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.7710/1093-7374.1868>

© 2017 by the author(s).

OLA Quarterly is an official publication of the Oregon Library Association | ISSN 1093-7374

My Librarian Knows My Next Good Book, Does Yours?

by **Matthew Stefanik**
Librarian,
Multnomah County Library
Matthews@multcolib.org



This is fantastic. When I got your email, I read it out loud to my husband because I was so impressed that (a) you understood exactly what I was asking for, and (b) the quality of the recommendations and explanations are amazing. My husband asked me how much I had to pay for that, and when I told him it was a free service of the local library, he was blown away.

—PATRON RESPONSE TO A MY LIBRARIAN ANSWER

Many of our library patrons' needs (account information, computer help, you know the deal ...) are easy to recognize, but what happens if we take a look beyond the obvious? What if we offered an unexpected experience? Libraries have rolled out myriad options varying from unique collection lending, makerspaces, and other innovative and inventive ideas. In that spirit, Multnomah County Library pursued a new approach to readers' advisory: My Librarian. My Librarian is made possible by

a grant from the Paul G. Allen Family Foundation to The Library Foundation, a local non-profit dedicated to our library's leadership, innovation, and reach through private support.

Multnomah County Library's new and interactive readers' advisory service, My Librarian, began in 2014. It is designed to meet patrons where they are, in the channel where they prefer to interact. Its goal is to bring the warmth and connection of personal service into an online environment utilizing staff curating expertise. Curious patrons select from a menu of 17 librarians based on a shared passion for books, movies, or just intrigue. These characteristics are reflected in the My Librarian's self-created profiles highlighting personal interests and genre knowledge.

My Librarian offers a new connection for patrons who may not normally interact with library staff despite their regular usage of our services. Many patrons know what they want, but perhaps they don't know the scope of our services or haven't been asked the correct questions. This includes readers' advisory. Whether for themselves, children, or someone else in their lives, finding the "next great read" is not a new question for the library professional; but how it's answered has changed.

The My Librarian team aims to put an innovative, personalized, and accessible spin on reading suggestions. It was an experiment in selling ourselves as human beings with passions and interests, capable of offering better recommendations than a search engine algorithm. Coupled with an emphasis on increasing the quality of relationship building via readers' advisory, the program ultimately aimed to strengthen the connection between reader and librarian.

How does it work? The process is something many of us do, on or off the clock, on a daily basis, sometimes without even knowing. Patrons ask about finding a new book to read. A reference interview ensues. Hopefully, any pertinent information is obtained. We respond with information to fulfill their request. Simple enough, right? However, what if there was a more personalized way of patron interactions?



My Librarian does not live on paper. Patrons choose from a variety of staff profiles with a range of interests from the Multnomah County Library homepage, www.multcolib.org. The brief online form asks them what they like, don't like, and how they prefer to communicate. These options include email (the most popular), in person, video, and phone. After receiving their information, the selected staff person finds three or more personalized read-alikes utilizing a variety of tools and knowledge and responds within a 48-hour period. As per best practices, patrons are invited to let us know what they think and are encouraged to use the service again at the end of each email or conversation.

The requested feedback ranges from radio silence to raves (as seen at the beginning of this article). It's not an expectation from the My Librarian point of view, but is always appreciated. Readers' advisory is a fun and rewarding process as well as an invitation to build the patron/librarian relationship, one of the goals of all library service. That's enough about who we have heard from, what about the silent patrons? How did we know if they liked us—really liked us—or not?

One of the frustrations of virtual service is the lack of immediate feedback that is intrinsic during in-person interactions. Readers' advisory requires a certain amount of vulnerability from the patron, and the fear of being judged for one's reading tastes can be negated through the anonymity of the Internet. My Librarian recommendations are provided with warmth and lack of judgment, offering assurance of their trust. Despite these efforts, many answers still received no response. We needed to know how the user experience was, so we followed up on their experience.

To find out what the My Librarian patrons thought about their experience with the service, their comments, or "love letters" as we refer to them, are a good place to start. However, as reaffirming as they are, they represent a small portion of the My Librarian users. In an effort to reach out to a large number of My Librarian users, we contacted additional patrons who used the service with a survey about their experiences. From that pool, a smaller group was chosen for a more detailed survey about their entire experience from entry point to final thoughts on improvements. These results yielded high satisfaction rates and offered paths for future action as the My Librarians continue.

Now what? It's been almost two years since the My Librarian team has been offering book suggestions. For the patron base utilizing this program, the effect is clear and direct. They want book recommendations, and they get them. However, the reach has grown beyond the readers' advisory transaction. The staff making up the My Librarian Team is spread across the entire Multnomah County Library system. This locational diversity extends the reach of expertise and guidance for readers' advisory for the system as a whole. The staff members serve as internal experts, coaching staff on the provision of service in order to raise the bar for readers services system wide.

Let's face it. The reality of today's library is recognizing that our patron's needs evolve faster than we can keep up. Innovation that serves the library user requires many components for success, and the relationship library professionals can build via personal connections is a pivotal factor. My Librarian reaches out with book recommendation in hand, but it is more than a few titles. It's about highlighting and utilizing staff expertise, looking ahead, and most importantly, engaging the most important aspect of our work: the patron experience. 

