



THE TRANSPARENT LIBRARY

Ask for What You Want

By Michael Casey & Michael Stephens

WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME SOMEONE said lawyers or doctors needed to update their images into the 21st century? How many skits on *Prairie Home Companion* or *Saturday Night Live* have you seen where doctors appear as outdated, dowdy spinsters in need of love or romance? None. Yet Garrison Keillor's "Adventures of Ruth Harrison, Reference Librarian" parades antiquated and stereotyped images of librarians as humor. Unfortunately, librarians are often portrayed as technologically backward, fearful of teens and loud noises, and overly protective of books to the point of not wanting anyone to "touch our stuff."

This misperception may be caused by librarians' desire to create rules and procedures to combat what are really behavioral issues instead of taking direct action. Just this week, a former library director told us about a situation she witnessed where staff wanted to remove from in front of the library a couch used by many patrons—moms reading to kids, older users waiting for rides—because one person who came in every day slept on it.

Enforcing the rules

Instead of removing the couch, the staff could have asked the sleeping patron to respect the library's policies and get up. When asked why they hadn't done so, the librarian replied that many years ago, she'd been verbally harangued by a patron after trying to enforce a similar policy. Instead of confronting the problem, or others like it, staff failed to enforce already existing rules. They acted in a passive-aggressive manner.

In the past year, we've heard about libraries that are considering closing because of rowdy teens, and we've seen libraries respond to behavioral issues by blocking social network Internet sites. Taking away chairs or couches, blocking legal web sites, and creating more and more rules create an environment where confrontation becomes more likely, not less.

Act without fear

In a seemingly unrelated problem, getting new initiatives off the ground sometimes seems to need an act of God, simply because new services mean change. For some librarians, change represents the potential to fail. For others, it's a fear of success, that a new service might be too popular and draw too many people.

What underlying theme flows through these things? Timidity. Whether it's the staff member who wants to remove the couch to spite the sleeping man or the librarian who wants to shut out the teens

company would never put up with this from its vendors?

And how many times have we looked at other companies' services and equipment that seem so much more polished and refined than ours. We work individually and without centralization, so our vendors see thousands of weak buyers, unable to stand up and demand better quality. To be fair, library consortia address this need, often with great success.

Recent shifts toward open source collaboration [see "Evergreen: Your Homegrown ILS," *LJ* 12/06, p. 38–41] and the vendor cooperation John Blyberg noted

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because they're having too much fun at the computers, the librarians are often too timid for their own good.

Missed opportunities

When Amazon rolled out customer-written book reviews, and Google became our customers' search engine of choice, where were the library directors who should have been standing up and demanding similar features from our ILS vendors?

When audiobook vendors gave us downloadable material that was incompatible with iPods, why did we roll over and buy it (at exorbitant prices) instead of declining the service and explaining to our taxpaying customers that we could not ethically spend that much money on a technology that only a very small fraction of our customer base even owned.

Working together

Yet this happens all the time. Our collective power is far greater than our individual power, yet we seem to be incapable of getting together and harnessing this strength to demand better products and services from our suppliers. How many times have librarians said XYZ

in "Always Pushing Information" [*net-Connect*, Summer 2007, p. 2–4] spell out the promise of what could be achieved if we all work together.

Avoiding confrontation

How can we eradicate the theme of timidity that runs throughout our profession? How do we work to become stronger, prouder, and more willing to do our job of walking up to those loud or obnoxious persons and politely yet firmly telling them that they must either change their behavior or leave the library?

Our focus should be more on reinforcing existing policies instead of banning technologies. Focus on trust and open conversation instead of new rules. Focus on understanding those folks who might be breaking your rules by listening to their needs. Then act. You and your users will benefit.

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