

Your voice

Patron privacy vs advantages of a customer database

Recently, following an Australian library list-serv discussion on privacy, I felt compelled to contribute my thoughts, and especially in light of ALIA's privacy guidelines published in the June issue of *inCite*.

Having come into libraries with a marketing background, I found it fascinating (although somewhat understandable from a privacy standpoint) that library systems seem to be very much oriented towards the collection rather than the patron — certain pieces of valuable information are tied to the item record rather than the patron record.

Seems to be the wrong way around! Even the very terminology in libraries says a lot — they are so often borrowers, patrons, users, readers, members, but so very rarely customers. Tends to mirror librarians' often-cited inward focus and self-inflicted inferiority complex (focusing on ourselves, our dramas, our low salaries, our woes of buildings and staffing, our collections...). Occasionally, we are our own worst enemies...

Time to weigh up privacy implications vs potential advantages, and consider just how likely it is that we will have those bureaucrats phoning us for Mr Smith's reading records and bomb-making habits. I mean, are we getting many of these queries?? The new ALIA privacy guidelines seem a bit restrictive and I recognise that Australia does have a Spam Act, which is commendable, but we should be lobbying

system providers to give us the solutions we need, and continuing to collect information that could be useful given the right analysis. I fully support the process of allowing 'opt-in', thereby giving people the choice to receive communication from libraries — that is just good solid direct marketing advice.

Still, perhaps we're taking our guardianship roles a bit too seriously — rather than guarding the collection and preserving the customer's identity, it's also important to consider how well we actually communicate about our collections and provide service to customers. Let's just at least remember to think about the customer and how we can enhance services. Information is power, especially in our own hands! Think of how well we could know our customers.

One of the most important recognised assets of any decent-sized business is its customer database. So much so that companies insure them, they invest in them (the technology as well as building the actual numbers of customers) and, ultimately, they even assess them as financial assets on their balance sheets.

What about marketing? Direct marketing? Database marketing? Surely some of you out there are doing this — I know many of us strive to, and having a system that stands in the way is actually frustrating. I would actually love to have full customer borrowing histories (don't delete anything!) and a data mining solution, or 'data cube' as they're often called, as I could better understand my library's readership base

— their demographics, what they like, what they don't, what appeals to certain individuals, which parts of non-fiction my best thriller customers are most likely to access, and how to cross-sell other services.


I would love to have inactive customer records too and know what they were reading, and why they stopped, when it happened, etc — they're my best source of fresh leads, most likely to become customers again. With the right software, I could provide better service, I could point my customers to books they didn't even realise existed, or realise they may like. I could build profiles and patterns, understand the big picture as well as the individual picture for one reader at a time. That's what direct marketing is all about — improving one-to-one marketing and personalised service, and it's just as important in libraries (if not more so) than in many other types of services and businesses. It's not about abusing the information we have, it's about using it wisely to increase the business intelligence of our libraries.

Jeff Cabral, library manager, Upper Hutt City Library, New Zealand

Your letters on any issue of relevance to the library and information sector are welcomed.

All letters should be addressed to the inCite editor and may be e-mailed to incite@alia.org.au, or faxed to 02 6282 2249, or posted to: Your voice, ALIA, PO Box 6335, Kingston 2604. Please include your name and postal address with your letter or e-mail.

Letters will be accepted for publication until the 18th of the month.

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