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REINVENTING INFORMATION SERVICES
TO INCREASE CUSTOMER SATISFACTION

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Reinventing Information Services to Increase Customer Satisfaction

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Abstract

Service means work done by one for the benefit of others. Information service should be information that enhances the customer's productivity. Just as many patients seek a physician only when they are ill, our customers tend to seek the services of information specialists only when they have an information problem. To help the patient, the physician examines the individual and prescribes treatment. Information specialists likewise must diagnose the information needs of customers and fill the information void with the appropriate material. Needs should be customized to the user. While some customers require minimal assistance, others need careful nurturing. As information professionals, we must re-evaluate our roles to correctly diagnose and cure our customers' information deficiencies.

REINVENTING INFORMATION SERVICES TO INCREASE CUSTOMER SATISFACTION

When our customers seek information, they have usually exhausted all other avenues and expect instantaneous solutions. In many libraries and information centers, they meet with frustrating situations--situations that stem from a system with ever more complex technologies and a burdensome, antiquated bureaucracy that has ignored them. Information specialists and librarians, although seeking to expand and improve information resources, have not attempted to understand the diversity of the needs of information seekers. Instead, they have attempted to categorize the information needs and the customers themselves. But our customers are individuals, and when they seek information in special libraries and information centers, it's to enhance their job performance.

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When categorizing information seekers, many information specialists and librarians will assume the customer has either some working knowledge of their facility or none. They will gather information from the user based on these two assumptions, seeking minimal information from those who seem familiar with the setup and grilling the novice customer. This may work in a few cases; however, most customers may not be as familiar as is assumed, nor will others be information infants. Many fall somewhere in between and, depending on their information needs, their familiarity fluctuates with each request. It is our responsibility to become familiar with the requestor by putting the customer first. When we do so, it assures the customer that we are sincerely concerned about assisting him or her. Information centers can initiate the "customer first" policy by implementing it in their mission statements. When the staff members know that customers have value, that awareness is reflected in the staff's treatment of customers. When the customer feels valued, then we will be viewed in a different light, and he or she will return again and again.

Getting the customer to return again and again is not an easy process. It's a dynamic situation that requires continuous attention. It means that we must offer a service that our customers can't receive elsewhere. Service means work done by one for the benefit of other(s). The benefit the customer should receive from information services is enhanced productivity or distribution. A customer is any one who is asked to accept and pay for what is offered. In the case of information centers or libraries, we're asking the customer to accept not just our information but our process of gathering and analyzing and our method of distribution as well. It is this gathering, analyzing, and distribution process that holds value for the client. And it's through this process that we must demonstrate how much we value the customer's request.

Information is useless until someone requests it. It becomes merchandise with a dollar value once the initial request is made. However, too much information, especially if much of it is not relevant to the requestor, can inhibit the customer's productivity and well-being. Like a disease, excessive information starts to gnaw at the customer, who only gradually realizes that something is seriously wrong. As information specialists and librarians, our ability to maneuver in the information maze puts us in the role of "information physician." We are able to get to the root of the information problem as the physician is able to get to the root of the disease.

Just as many patients seek a physician only when they are ill, our customers tend to seek the services of information specialists only when they have an information problem. To help the patient, the physician examines the individual and prescribes treatment. Information specialists likewise must diagnose the information needs of customers and fill the information void with the appropriate material. If a physician merely listened to the patient's request and prescribed the requested medication, he would be judged incompetent; his reputation would suffer, he would lose his customers, and perhaps he might ultimately have his license revoked. We might dispute the analogy at this point, claiming that, unlike information specialists or librarians, physicians deal with life and death situations. However, for all we know, our customer may need the information to make a life or death decision and it's our responsibility to treat each request in that light, once again showing that we value the customer. Just as a physician must diagnose the patient's ailment, we must diagnose the customer's request by questioning and examining (analyzing), testing (searching and gathering), and offering medication (distributing information). In both cases, the diagnosis and treatment must be well thought out and carefully acted upon.

As I mentioned earlier, information specialists and librarians tend to group customers into two categories: those having very good knowledge about obtaining information and those having none. It's as if a physician were to say that all patients are either extremely ill or not ill at all. In reality, most patients fall between these two extremes. An example would be a person with a bad cold. The person might feel lethargic and stuffy but could, after taking a decongestant that made the symptoms disappear, function as if she were healthy and be unaware that the cold was still active.

Similarly, our customers may be unfamiliar with the information choices available to them at a facility but have an understanding of the information needs they are seeking. For example, a person may be seeking property information for a fairly common compound. This information could be found in hardcopy format in the CRC Handbook of Chemistry and Physics or in an electronic format on ChemBank. To assist this individual, the Information Specialist would ask questions and conclude that the information could be found in the sources mentioned above. To finalize the request, the Specialist would direct the customer to the source that was available and suited the customer's needs. The latter would be the test and the medication would be the correct information. This was a fairly easy problem and, like the common cold, had a simple, expedient solution.

