Dealing With Hostile and Potentially Dangerous Library Users

Wednesday, April 8, 2020

Customer Service Webinar Series

Presented by the Wisconsin Valley Library Service, with support from the Northern Waters Library Service and the Southwest Wisconsin Library System.

with Pat Wagner–patternresearch.com
Pattern Research, Inc., Denver, Colorado
Are All Hostile Library Customers Dangerous?
Key Idea

We need to plan as if anyone might turn out to be dangerous.

*Not paranoid: prepared!*
Key Idea

Therefore, practice consistent courtesy. And trust your gut.
Outcomes

• Ensure everyone on the staff knows what to do in emergencies.
• Lower the drama of difficult encounters with library customers.
• Develop consistent responses to challenging customer behavior.
• Improve basic security features of your workplace.
• Institute regular safety programs with professionals.
Agenda

- How We Influence The Behaviors Of Others
- Setting Limits On What Is Acceptable
- Prevent Escalation: Don’t Engage Emotionally
- Distractions, Alternatives, Disengagement
- Trust Your Gut: When To Call Authorities

Hostile and Potentially Dangerous Library Users
Assignment #1

How prepared is your library today?

- Cheat sheets for procedures
- Emergency phone tree
- Staff meetings with leadership
- Law enforcement speakers
- Supervisor meeting:
  - Consistent responses
Your Internal Customers

- Applies to employees and volunteers
- Yearly program on personnel issues:
  - Grievances and employees’ rights
  - Management rights
  - Clarifying issues
- Take all threats seriously.
- No one is exempt from the rules.
Agenda

How We Influence The Behavior of Others
Caveat

Do you use your “disapproval” face with library users and co-workers you don’t like or know... so they know to shape up?

*Did you put that chip on their shoulder?*
First Impressions

Verbal and nonverbal messages

- The look of your face
- The tone of your voice
- Your posture and mannerisms
- The first words you say
Your Environment

- Community policing strategies
- Outside: No trash, clean windows
- Inside: Clean, uncluttered, pretty
- What staff wears
- How they see/hear you treat others
- First signs they read at your library
Hire for Emotional Maturity

- Calm and friendly demeanor
- Flexible and willing to learn
- Treat others with respect: Manners
- Understand personal boundaries
- Don’t default to blame/complain.
- Take responsibility for mistakes
Hire for Emotional Maturity

• Like children and teenagers
• Have life outside of work
• Understand they’re part of a team
• Like folk, even when they misbehave
• Can build/maintain healthy relationships
• Have sense of humor about themselves
Caveat

*People who do bad things are opportunistic.*

They look for: people who seem weak, dark corners, and the chance to do wrong.
Two Levels of Service

One for people we know and like
For people who look like us
For people who are "nice"

One for people we don’t know or like
For people who don’t look like us
For people who are "unpleasant"
Supervisor Issues

• Supervisors not on same page
  Different sites; different rules
• No supervisors on weekends or evenings: *False economies*
• One person staffing small branches
• No one’s alert to dicey behavior.
Assignment #2

If you *watch the faces* of library personnel as they interact with customers, what would this *show* you about their opinions regarding the people they are serving?
Assignment #3

If you *listen to the voices* of library personnel as they interact with customers, what would this *tell* you about their opinions regarding the people they are serving?
Agenda

Setting Limits on
What is Acceptable

Hostile and Potentially Dangerous
Library Users
Caveat

Manipulative behavior by library customers is a sign of inconsistent enforcement of the rules. The problem is library staff, not the library customer.
The Policy Process

- Transparency breeds respect and trust.
- Include library stakeholders in processes.
- Meetings and advisory boards
- Invite professional advice:
  - Law enforcement and social services
- Engage the media in education
- Commonsense signs in library
Typical Mistakes

- Too many rules
- Rules dominate interactions.
- Old ladies versus teenagers
- Few people enforce the rules.
- No way to test/evaluate rules
Assignment #4

How many *employees* would be able to accurately *describe* the library’s or institution’s *rules regarding unacceptable behavior*?
Prevent Escalation: Don’t Engage Emotionally.
Avoid Triggers

• Status issues:
  • Who knows more?
  • The “Credentials” Contest
  • Correcting customers
• “Singsong” condescending voice
• Domination under guise of service
Stop Arguing

• It’s about the library, not your opinions.
• Provide information for their concerns.
• Find a way to say yes or agree with them.
• Find a way for them to say yes.
• Avoid political discussions.
• Change the subject:
  • Ask their opinion about something safe.
Assignment #5

Do you know your own triggers?
Ask your friends, family, colleagues.
Agenda

Distractions, Alternatives, Disengagement
Distractions

• Ask for advice.
• Create a toy basket.
• Sitting down and writing
• Prepare something they like.
• Offer them a glass of water.
Alternatives

• **Generate options and choices.**
• **Learn the customer’s goals:**
  Will another path serve?
• **Substitute something more interesting than their anger.**
Disengagement

• Can you say *no thank you*? Learn to interrupt politely and deflect.

• The formula:
  • Thank them.
  • Set the limit.
  • Offer an alternative.

• Walk away or hang up: Stay calm.
Assignment #6

Discuss with co-workers how to develop the "option" frame of mind.
Agenda

Trust Your Gut: When to Call the Authorities

Hostile and Potentially Dangerous Library Users
Education

• Legal and law enforcement community
• Who has jurisdiction for what issues?
• What you can and can’t do
• Consistent and transparent process: Communication, rules, and the consistent enforcement of rules
Resources

- *The Gift of Fear*. Gavin de Becker
- *Prisoners of Hate*. Aaron Beck
- *Stop Walking On Eggshells*. Mason and Kreger
- *I Hate You--Don’t Leave Me*. Kreisman and Straus
- *Don’t Shoot the Dog*. Karen Pryor
- *Fixing Broken Windows*. Kelling and Coles