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in

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Shelley E. Mosley,
Dennis C. Tucker, and
Sandra Van Winkle



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Crash Course in Dealing with Difficult Library Customers

**Shelley E. Mosley, Dennis C. Tucker,
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Crash Course Series



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To Vicki, Gary, and Steve—Mom always liked you best!

— Shelley and Sandy

To Dr. Jennie C. Cooper, Ph.D., for a lifetime of inspiration.

— Dennis

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INTRODUCTION: A WORD ABOUT LIBRARY PATRONS

Good people do not need laws to tell them to act responsibly, while bad people will find a way around the laws.

—Plato (427 BC–347 BC)

Librarians aren't saints (except maybe St. Jerome, the patron saint of libraries). We moan and groan about the small percentage of customers we think of as problem patrons, who eat up our time, patience, and energy as though they were chocolate truffles. Trust us, when we surveyed other librarians, they had no problem coming up with a list of people with bad behaviors and attitudes for this book!

The hard truth is that most of our customers aren't problem patrons. However, during our long careers, with our combined experience of over 80 years in the profession, we've observed in many different libraries of various types (public, academic, and school) that certain behavior traits and personality types tend to repeat themselves. Public libraries especially, are, by nature, community gathering places. They attract a wide variety of people for a plethora of reasons and some have nothing to do with reading. Most people who visit their local library do so with the intention of being informed or entertained. They are courteous to the staff. They respect the facility and everything in it as a valuable, shared resource to be preserved for the benefit of everyone. They abide by the rules and honor library policies.

But every now and then, librarians encounter difficult customers who disrupt the library, its staff, and other customers. Even though this represents a small percentage of the library's patron base (some experts estimate 1% or lower), when your staff encounter these people, they need to know what to do. Untrained or undertrained staff members or volunteers can make a bad situation worse, especially when people who come into the library assume that every person working there (including the pages) is a "librarian" who has the immediate power and resources to solve their problems.

It's up to you, as the manager or supervisor, to ensure that your entire staff, from the pages to the professionals, as well as your corps of volunteers, knows what to do in these instances. There's a certain inevitability in dealing with the public. It's not a question of *if* problem patrons come to your library, but *when*, and you need to prepare for those eventualities. Most importantly, you need to lead by example.

It's vital to plan ahead and provide training for staff and volunteers to deal effectively with difficult customers. Each situation will have its own unique set of circumstances, so it's not only imperative to do that initial training, but also to have regular updates. Training should include:

- Reviewing written policies and procedures
- Reviewing which contacts to use (such as the police department) when problems accelerate
- Role-playing potential situations and the appropriate reactions to them
- Practicing active listening

When it comes to dealing with difficult customers, staff members have certain rights, including:

- You have the right to be in a safe, healthy work environment.
- You have the right not to be verbally abused.
- You have the right not to be threatened.
- You have the right not to be physically victimized or abused.
- You have the right to be in a nonhostile work environment.
- You have the right not to be sexually harassed or abused.

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- You have the right to be in an open, nondiscriminatory workplace.
- You have the right to say no when a customer request falls outside the parameters of what is acceptable in a public environment.
- You have a right to ask someone to change his or her inappropriate behavior.
- You have constitutional rights.
- You have the right to full protection under the law.
- You have a right to dislike certain patrons. However, you do not have the right to give these people a lower level of service than you offer other customers. Your goal should be a consistent excellent service with a pleasant, professional attitude.

Staff members need to know that management supports them. One of the worst things a manager or supervisor can do is to contradict or reprimand an employee in front of a customer. If it's obvious the employee is in the wrong, the person in charge should quietly step in and intercede. After resolving the problem, the manager or supervisor should pull the employee aside, and, out of the hearing of other people, explain the proper procedure.

The types of difficult customers described in these pages are common to libraries everywhere. Librarians and other library staff will likely recognize most of them and can probably put faces to more than a few.

Dealing with problem customers can be challenging, and something many librarians dread. It requires tact, diplomacy, excellent listening skills, and above all, cool heads at a time when the customers may be losing theirs. Face it—most of us aren't Mother Teresa! Sometimes, when we deal with difficult customers, it takes every ounce of patience we have. And then some.

