Dealing with Difficult Patrons

Presented by
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“The way we communicate with others and with ourselves ultimately determines the quality of our lives.”

Anthony Robbins

Three Main Goals for Dealing with Difficult Patrons

The best time to handle difficult situations is before they occur. Ideally, your library director and board have regularly worked together to create and update policies that address the issues you are most likely to face on a daily basis. Staff should know what policies exist and why they exist; their role in enforcing policies, as well as the role of others (board members, library director, police, etc.); and the amount of discretion they have in managing the situation.

The three most important ways you can prepare for dealing with difficult patrons are:

1. Create and update policies that reduce problems and protect staff and patrons.
2. Develop communications skills to handle variety of situations.
3. Train all staff in dealing with difficult patrons.

Good Communication Is Critical When Managing Difficult Patrons

What you say (and don’t say) and how you say it will set the tone for your interaction with patrons. This is important when dealing with all patrons, and it becomes especially important when handling a difficult or irate patron.

When challenging situations occur, remember these guidelines:

- Observe verbal and non-verbal messages, and respond accordingly.
- Paraphrase to ensure that you understand the problem, and ask the patron to validate your understanding of their problem or concern.
- When necessary, ask questions to learn more.
- Keep the conversation focused on the topic at hand.
- Use silence well. Five or six seconds of your silence will encourage the patron to elaborate.
- Be cautious of using humor. When patrons are angry, they don’t see the humor in the situation.
- Keep your comments factual. Do not take the patron’s comments personally.
- Say “I’m sorry” and acknowledge the patron’s feelings.
- Refer to a supervisor or director when necessary. Know when to involve police.
- If a certain problem occurs regularly, post notices as appropriate.
- Address ongoing issues in library communications; explain that decisions are made with all patrons in mind.
- Explain the rationale behind the situation/decision/request/policy.
- Be direct, yet remain polite and professional.
- Use positive language (ex: for your safety, we respect all opinions, etc.).
- Refer to policies that relate to the situation. Share them with the patron to help them understand your position.
- Alert your library director and board about serious issues.
- Agree on a resolution and proceed with it immediately.
- Let the patron know what follow-up action (if any) will take place.
- If the situation requires follow-up, do so on a timely basis.
How Do You Say It?

When speaking with a difficult patron, remember to remain calm and focused on the issue, offering solutions whenever possible. Here are examples of practical responses that are intended to professionally deal with difficult patrons.

“I see that you’re upset. Tell me about the problem.”
“I’m here to help you. Take a moment to calm down, and tell me what I can do.”
“Please step into my office, so we can talk more about this without interruption.”
“I’m sorry to hear about your experience. Let’s talk about what we can do about it.”
“Thank you for bringing this to my attention.”
“I’m sure we can find out what happened and look at ways to resolve the problem.”
“Our policies were written to benefit everyone who visits the library. It’s important that we follow them.”
“I know that this is important to you, so I will …”
“According to our policy, we can …”

When possible, avoid negative language in favor of a more positive response.

Instead of … Say …

“That’s not my job.” “I’m not authorized to do that, but I’ll find someone who can.”
“That’s not handled by my department.” “I think our reference department can help. Let me find out.”
“We’ve always done it this way.” “That’s our current policy, but I’ll ask our director to reconsider it.”
“That’s not available.” “It’s not in right now. I can put a reserve on it or check availability through interlibrary loan.”

“I don’t know.” “I don’t know, but I’ll find out for you.”
“Go to the circulation desk for more help.” “Let me walk you over to the circulation desk, where we can get more information on that item.”

“You need to take your child home.” “For your child’s safety, we have a firm policy that children must be accompanied by an adult.”

Each time you experience a challenging situation, you also experience an opportunity to prevent a similar one in the future. Speak with your library director about the problem, so he/she can determine if policy updates need to be made.

Make Sure All Staff Members Are Trained on Proper Response

To minimize problems in the future, follow this plan:

- Discuss and list the most common problematic situations in your particular library.
- Review the policies related to handling those situations. If a policy requires an update, the library director may work with the library board to include appropriate language.
- Talk about recommended procedures to handle the situations you’ve identified. The procedures should include proper language to use as well as appropriate actions to take.
- Train all existing and incoming staff on the recommended process.
Case Studies in Dealing with Difficult Patrons

Case Study 1
Fred, an infrequent patron, comes to the circulation desk to pick up a book that he had put on reserve. Jennifer, the staff member, could not locate the book. Jennifer discovered that the hold had expired, so the book was given to someone else, and she explained the situation to Fred.

“I’m sorry, sir,” she explains, “but the item is not available at the moment. We held it until yesterday, and when you didn’t pick it up, it was given to the next person on the reserve list.”

Fred begins yelling, “You won’t give it to me because it’s one day past the hold limit? I was on vacation and just received notice yesterday that the book was here! I came in as soon as I could! I need that book for a project at work! I must have it now!”

He continues to rant and is making other patrons uncomfortable.

How will you handle this situation?

Case Study 2
Lucy, one of your patrons, is new to using computers. Lucy wants to set up an e-mail account, and she has no idea how to do so. The woman repeatedly asks the same staff member for help. Sarah, the staff member, provides polite, professional help for a few minutes. Because of her other duties, Sarah is unable to stay with Lucy while Lucy sets up an e-mail account and attempts to use it. While Sarah assists other patrons, Lucy loudly complains about the lack of service at the library.

How will you handle this situation?

Case Study 3
Alice is a regular patron of the library. She is a Friend of the Library and volunteers at most fundraisers. She has just come storming into the library, waving a book in her hand. Approaching the first staff member she sees, Alice begins to yell.

“What has this world come to? This book contains material about homosexuals! What if a young person were to read this book? This is a public library, and it should promote good values, not this trash!”

Alice continues to yell, and other patrons are beginning to stare.

How will you handle this situation?

Case Study 4
Two small children are running through the children’s area of the library. Their mothers are engaged in conversation in another area of the library. They can see and hear the children, yet they’ve done nothing to control the situation. You asked the children to calm down, yet their wild behavior continues.

How will you handle this situation?

About the Speaker

Tricia Richards is president of The PR Dept., LLC, a full-service marketing communications firm in Northeastern Pennsylvania. Tricia earned a bachelor’s degree in communications/journalism from Shippensburg University (PA) and a master’s degree in healthcare administration from the University of Scranton (PA). In addition, she completed master’s level coursework in communications at Marywood University (PA), where she currently teaches graduate-level communications courses as an adjunct faculty member. Tricia has won multiple national, state and regional awards for communications excellence and has been a featured speaker at several conferences. She is a member of the American Library Association and the Pennsylvania Library Association.