But just as colds can develop into more serious illnesses over time, information needs that seem minor at first can become major problems. In fact, many of the requests that information specialists deal with are much more complex and require skills analogous to those of a surgeon. A surgeon, unlike a general practitioner, has expert skills and knowledge for dealing with a particular section of the body, e.g., the brain. Likewise, information specialists usually are skilled in one particular subject area, such as chemistry or business. Just as surgeons understand the language of their fields of expertise, information specialists that are skilled in a particular subject area have an understanding of the terminology used in that area. As a surgeon welds the knife to remove disease from a section of the body, ensuring the wellness of the remaining portion, the subject-expert information specialist is able to eliminate unnecessary data from the information request and present the requestor with the vital portion.

Offering our customers sound and useful data is terrific, but let's not be like the physician who strolls into the room and, after giving the patient a nod, proceeds with the examination, then promptly strolls out after listening to the vital signs, leaving the patient to wonder if he is on the brink of death. Information specialists are often guilty of the same acts. They will ask for the request and then not communicate with the customer until the work is given back. Customers see themselves as products on an assembly line and not as individuals. As professionals, we should take an interest in the customer, taking the time to find out why they are asking for information and what use they will make of it. By making an effort at the beginning, we can make our jobs--and the customer's--a little easier. It may also motivate the customer to tell others about the service, and word-of-mouth is still the best way to advertise.

But getting the information is only half of the solution. By handing out citations and abstracts, we've given the individual only a sample of medication. What happens when he goes home and the pills run out?

After offering the good data, we may receive additional requests from the customer, and this is where I feel information centers and libraries often fail to be of optimal service. Once the customer has received the pertinent information, he may be interested in obtaining the complete work. Due to a lack of space, however, many libraries and information centers can maintain only so much material. Although we may be in the Information Age, budgets have not kept up with the times. Contrary to popular belief, for many facilities the virtual library is not just around the corner. The problem isn't totally financial; many computer companies have touted the availability of electronic material while displaying the cost of this material in small print. The process of getting this material into electronic format is time-consuming and costly. If we have offered the customer samples of medication and he demands a full prescription, we should enhance our value by obtaining it as speedily as possible.

But with speed we should take into consideration the cost and the customer. Once again, understanding your customer's information needs is just as important as the physician learning about his patient's health habits. Foremost in both professions should be obtaining the best value for the customer while curing the problem. For us, this means focusing on the quality rather than

the quantity of information. The physician seeks the best and hopefully the least expensive way for conquering a disease that is undermining a patient's health. The information specialist should ferret out the most comprehensive and best information for the customer, keeping in mind the cost to the customer. The customer wants our help in order to enhance his productivity, and he expects the best. That means we must demand the best--from ourselves and our suppliers. When we look for quality in full-text and have to go to outside sources, we should be well versed on those sources. We need consistent networking systems for obtaining full-text material, once again keeping our focus on the customer.

Interlibrary loans, the beginnings of networking among libraries, haven't stayed abreast of the times. CARL (Colorado Alliance of Research Libraries) has started to bridge this gap, but it's just one bucket of water in the ocean. Much of the material that is needed by our customers, many of whom are researchers, is housed in various universities. Due to budget constraints, many libraries cut corners in areas they feel will least affect their customers. Because the interlibrary loan process is a behind-the-scenes action, many university libraries rely upon student help to fill this void. But customers are why we exist, so this service should be handled by professionals.

We have become an instant society. Physicians are expected to relieve pain quickly; information professionals should relieve an information void quickly. And since many of our customers have come to us only as a last resort, we are already behind and should anticipate this extra process. Just as in many patients the disease has already progressed to a serious stage by the time they consult a physician, our customer's need for information is usually crucial. If we don't jump to recognize this, we lose value to our customers. Obtaining the citations may be a fairly speedy process, but without professionals manning the full-text search, the second part of the request could fall through. What follows is frustration for the requestor and an even longer delay, next time another information illness hits, before he decides to seek our aid. It's a cycle that perpetuates itself and causes the customer to be apprehensive about our profession and to persuade others to see us in the same light.

The world is small and growing smaller every day. We've thought of America as a melting pot, but it no longer is. Many information centers and libraries are faced with customers from other cultures and other countries. It may mean we have to deal with customers that have trouble speaking our language or may not speak it at all. When physicians are faced with a language barrier, they call in a translator to help facilitate and to make sure the patient understands their questions and answers. Likewise, the information specialist may need a translator or the patience to understand the requestor. Transversely, the problem may be with the information obtained for the requestor; it may not be available in the customer's native tongue. Once again we must value the customer. Just as a physician would not leave a patient half-cured, we should not fulfill half a request. By not ferreting out translation sources, we have only half-cured an information illness. We must once again show that we value the customer and not just the information, just as the physician values his patient and not just the medication.

Summary

To improve the information services of their facilities and improve customer service, information specialists and librarians must put the customer first. This means understanding the information woes of our customers and placing value on the customer rather than the information. Without the request the material is valueless. After receiving a request, the added value comes in the speed, accuracy, and availability of full-text sources in a language and format convenient for the customer. Monitoring the steps in this process should be handled by professionals, since this is part of the service. If we wish to increase customer satisfaction, we must impress upon our

customers that we're thinking of them and their needs and priorities. By valuing them, we help them to value us.

Biosketch

Jacqueline Madison is an Information Specialist at the Hanford Technical Library, which is managed by Pacific Northwest Laboratory and has been in her current position since 1991. Before that, she was an Assistant Librarian at Ft. Riley Library. In her professional career she has been an information professional, Food and Drug Inspector, teacher, veteran, secretary, and writer.

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