In writing this book, we're not trying to stereotype people or to poke fun at them. Rather, we intend to address certain types of behavior we have observed repeatedly in our many years of experience. These are real people and real situations. Only the names have been changed. Hopefully, some of our solutions to these problem behaviors will be helpful to you, our fellow library staff. In any case, we hope readers will see that they are not alone when it comes to dealing with difficult patrons.

PART I

Some General Guidelines in Dealing with Problem Customers

This book is intended to identify problem customers and propose some possible solutions in dealing with them. The next few chapters deal with specific situations, but here are a few general guidelines for dealing with difficult patrons:

Ask questions.

Never assume that you have understood. Listen carefully to their comments. Many times, a simple clarification is the key to solving a problem.

Avoid confrontation.

The surest way to escalate a situation is to be confrontational. Stay calm. Don't argue or dispute. Try to remember, the customers are *nearly* always right.

Be aware of what's going on in the library.

Walk around. Don't conduct yourself as though your bottom is glued to your desk chair. Is anyone acting strangely? Is there an adult lingering alone in the youth department? Are there kids or teens clustered around a computer screen? Be conscious of each situation, and try to determine why it exists, and whether it could become a potential problem.

Concentrate on what they're saying.

What words are they using? *How* are they saying them? Don't jump ahead and think about what your next sentence will be. Stay in the now.

Consider cultural differences.

One of the beauties of our country is its diversity. However, this means you will encounter different languages and different levels of English proficiency. This can lead to misunderstandings and frustration on both parts. Taking the time to become familiar with the diversity of your community and the cultures of your customer base will not only be greatly appreciated, but will help avoid potentially embarrassing, if not offensive situations.

Establish a bank of interpreters, people you can call when you need help with translations. Good sources might be other patrons, cultural organizations such as a Chinese Community Center, or language instructors from local high schools or community colleges. These volunteer interpreters don't have to come from the library world; they just need to be fluent in the language you need.

Language is not the only cultural difference. Cultural differences are engrained from childhood and are part of how people communicate. Personal space varies from culture to culture. Some cultures seem

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more excitable, some more withdrawn. Some cultures use sweeping hand gestures when they speak. Widely accepted figures of speech don't always make sense from one culture to another, and similar gestures can have very different meanings. To say "I think we got off on the wrong foot" may make absolutely no sense to someone unfamiliar with that colloquialism, and making a harmless, friendly gesture like a thumbs-up or a peace sign could trigger an international incident in some cultures.

Continue to offer great customer service.

This isn't easy when someone's in your face saying bad things about you or your library, and disrupting others. Consistently great service leads to fewer problems and nasty encounters.

Document. Document. Document.

Record incidents. (See Appendix A.) Use as much detail as you can remember, including witnesses, time, date, and place. A running record of incidents is invaluable, especially in cases where the problem is ongoing, or where different staff people have had difficulties with the same person. In some organizations, if it isn't documented, it didn't happen.

Don't stereotype.

Wholesale stereotyping spells disaster in any situation. As a manager or supervisor, you should be sure your staff is sensitive to cultural differences and doesn't treat people wearing the traditional clothing and accessories of their cultures differently than anyone else. A zero tolerance policy for racism and bigotry needs to be established and enforced for both staff and volunteers.

Stereotyping can lead to a fear of anyone who dresses differently than mainstream America. For example, teens and young adults use style and appearance as a means of self-expression and rebellion. The reasons may not be understood, but the young customers themselves should be accepted. Just because they're dressed in clothing mandated by the latest fads or have piercings and tattoos doesn't mean they're in the library to hurt you.

Don't think of the customer as an interruption.

This isn't always easy. With lowered funding and staffing cuts, we often find ourselves working at the reference desk while trying to order books, plan programs, or develop bibliographies. However, the public is our business, our *raison d'être*. Customers, good or bad, are why we're here. The people standing in front of you, even those who are cranky or angry, should be treated as valued customers. Greet them politely, even if they're being rude.

