

LibraryCrunch

Service for the Next Generation Library: A Library 2.0 Perspective by Michael Casey

[« Best Friends, by Sophia | Main | Re-Nominate LJ Movers and Shakers »](#)

Users or Customers: Internal and External

Ryan Deschamps over on [The Other Librarian](#) says:

This only goes to show that a user-centric library may have to also be fairly librarian-centric in the end. If we want to change our brand to something positive, we will have to invest our time and energy in attracting positive non-jerk librarians in the end. For a lot of countries (and the U.S. is an exception to this) that are going to be looking at labor shortages in the next couple of years, this is going to be more and more difficult. In other words, it goes to show that going on a [manifesto of user-centricity](#) is not going to be enough to satisfy the needs of our users in the end. We have to consider the whole package. We can't be user-centric, if our employees are jerks.

I think many have been saying this for a long time – the idea of creating internal customer service expectations that demand the same level of performance and attention as that given external customer service is key to our success. Business 2.0, Learning 2.0, and pretty much every 2.0 customer service approach has included internal service with the external, fully acknowledging that **the way we treat our employees (and the way they treat each other) has a very direct and measurable impact on our external customer service**. The "[manifesto](#)" you reference (and all of my writing) includes internal customers (staff) in the larger equation of user-centricity or customer-driven services.

One way we get better employees (and better employee morale) is to simply communicate with them. Finding ways for staff to communicate has always been a goal. In [Living Out Loud](#) (Library Journal, 6/1/07), Michael Stephens and I write:

Corporate blogs and wikis—and any other tools that create transparency in the organization—foster the concept of vertical teams, where front-line staff have the ability to communicate and cooperate with top-level administrators. This internal openness is as important as external transparency. Building morale within the organization—and sharing the big-picture ideas with everyone who will listen—creates a stronger and more motivated work force, one willing to participate and share new ideas. Such internal openness will translate into external transparency, which is vital to the library's future.

Back in March of 2006 I wrote about [using blogs as a way to communicate internally](#), so that both vertical and horizontal discussions could take place in an open and productive manner. Before that, in November of 2005, writing in [3 Degrees of Separation: Libraries, Technology, and Administration](#), the idea of using new tools to foster internal communications is discussed:

But how do we offer these tools to an administration that does not even want to hear such words as "blog" and "wiki" and "IM"? I do not believe I am exaggerating here – I have heard first-person accounts from fellow librarians about administrators saying such things as "I don't ever want to hear the word blog". This despite numerous trusted sources such as Harvard Business Review (2/2005 issue) and [Business Week](#) proclaiming the necessity, the requirement, for any company to have and use an internal (behind-the-firewall) blog and, in many circumstances, an external customer-focused blog.

In [Going to the Field](#) (Library Journal 9/15/07), Michael Stephens and I write:

So how do you get administrators and support staffers to understand the daily operations of the real library? How do you get them to recognize that you deal not only with their guidelines and expectations but also with those of many other departments as well, all on top of your local duties?

Bring them out.

Bring out the maintenance administration and let them see just how dark that corner area is—perhaps sending out staff to replace lighting once a month simply doesn't work. And get those accountants out there to see how you have to count

the money amidst screaming kids and a full book-drop and do it all on a tiny table without a proper chair.

Get collections staff out to see your full rows of boring fiction and your empty shelves devoid of graphic novels. Use these visits as a means to start conversations about what the users want.

Rotate administrative and support staff through the branches or various departments. Have them go through the same training that all of the front-line staffers go through. Write policies and guidelines so that staff can easily understand and comply with them.

By following this simple rule—bring them out—you'll develop a big-picture understanding of library services among your staff, and you'll see dividends immediately.

Staff morale and the "culture of no" was discussed in "[Turning 'No' Into 'Yes'](#)" (Library Journal 5/1/07), where we argued that staff with ideas must be listened to and that libraries must cultivate ideas without setting up insurmountable roadblocks to staff initiatives.

Often times, it's born at the desk. Staff members think of a new idea, and they want to share it with the decision-makers. They put together a presentation or proposal at the suggestion of their immediate supervisor and take it up to administration. But they receive a cold reception. Not only are they told, "No," but they were "talked to" by the department head: "How could anyone think such an idea would work? Didn't they realize that their idea had been tried five years earlier?"

