

CUSTOMER SERVICE

New library, new opportunities

What do you do when you've got a brand new library? Develop a new proactive customer service model to go with it.

Since the doors of Gordon Institute of TAFE's new East Geelong Campus opened on 5 October 2009, we've been rushed off our feet. Why? We've started doing things a little differently. And our customers – staff and students from disciplines as diverse as plumbing, IT, remedial massage, and interior design – have been flooding in. In our previous library, our practice was largely about library staff: what was easy for us, what made sense to us. Moving into a brand new, purpose built building gave us the fresh start we needed to rethink that approach. As we prepared for the move and imagined our new space, we found ourselves thinking more about our customers and less about ourselves. Now we put our staff and students firmly at the centre of what we do.



We started with a thorough collection review. Over five thousand items were reviewed and withdrawn. "Do we really *need* a text for every version of Windows?" we asked ourselves. "Do our customers want or use it? Do they need it?" We quickly realised asking ourselves wasn't the most effective way of gauging needs. We had to ask our customers. We invited teachers in to tell us what they needed and wanted. Decisions were made through formal meetings, walk-in perusals, and timetabled 'dotting': a yellow adhesive dot stuck on the item spine to say "Keep this

one. It's useful". So when we arrived in our flashy new space, we brought with us a tight, focused collection: relevant, up-to-date, and tailored to our customers' needs.

Next we arranged that collection in the new library. Our staff customers, many of whom have enjoyed a long tenure at the Institute, are creatures of habit. They would walk to the same spot in the existing library they had been walking to for years, find what they expected to find, and leave. Our challenge was to make collections easy to navigate while also showing staff and students the things they'd habitually been missing. Carefully and exhaustively planned subject hubs are meeting this challenge. We've taken some risks. We increased display spaces. We interfiled DVDs and journals with books. We upset Dewey order by putting three numerically disjointed, but thematically linked, areas together. Has anyone asked us why the 333.7s and 581s and 635s are all together, without the interceding numbers in between? No. Instead they say, 'It's so good to be able to find everything I want about horticulture in one place.' Is shelving more difficult for library staff? Yes, but it's getting easier each day as we become more familiar with the layout. And suddenly there's more shelving to do – because more is going out.

RFID and a self-service kiosk give staff and students the means to check out their own items. Library staff are free to do other things, like talk with people about books or DVDs, or provide one-on-one database assistance, or discuss an assignment. We can now invest time in our staff and students without having to intermittently duck back to the counter to issue items. We're learning people's names. And they're coming in again and again. Has the introduction of self-service killed our interaction with users? Not in the least. It's enhanced it. Is the routine checking out of items *really* customer service anyway? Or is customer service having the time to assist and build relationships with customers?

We don't care much about the noise our customers make. We don't mind if they move furniture. Or if they eat or drink in

the library. Instead, we promote these things so our customers understand that the library is their space. We're working with students for whom the library is not familiar territory. Vast reams of rules and dos and don'ts won't make them want to come here, let alone hang out or borrow. So our couch has some grubby footmarks on it. We're delighted: it's evidence that young apprentices are making themselves comfortable in the library.

How do we know our new customer service model is working? Simple. The library is always *busy*. Staff and students are *in* it. More is being borrowed than ever before. Our old regulars have made the move with us and we've gathered new regulars along the way. People ask for our help more, and now offer theirs – suggesting additions to the collection or new things to do in the library. And these relationships are important, not just for confirming that what we did works, but more importantly because they are integral to helping us continually improve and tailor their library and its services.

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Customer service and the Unconference

On Saturday 20 February 2010 Gold Coast City Council Library hosted an Unconference, PodCampGC.

Why?

Library staff were confident there was a demand for information about social networking tools and applications to be delivered to a more tech-savvy audience. An Unconference environment was trialled as being the most suitable way of responding to a need that library staff could not clearly define. We wanted to let the customers choose the service they wanted.

We offered the venue, speakers, access to online tools via laptops and WiFi, the broad topics, and a draft program. Participants self-registered online. The participants refined the program on the day including adding/removing topics, ordering the sessions, and questioning the program. Therefore the participants dictated the flow of knowledge based on their needs.

The Unconference format required speakers to be knowledgeable on the topic and fluid in their delivery; the flexibility to repeat sessions due to demand, expand on some aspects or offer more detailed content, adapt language and delivery to the varied levels of the audience, and allow session lengths to expand or contract to meet participants' needs; a number of speakers who could contribute to each conversation, enriching the experience and providing differing life examples; participants' engagement and the freedom to 'vote with their feet' and move to a different session; the ability to talk on unscheduled topics e.g. we incorporated a jargon busting session after the participants identified this need; and plenty of time for questions, avoiding a formal 'lecture-style' format.

Conclusion

Requests for more similar events, ongoing interest in the Twitter hashtag created for the event #podcampgc, the enthusiastic participation on the day, and the fact that the majority committed to a full day at the event indicates PodCampGC was a success. It was rewarding from both the staff and participants' perspective to successfully hold an event where the participants could request the topics to be discussed and staff could respond to their needs.

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