

Public Relations Aspects of Circulation Staffing and Training

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Staff at circulation desks stand at the hub of service. Located at the point where patrons generally have the most contact with library staff, circulation staff are in a unique position to promote good public relations. Somewhat paradoxically, the circulation staff who serve as the principal contacts with library users are for the most part nonprofessionals. How well professional librarians meet their responsibilities in selecting and training the staff who work at circulation significantly affects the public relations of any library.

Selecting Staff

Good public relations comes about only in an atmosphere of good public service. Staff for the circulation department must be carefully selected and trained to help patrons benefit from the contributions of librarians in both technical services and public service who have special expertise. Murray Martin's "zone of optimal information supply," the area in his chart of three circles where Technical, Reference, and Circulation overlap, illustrates not only the interaction among the work areas of libraries but also the need for those at circulation to know about all services of the library, to have working relationships with the other departments, and to be able to interpret library services and policies to the public.¹

Because the staff at circulation must be effective ambassadors when meeting the public, candidates for circulation positions should exhibit good interpersonal communication skills. A plus when considering an applicant would be a friendly, outgoing, service-oriented personality. Because regulations enforced at this public service desk sometimes bring about conflict situations and because patrons are not always successful in finding materials they need, the staff must be able to cope with heated emotions calmly and constructively. The library's image and service are enhanced when the staff members are approachable, good listeners, and able to handle several operations or situations simultaneously.

Although requirements for positions in circulation work usually do not go beyond the need for clerical skills, there is no doubt that in addition to the personality traits mentioned earlier, background knowledge of the library's patrons is an asset. For example, a staff member in an academic library who has been a college student has a good perspective of students' problems and needs—an insight which can translate into better service. Also, a college-educated staff member is likely to have more positive relations with faculty users

than a person who has never been to college. In public libraries, it helps to be knowledgeable about the community and to exhibit an interest in local life. Service in special libraries can be enhanced if the person at the circulation desk has some training in the area of the library's specialty.

In general, during the job application interview, the public service and public relations aspects of circulation work need to be communicated and emphasized to applicants. In hiring decisions, these aspects should be considered as much or more than the clerical duties of the position. Professional librarians must face the fact that to the public, the staff at circulation are "the librarians."

Training for Public Relations

Public service should be the primary focus when training begins for new staff members. Before teaching the circulation routines, orienting new employees to the purpose of the library helps to emphasize to the trainee that all of the work at circulation is done to facilitate the primary goal of getting people and materials together in the most efficient and effective way possible. Patrons cannot find needed books if books are not reshelved; no information can be given as to when a book is due if the location records are not processed; and books are unavailable for other borrowers if a system of enforcing loan periods is not monitored. An employee thoroughly trained in the myriad of operations at a circulation desk with the focus always on public service and the purpose behind seemingly routine tasks will be more likely to project a positive attitude and improve public relations than one who is taught to view these duties as ends in themselves.

As a foundation on which to build an understanding of their jobs, new employees in circulation should be introduced to staff in acquisitions, cataloging, reference, serials, etc., and shown something of operations in those areas. In dealing with patrons at the circulation desk, it is vital that the staff know how to facilitate the ordering of new books, what to do when a person wants an item not yet cataloged, and where to turn for additional information outside the responsibility of circulation to satisfy patrons' needs. Circulation staff members can greatly improve public relations and service if they develop easy and knowledgeable working relationships with all areas of the library's operations.

One of the most important public relations aspects of circulation work is the handling of general questions. No matter how obvious the location of a reference desk or how clearly signed the areas of special services in the library, for answers to their questions users normally turn to the familiar faces at the circulation desk where they regularly borrow books. Therefore, it is essential that the staff at circulation be trained to recognize at which point the questions become too difficult for them or fall outside the purview of circulation work and need to be referred to a professional or to another department. Sometimes it is difficult to curb the tendency of circulation staff to go too far in answering user inquiries, and this can result in incorrect or incomplete information. If staff can

be trained to see themselves as part of a team and in a very important position to influence public service and public relations, in responding to questions they will more readily think first about how to get the best answers for users by drawing upon the expertise of professionals in the library.

Promoting Public Relations through Daily Routines

Considerable public relations work is involved in the ordinary tasks of circulation work. Charging books to users seems like a strictly routine function. However, I have seen staff members who are alert to the subject matter of materials being borrowed call attention to a new book on that subject or to a book just returned that might be of interest to the patron. This is just one example of how circulation staff can relate to users in a personal way that enhances public relations. Another way to improve the library's image that is more within the expected responsibilities of circulation work is the proper handling of a situation in which the user has not found the desired item on the shelf. To give the best service, staff members must have been thoroughly trained in "call-in" and "hold" procedures, in interpreting all charges, and in the necessity of relaying clearly to the patron information about how and when access to the material will be possible. Staff members also must be able to explain all regulations in a helpful and cheerful manner indicating their desire to give good service. It helps to volunteer to place a hold on an item or to call it in when possible rather than to wait for the patron to request such action; processes that are routine to the staff often are not understood by users. Staff must anticipate user needs and offer the library's services.

