



## AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein  
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*“Customer service workshops can range from the perennially popular dealing with difficult patrons to conducting effective reference interviews.”*

-Rachel Singer Gordon,  
“The Accidental Library  
Manager”

Being a public librarian is about public service. Those of us who work directly with the public spend a great deal of our time interacting with people. We answer questions (can you help me download a photograph from my email?); we give opinions (could you recommend a book for my ill wife who loves to read?) and we help locate things (this book is supposed to be on the shelf, but I can't find it).

Our goal is good customer service, which means welcoming our patrons and being as attentive as possible. *In The Branch Librarians' Handbook*, Vickie Rivers lists “The Ten Commandments of Library Service,” borrowed from Sara Hightower Regional Library in Rome, Georgia. Included are: “Patrons are not outsiders. They are the owners of our library...Patrons do us a favor when they call. We are not doing them a favor when we serve them...Patrons are deserving of the most courteous and attentive treatment we can give.”

Over all, public librarians adhere to these rules, although I have occasionally been to libraries where I have been treated rudely or impatiently. I remember asking a question at an urban library years ago and the librarian didn't say one word to me, just turned his computer screen toward me and pointed to the words there. I have never forgotten that and even though I like that library and even though he was only one person in a large library system, somehow I have his impatient and disdainful behavior in my mind every time I visit there. It isn't fair, but I still do.

So, when I am at work, I am mindful of the impact of each interaction I have with both adults and children and I think I usually do a good job. But a recent experience made me think again about what I am doing. On the educational computer in the children's section, there is a sign reminding parents and children there is a limit of one 15-minute session per child per day. There are many

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reasons for this limit, but probably the most important one is there are many shy children who won't approach the computer unless the seat is empty. So, I keep an eye on the computer and when the very brief message pops up on the screen, indicating the 15 minutes is up, I try to notice. Otherwise, a quick click with that child-sized mouse will start another session and take the child right back to the program he or she was using.

It is a small matter in a busy library and yet something about this has made me anxious enough that when I can, I remind the children their time is up. When I did that recently, however, the parent told me – politely yet firmly – she knew about the limit and had no intention of letting her child exceed it.

I apologized to her and tried to explain the reason for my reminder, but she was right. I should have given them a chance to follow the rules on their own. Everyone deserves that chance, those who always follow the rules and those who haven't been able to in the past. I realized this is another aspect of customer service: We must treat not only each patron, but also each interaction as brand new. We must

drop our assumptions and our preconceived ideas and act on the situation of the moment. It isn't easy, yet it is critical. At a library, people deserve our positive best.

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