

De-Humanizing the Library Redux

Hurrah for technology in libraries! What would we do without it? So many areas of our operations have been enhanced by the powers of computers and the Internet — that is nothing new. Right?

But, how far can we take this? And, how far should we take this? And, when? Most of us know all about Libraries 2.0. My own library has delved into exploring newer communication methods with our patrons by using whatever was or is the newest thing. I still harbor some doubt as to their success, but I realize that sometimes the impression of newness or the act of being new is the point itself. If you want new, only new will do.

Quite frankly, I am usually bothered by those who always have their hand up as early adopters of every new thing on the market. When did they have time to use the last new thing enough to allow its potential to be harnessed? How long does it take to know that some things are great while others are wasting energy? Are we merely interested in touching base with those patrons fascinated by all things new or even those lost in Second Life?

Much comparison has been made of public services in libraries with those in a business setting. Although libraries have such devotion to patrons and attempt to offer services for free, the business folks are really trying to lure their clients from the aisles and Web sites of other businesses down the street in order to capture a larger market share. Cutting costs is a strategy to increase profit in a business, while cutting costs in a library is usually intended to provide more money for another service or program in that organization.

Let's look at the self-checkout stations for a start. By the way, I know this is not a new technology, but I have also noticed that more and more of them in libraries are stuck in a corner that seems more suited for a private Internet transaction than a brief

checkout encounter. In a business, these stations have taken over front and center to the extent that you have to wander around looking for a real person to help you. Library architecture and design may slowly place these stations on the main thoroughfare.

In libraries, these stations can provide a more private transaction for the patron and sometimes offer a quick exit, although we now assume that the patron is reading something more fun than their image might suggest or perhaps is still hiding the fact that someone in a mask has taken up residence near their mind. In the retail establishment, the idea is to have the work done by the client in an effort to cut personnel costs. Getting caught behind a slow person in a self-check situation is worse than getting stuck in a long line with a trained employee at the lead. I have watched who finished quicker, and it usually is the one who opted for a trained clerk who added something like, "Have a nice day. Thanks and come back," rather than an electronic beep beep telling you to remove your ID and move it on out.

Furthermore, have you noticed that the longer a business has the "let's put all the work onto the customer" attitude, finding a capable assistant to facilitate your purchase or one who knows how to operate the contraption you've decided to use is almost impossible. Yes, they are open longer hours, but their staff is less trained than ever, and usually know less about the product than the customer. Am I the only person who buys plantains and avocados at Walmart? Their inexperienced clerks have no idea about produce beyond apples and bananas even with a color picture guide in front of them.

Is this the role we want for our library employees in the future? Instead of the trained voices of the past serving patrons coming and going from our libraries, we could have more employees roaming the library hoping someone needs help. (This reminds me of a long-gone "pop cop" in an academic library who roamed nightly, enough to scare most of the patrons and bother all of the staff.) As time marches on, we could become quite comfortable

with our patrons marching toward brightly lit self-check machines which will say, "Show me your ID and you can leave here soon." With a bit of extra programming, I'll bet they could add, "Never come back here... you can request anything we do from home, online or by calling 1-800-SAVE-GAS. You too can check out of humanity by using buttons placed everywhere you go. Good luck and watch out for the moving sidewalk provided for your convenience and hardening of arteries."

As for most technologies playing a role in our libraries today, I feel that the most beneficial ones are those which are ubiquitous, for both the user and the library staff. There should be no question as to where or how the service is available. If automatic phone and e-mail messages have overtaken print notices and fax transmissions, it is because the library benefited in a substantial way, usually in time or money. It probably wasn't the patron who requested an e-mail rather than a note in snail mail nor a computer-generated telephone message rather than a personal phone call from a staffer. Many of us were not in libraries when microfilm replaced piles of newspapers, but I'll bet it was the library insisting upon the change, the same with coin-automated photocopiers, online catalogs, compact shelving, barcoding of library materials and patron cards, and many other innovations now routine.

As Library 2.0 technologies spread throughout the country, may they do as much for the library as they do for the patron who apparently, according to some, is screaming for them. Keep the message brief and informative, avoid usurping staffers' energies from the development of the library while they attempt to develop one patron at a time. If we can help citizens understand the world and its many innovations, perfect. If we are trying to compete with the commercial vendors of entertainment for teens or adults, we may come up short.

Blogging is a wonderful resource for public comment, especially about a thread related to the library or its programs. Attracting new users is a worthy goal.

Podcasting can document an event for those who could not attend in person. As for patrons contributing to our library catalogs and generating or writing new ideas over old ones, and debating subject headings, etc., I'll ask for more time to understand the value added. While library catalogers may be more difficult to recruit these days, I'll never trade them for the graffiti-esque ramblings of the wannabe writer or casual critic.

Let's keep the technology coming in libraries and at full speed, but let's make judicious decisions as to which ones benefit us and our patrons and which ones are just fun and seem to attract a lot of attention. I think our libraries and librarians have the power, energy, resources, and creativity to generate a lot of enviable attention with or without a new shiny thingamajig around their necks. **ILA**

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