



By Any Other Name, They're Still Our Customers

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August 1997

IS IT TIME TO STOP PATRONIZING THE PUBLIC AND START WAITING ON CUSTOMERS?

What do libraries, restaurants, and theaters have in common? Customers. Webster's Third New International Dictionary defines the term customer as "one that patronizes or uses services (as of a library, restaurant, or theater)." For many librarians, finding their mostly fee-free workplaces equated with such pay-as-you-go concerns just doesn't seem right. But wait--there is a common ingredient: Service.

All around the country, librarians are coupling library service with the use of the term customer, even while their colleagues, many in major leadership positions, are content with older names, such as user, patron, and client. Thus, the challenge unfolds: Are we, as a profession, ready to serve customers, as does the business world, by way of promoting a new kind of library service for the 21st century?

Most librarians may think that the name they employ to describe the people they assist is unimportant; what really matters is the service they provide. Indeed, among many practitioners, such a discussion can barely get a hearing, and there's certainly no agreement on a "best" name. Nevertheless, I believe that the name we use to describe the individuals we serve affects how well we do our jobs.

At the core of the "name game," librarians have to decide what it is that we really do--not unlike reinventing a library's mission statement. For instance, if we just practice collection development, then acquire away. However, if our focus is on customer service, it's time to devote more attention and energy to taking care of the people using the materials we offer.

It's well known how good the reputation of BMW autos is. Yet, BMW manufacturers pay just as much attention to serving "Beamer" buyers as they do to selling cars. This is not to say that either books or BMWs should be ignored per se--only that the product and the customers get equal treatment.

Surely no librarian can be faulted for not embracing the term customer. The simple truth is that the idea of customer service, with its focus on the individual, isn't well understood by librarians. Christopher Millson-Martula and Vanaja Menon's "Customer Expectations: Concepts and Reality for Academic Library Services" (*College and Research Libraries*, p. 33-47), only appeared as recently as January 1995.

But the shock of calling people customers probably would fade sooner than twilight if librarians internalized the term's association with individual needs, expectations, and satisfaction. And there's another thing for us to think about: In customer service, the spotlight is on individual behavior, feedback, and communication. It sounds like good library business.

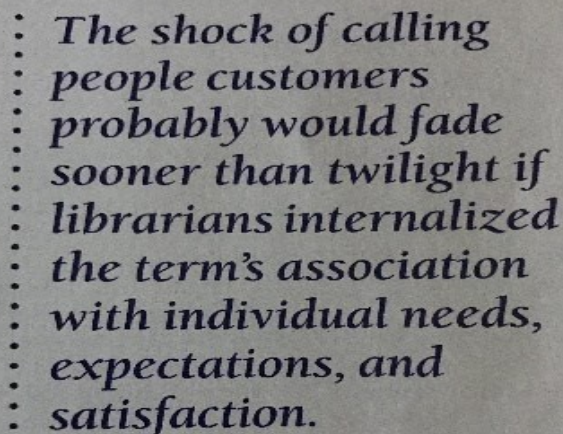
Finding a fit

The word library workers use to describe the people they serve seems to vary according to the workers' preference, and sometimes the particular situation or setting. A conservative lot, we librarians are not quick to embrace a new name.

The terms reader ("one that reads" or "one that applies himself to reading") and user (merely "one that uses") have been around a long time, since at least 1900. The term patron ("a steady or regular client, as one who uses the services of a library") has been in our jargon since about the mid-century and is highly popular today. Client ("a person who engages the professional advice or services of another") entered library literature in the 1950s, and customer first appeared in the professional canon in 1990. (In titles indexed since 1989, client or customer appears 131 times; patron occurs in 284 works.)

Fortunately, the names used to describe people in libraries reflect a tradition of service. There have been lots of choices and all seemed to fit, at least somewhat. But, over time, our views about service have changed. Who among us today prefers the term reader? Few indeed; in a national mail survey I conducted this January of the name preferences of 150 public, academic, and special librarians, no one chose reader.

In the survey, I asked participants to respond to the statement: "The name I most commonly use to describe a person who uses my library is (check one) user, client, patron, reader, customer, other." The order of preference for all librarians, from highest to lowest, was: patron (67%), user (16%), customer (11%), and client (6%), with 88% of public librarians and 71% of academic librarians voting for patron; the terms client, customer, and user tied for second choice among 23% of special librarians.



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Patronizing past practices

For many, the term customer may be excessively modern, but it may reflect our aspirations for service more than, say, patron, a designation now decades old. What is it about that term that makes some librarians (albeit a minority of survey respondents) feel uncomfortable? In search of an answer, I conducted telephone follow-

up interviews with several library directors in March.

Jarrett Boyd, director of the Carroll County (Ky.) Public Library, cited literary history, observing that centuries ago an author would find a "patron to support him so that he could stay home and write." Boyd feels that, in Libraryland, the usage suggests an expectation that "our patrons would take care of us." Instead, she prefers "to think of the people who come in here as customers and we take care of them," but admits that at her library, "We keep trying to change to 'customer,' but old habits die hard."

For Mabel Shaw, director of the Tallahassee (Fla.) Community College library, the behaviors associated with the word customer really matter. Her message for librarians is strong and clear: "We ought to treat people right and inculcate into our services those kinds of things that a for-profit business has to do if they plan on keeping customers."

Having customers around should make librarians very happy. After all, isn't that how persons who fund libraries think of themselves? If recognized as customers, mayors, college deans, and the public will get the message that libraries go all out to take care of their needs.