Good employees who were once open to change and receptive to new ideas become entrenched in their positions and somewhere along the way become closed, curmudgeonly, and unreceptive to new ideas.

But it goes farther than this. Getting staff out into the field so that they understand front-line concerns is but one step in eliminating, as Ryan calls it, the "[jerks](#)" of the library. Ask any IT staffer in my department and they will tell you that the past year has been spent listening to our customers -- branch staff and external users -- and responding to their needs and ideas. IT exists for one reason, the customers -- both internal and external -- and if we don't listen to their needs, if we fail to ask them questions and find out what is working and what is not working, then **we** have failed. I will not have "jerks" on my team, and I don't.

But "jerks" can only become "jerks" when other library staff -- supervisors and administrators -- allow them to continue to exist. Whether it's the passive aggressive "jerk" who stymies your every effort at change by creating barriers to innovation, or the outspoken yet anonymous "jerk" who sits at her (or his) computer on the reference desk each day turning out vitriolic diatribes against fellow librarians and library customers (presumably while ignoring those real customers in front of her), the supervisors bear the burden of responsibility. Evaluations exist for a reason, and there are plenty of other good people out there who would happily replace those "jerks".

I don't think we've ever avoided talking about the internal problems libraries and library staff face. In fact, given the record, I think we (*the collective professional blogging/writing librarian "we"*) have always identified internal staff morale and behavior to be fundamental to excellent external customer service.

Posted by Michael on November 6, 2007 02:54 PM | [Permalink](#)

➔ TrackBack

➔ Comments

"Corporate blogs and wikis—and any other tools that create transparency in the organization—foster the concept of vertical teams, where front-line staff have the ability to communicate and cooperate with top-level administrators."

I certainly don't disagree with this, although I'd suggest that maybe you have it the wrong way around - all the tools in the world can't create a culture of openness: if an organisation wants to be more open, an internal blog is a great way to do that. If the organisation doesn't want to be open, implementing a blog won't make it so.

Or will it? I'd be interested to hear if anyone thinks I have that wrong.

Posted by: [Simon Chamberlain](#) | [November 6, 2007 03:45 PM](#)

Simon, I think you are unfortunately correct. Any organization that does not begin to push for or exhibit transparency from the top down will probably not benefit from internal efforts such as blogs or wikis. That is the sorry reality for many organizations, not simply libraries.

In some organizations the best we can hope for is a leadership that, while not actively pursuing transparency, will allow staff to create and use such tools and, hopefully, push the entire organization towards a more transparent structure.

Posted by: [Michael Casey](#) | [November 6, 2007 03:50 PM](#)

The link I made was not intended as a slight on Library 2.0, but instead on a generalization on user-centricity. I haven't found a staff member who does not think that what they do goes directly to the heart of the user.

The "internal customers" trope doesn't quite work either, because part of what I'm proposing is to keep the jerks out of libraries altogether. Keeping the jerks out, means keeping the non-jerks in and/or attracting non-jerks as well. Attracting non-jerks will draw resources away from "external" customers.

In short, there is a contradiction inherent in a "staff" (or internal customer) focus and a "user" (external) focus. Organizational success will require a balance (or maybe a swaying equilibrium, if you prefer) between the two.

Posted by: [Ryan Deschamps](#) | [November 6, 2007 04:02 PM](#)

I guess I don't see the contradiction quite as vividly. If we put good people in our library positions then I see a direct benefit in better external customer service.

I agree that keeping the jerks out is key, but I don't think we always know that when we hire them. Having sat on many interview panels I can attest to having been "duped" several times by people who give great interviews (and have good references) yet somehow end up being, well, not good.

Just to come back to internal versus external, I really believe (and we may have to agree to disagree here) that time and money spent on internal customer service will pay huge dividends on external service.

Regarding balance, well, I think a balance is nice but we must be willing to get our faces wet and hair mussed if we want to push forward, try new things, and find new users.

Thanks for writing!

Posted by: [Michael Casey](#) | [November 6, 2007 04:10 PM](#)

➔ [Post a comment](#)

(If you haven't left a comment here before, you may need to be approved by the site owner before your comment will appear. Until then, it won't appear on the entry. Thanks for waiting.)

Name:

Email Address:

URL:

☐ Remember personal info?

Comments:

[Preview](#)

[Post](#)