Establish win-win strategies ahead of time.

Compromise. No one needs to be a loser.

Know when to be quiet.

Adlai Stevenson once said, "In quiet places, reason abounds." It's still good advice.

Listen, listen, listen.

"Be a good listener. Your ears will never get you in trouble." These words of wisdom from erudite cartoonist Frank Tyger can prevent a world of difficulties. Try to hear the problem through the customer's ears. Develop the skill of good listening. Know when to be quiet. Let the customers air their concerns, and then rephrase what they've said after you've listened carefully, and then repeat it back to them. Practicing active listening is a great way to avoid misunderstandings.

Maintain your professionalism.

When angry or frustrated customers approach you, be polite. Introduce yourself. Maintaining a calm, professional demeanor should be the cardinal rule at all public desks in the library. This is also paramount when controlling conflict, whether dealing with problem customers or fielding simple complaints. A calm, constructive approach to problem-solving often elicits a similar response in return. It defuses anger and builds a cooperative relationship. Don't get defensive and begin arguing. Demonstrating a sincere interest in satisfying customers' concerns indicates they are appreciated and valued. Growing up, you might have been told the age-old adage, "Don't stoop to their level." Or perhaps you were told, "Kill them with kindness." Well, maybe Mom was right.

Make, and keep, eye contact with the other person.

Looking at your watch or glancing at some distraction over the person's shoulder are good indications that you're really not paying attention. "The eyes are the windows to the soul." Make sure yours are pointed at the people talking to you.

Pay attention to body language as well as facial expressions.

Furrowed foreheads, crossed arms, tapping feet or fingers, tight-lipped expressions, squinting, eye-rolling, hands on hips . . . the list goes on and on. Each one of these is a clue as to what the person is actually feeling. Body language is expressed from head to toe. In the process of communicating, people tend to say as much with their body as they do with their words, and often without realizing it. Subtle movements, the amount of eye contact, facial expressions, stance and even spatial proximity can reveal far more about a person's frame of mind than their words convey. Being alert to nonverbal cues is essential to controlling the tone of the conversation and allows you to keep the dialog constructive and on friendly terms.

Pay attention to your own body language.

Are you frowning? Are *your* arms crossed? Crossed arms mean you're closed to their ideas. This, and other defensive postures, can exacerbate a bad situation. Are you rolling your eyes? Do you appear open and receptive, or do you just appear annoyed that they've bothered you? Be mindful of your own body language to ensure you aren't sending messages that contradict the concern and sincerity your words are trying to convey.

Put yourself in the patrons' place.

Try to see the situation through their eyes. Why are they upset? What are they trying to accomplish and what obstacle(s) have they encountered?

Respect both internal and external customers.

It doesn't matter if the customer is from your organization or from the general public. Everyone we deal with, including our coworker, is a customer, and should be treated thusly.

Respect the customers' space.

Don't step toward people when they're complaining. No one likes to be crowded. Invading personal space may be construed as intimidating, aggressive, and confrontational, and rarely goes unchallenged. Provoking anger makes problem solving nearly impossible, and the backlash could possibly endanger staff and customers. Keep a respectful distance.

Respond consistently.

Do you really think people don't talk to each other about the library? Think again. For example, the practice of waiving a fee for some people and not others will eventually be communicated throughout the community, and your credibility will take a nosedive.

Respond quickly.

Nothing says, "I don't care" more than telling someone you'll look into their problem within the next 24 or 48 hours, or worse yet, when you have "enough time." You have just communicated to them that, as far as you're concerned, they are a very low, if not the lowest, priority.

Treat people the same way you want to be treated.

Most people know the Golden Rule. Some customer service experts have upgraded the concept of the Golden Rule to the Platinum Rule: "Treat others the way *THEY* want to be treated."

REMEMBER:

HOW YOU REACT TO ANY GIVEN SITUATION IS UP TO YOU. DON'T LET THE SITUATION CONTROL HOW YOU BEHAVE!

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PART II

Patrons with Disruptive Behaviors

Moaners, Groaners, and Other Cranky People

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