Like her academic-library peers, however, Shaw worries about the politics of calling students customers while visiting state lawmakers. "I'd be very scared to talk to legislators about customers because most of those people come from the business world, not the education world." Her concern is that legislators might offer a slew of business solutions, which, if applied to education, might not make a good fit. Fee-for-service, deplored by many librarians, is an obvious example.

Still, many two-year colleges describe their programs as customer-driven. Courses such as computer networking and manufacturing processes are designed to prepare individuals for immediate placement in commerce and industry. Four-year colleges and universities are also under immense pressure to make their programs relevant to society's needs. It's not surprising that, under these circumstances, libraries follow suit and tailor services to the demand.

Subjects and participants

Besides affecting a librarian's perception of those being served, the name we use to describe our public can also influence the public's view of the library worker using it. A name may also cause individuals thus dubbed to think of themselves in a certain way. Perhaps most important, a name may bear upon the content, delivery, and quality of library service. These are significant issues.

Skeptics need only look at findings from psychology to learn that with the use of names comes consequences. People who are labeled are seen, by others and sometimes themselves, as embodying the characteristics implied by the label. Keenly aware of the significance of names in their own work, many psychologists have gone so far as to substitute the term participant for subject in describing research-study populations. Professor Steven Prentice-Dunn of The University of Alabama Department of Psychology explains that the change of label acknowledges people as "an integral part of the research process rather than just objects."

Is there a lesson here for libraries? Since certain outcomes, whether more or less desirable, likely follow the use of a particular name, how we describe library visitors could well influence how we interact with them. Which term, patron or customer, better involves the people we serve in the information process?

The meaning of names is probably best understood when viewed in the context of library service. To understand this, a useful exercise is to look at some typical services and then see what names come to mind:

- A university library supports distance education and extends networked service throughout the community.
- Librarians in a mid-sized city take pride in a large stock of books.
- At a junior college, librarians prepare detailed catalogs and offer bibliographic instruction services.
- In a public library, staff survey the interests of the community, and acquire media for homeschoolers and others with special interests.

In each case, the favored name likely mirrors the kind of service provided. If the focus is on individual needs and proactivity, the name customer sounds like a good bet.

At times, librarians almost seem reluctant, even embarrassed, to say they serve customers. Unsolicited comments made by rank-and-file survey respondents illustrate this point.

- A public librarian from Colorado checked user, patron, and customer (in specific proportions) and remarked, "depending on situation and audience."
- A couple of academic librarians were unsure as well, checking both user and patron in 50-50 proportions.

At least a few directors of large public library systems had serious doubts about the term customer. Phoenix (Ariz.) Public Library Director Toni Garvey hedged a bit: "I certainly like the term [customer] better than patron," she confided, adding, "We

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haven't found another word that's acceptable." Asserting that the moniker doesn't "change what we do for the people who use libraries," Garvey concluded. "Changing the word would not necessarily mean better service."

Craig Buthod at Seattle Public Library sees the issue as "irrelevant," and the name by which librarians refer to their service population nothing more than a

"buzzword." Quoting Shakespeare, Buthod declared, "That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet."

Of course, librarians are not the only ones with a stake in the name debate. The views of those who are served by libraries should not be overlooked. How does a person feel about being called a library user? Though there is little documentation about what the public thinks about this issue, we can learn from a citizen who told a Texas Library Association panel in 1968, "Libraries are a service organization. Pay more attention to your customer than you do to your books." (R. L. Waters, "Patrons Look at Libraries," *Library Journal*, vol. 93, p. 3102). Are we listening?

It may be hard to keep new names out of libraries, even if we try. The names we use are in response to pressures and changes, happening within and around the library. Historically, libraries were more inwardly focused; hence, names reflected the affairs going on inside the library. In contrast, modern-day libraries are actively involved in outreach, literacy training, and other kinds of activities. Also influential is the fact that ideas from management science, such as total quality management, are frequently applied in library settings in the 1990s. Symbolic of a shift to modern approaches to library service, the Special Libraries Association's new journal, which replaces both *Special Libraries* and the *Specialist*, is called *Information Outlook*.

But some librarians will argue that the term customer, and the kind of service it implies, is a threat to library values. Concerned practitioners worry that, should libraries look and operate like businesses, core values such as local collections, free service, and professionalism may be compromised.

Indeed, this concern may have some basis in reality. If service gets more attention, it's reasonable to assume that some functions in libraries may have to go, or, at the least, be handled in other ways, such as outsourcing. The challenge is to make the right trade-offs, ones that will lead to increased support and better service, while keeping core values intact.

From all indications, the popularity of names has changed over time. Older names are still important, but the real story is about the emergence of the term customer in many libraries. The term reader, rooted in library history, seems less germane today. The term patron, still enormously popular in public and academic libraries, reflects the status quo. User has modest support in all types of libraries. With its origin in business, the term client is preferred mainly by special libraries. The term customer is definitely catching on in all types of libraries, and its use may signal the beginning of a new era for library service.

The great name controversy will not likely go away soon. The outcome may depend on 'which name is the best catalyst for improving library service. By ignoring the name, librarians risk not getting optimal results. Is the time right to check out the term customer? In part, the answer may come from those we serve. Government and education officials and the public hear our words. We ought to speak their language.

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Citation:

Sandy, John H. "By Any Other Name, They're Still Our Customers." *American Libraries* 28 (August 1997): 43-45.

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