

The Value of Customer Service

M. Patrick Graham

"Customer service" is a phrase that I hear with increasing frequency these days. Our local facilities management division has undergone a restructuring to help it provide better service to libraries and other "customers" within the university. Similarly, the university's center for pastoral services, which provides chaplains to the various university hospitals, must consider how it will provide cost-effective services to its major "customers". Libraries, of course, are hardly exempt from these considerations, and so when I meet with colleagues locally, one of the greatest concerns is how to collaborate to improve the services that we offer our "customers".

It is clear that a business model - always present to some degree in academic libraries - is becoming even more prominent in many of our institutions, as nearly everyone is identified as a "customer". In medicine, it is managed care that is blamed (or praised) for the major transformations in the way that health care services are offered. There is enormous impetus to search for greater efficiencies, and this is sure to have an impact on chaplain services, as hospital administrators question the value of those services. Similarly, the public has shown growing interest in holding educational institutions accountable to the communities that they serve and in insuring that they are attentive to their "customers" and operate as efficiently as possible.

These developments come as no surprise to any of us. As academic belt-tightening has become more the order of the day and library budgets have come under increasing pressure, we have been forced to reassess the efficiencies of our own operations. The services that we provide are by no means free to our parent institutions, and we have been compelled to identify more clearly which users are entitled to our services, what are the services to which each is entitled, and how the library can best serve the larger institutional mission. It is clear that a business model has something to offer this process.

While many of us are sympathetic to elements of the foregoing, which of us is not committed to offering excellent service and avoiding waste? Academic institutions are different from hardware stores, and there are aspects of what we do that do not lend themselves easily to strict quantitative analysis. There is more to the library's story than can be told with circulation statistics, number of volumes added, and the like. This, it seems to me, presents a serious challenge to the way that we think about our libraries, service communities, and how we articulate the "story" of our institutions. Will we, for example, tell the "story" just in terms of FTE ratios and ATS/ATLA statistics for institutions of similar size, or will we find other ways to assess the quality of the collections that we build and the services that we provide? Will we find effective ways to assess the appropriateness of the "fit" between a library and the institution served - noting that, just as no one school can be "best" for all students, so no one library can be "best" for all institutions?

So, while the language of "customer service" helps us think about a part of the library's story and certainly gets at a critical element in our profession's system of values, something important may be lost if we simply adopt the phrase uncritically from the business world and fail to conceive and articulate this value in a way that is consistent with our settings in academic (and in some instances, theological) institutions and does justice to the "non-business" aspect of our organizations.

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This item was the President's Message to ATLA Newsletter readers, v.45, no.2, November 1997.

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