When requested material is not available, nor will be in time to satisfy the user's need, circulation staff should be trained to determine if other material might be helpful to the patron and, if so, to suggest that perhaps someone at the reference desk can help. If needed materials are neither on the shelf nor charged out, circulation staff members should themselves look for the books while the user is present. Many times it is convenient to go with the patron to the stacks and point out the location of unshelved books, certain peculiarities in shelving practices, and other general techniques for locating temporarily missing books. Such searches at the time of users' requests often turn up the items, and even an unsuccessful search will improve the library's public relations by demonstrating helpfulness in a situation which is frustrating for the user.

Prompt action by staff members in saying, "May I help you" to users as soon as they approach the circulation desk also promotes good public relations. There always are clerical chores to be done by the staff on duty at the desk, but when people need assistance, staff should be trained to drop other work immediately. There is no quicker or surer way to create a bad image for the library than for circulation staff to make patrons wait while they are doing work at the desk or talking to each other. Also, a staff member's manner and promptness in handling telephone calls can influence public relations. Because

attitude is reflected in one's voice, it is important, as Virginia Baeckler suggests, to "Be pleasant always! Remember there is a person, not a problem on the line."²

The everyday tasks in circulation work can bring conflicts, and the new staff member should be trained to handle difficult patrons and situations. Problems usually arise in dealing with fines and lost book charges, but difficulties can come about in any interchange with the public. The importance of consistency in dealing with disputes as well as in handling all the routines of circulation work should be stressed. Instruction should be given to trainees regarding possible problems and problem situations and a caution issued to remain calm and cheerful even when faced with arrogant, impatient, and demanding users. The staff member with a thorough knowledge of the procedures, regulations, and policies of the library is equipped to handle difficult confrontations as well as the simpler, more usual problems. Circulation staff should understand the reasons behind the rules in order to clarify them to patrons. For example, an informed staff member can explain to those who see no reason for fines and to those who want books that are charged out that fines and loan periods are not established to punish or to limit use but to serve better the needs of all library users. And, finally, staff must be able to determine when a question needs to be directed to the librarian in charge.



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Thinking about access to library materials and users' problems when items are inaccessible leads to another important function of circulation work—stack maintenance. Even this seemingly non-public aspect of circulation's responsibilities is vital in public relations. Unshelved books are difficult to find and cause frustration for would-be borrowers; books shelved in the wrong place are lost. Staff should be trained to see such tasks as shelf-reading and shelving as important public service functions and to take pride in keeping the collection in good order for the benefit of patrons.

An additional way to improve public relations is to encourage the circulation staff to establish rapport with the library's clientele. The staff at circulation often see new books on their way from processing to the stacks; and in some libraries, they are responsible for displaying selected new items. If the staff keep aware of new acquisitions and new services provided by the library, they can relay this information to users during the routine process of charging out books. One particularly aware circulation staff member so systematically kept a professor informed about the best new acquisitions that after the staff member left, the professor remarked unhappily that he would no longer know what to read. Without taking much work time, informal services like this can be provided by circulation staff who are knowledgeable and have the desire to help people.

Another dimension of staff-user interchange is provided by administering the reserve book collection—a part of circulation's public service responsibilities in many academic libraries. Training for good public relations in reserve operations is important in dealing with two kinds of users: the faculty who arrange for items to be placed on short-term loan and the students who read the materials. Situations often arise in which the faculty member does not allow enough lead time for processing books or decides to change loan periods after books have been processed. Properly-trained staff will always remain pleasant and cooperative even in such exasperating situations because they appreciate their role in supporting the instructional needs of the university. Dealing with faculty can also be a very rewarding interchange because of their appreciation for efficient service and because of the opportunity to work on a one-to-one basis with them in arrangements for courses. Demands for reserve books often create pressure situations as students vie for access to books on short-term loan, and this challenges staff to keep the operation running smoothly and efficiently.

It is important, especially in this age of computerization, that circulation services not become depersonalized. Good public relations must be especially emphasized when circulation has a computer system which takes away some of the usual contacts between users and staff. On the other hand, automation can free time for the staff to give more personalized service. Since conversion to a computerized circulation system is likely to disrupt good library-user relationships, the impact on both the staff and the users should be considered. Staff must become "fully conversant with all of the aspects of the system," and, for the benefit of the users, "the circulation system to be interposed between book and

reader should be . . . no more inhibiting to the user than the one being replaced."³

Providing Job Satisfaction

Thus far, I have been discussing the importance of selecting, training, and focusing on service as primary elements in staffing the circulation desk to create good public relations and to facilitate the goal of getting people and materials together. Job satisfaction of the circulation staff must not be overlooked in the total picture; a satisfied staff member will work harder to satisfy users. Once new staff members have progressed through the training period, they should be encouraged to assume more responsibility and autonomy and made to feel a sense of competency and achievement in working towards organizational goals. Good communication, trust, and delegation of authority are important in giving circulation staff the positive feeling they need to enjoy serving the library's users. A good circulation administrator will encourage suggestions for improvement both in services and policies; staff members working at the circulation desk on the front line of user/library contact can often see more clearly problems and possibilities for better service than can the department head who is frequently removed from direct contact with patrons. In addition, circulation staff should be informed about new library issues and changes in other departments and encouraged to see themselves as a vital part of the library's operations.

Good public relations, so important to the image of any library, often develop at the circulation desk because carefully selected and trained staff have clear and positive perspectives on the importance of their own work and how it fits into the total mission of the library. In their efforts to improve their profession, librarians should understand the impact of circulation service on public relations and make certain that the staff at circulation are dedicated to providing the best possible service through their own work and by helping the public to make effective use of all library services and resources.

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