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Robin Milford
University of Western States

Tania Wisotzke
University of Western States

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Introverts and Customer Service in the Library:

An Unexpected Fit

by Robin Milford

rmilford@uws.edu

Access Services Assistant,
University of Western States

and

by Tania Wisotzke

twisotzke@uws.edu

Library Assistant,
University of Western States

Why this topic matters to us:

Robin and I both work in front-line customer service positions at a small academic library where customer service is central to the mission. We both feel that providing excellent customer service is at once the most rewarding and the most challenging part of our jobs. We are also both deep introverts. We have had many discussions—sometimes venting sessions—about what it is like to be an introvert working in a job that is so, well, extroverted. We are betting we are not alone in these thoughts and would like to share with the library community what we have learned, intuited, and experienced regarding how introversion and customer service intersect, as well as tried-and-true coping methods to help introverts thrive in library customer service. —Tania

Introduction

Introverts in our extroverted society can feel outnumbered, and rightly so. Experts estimate that 65–75 percent of the general population is extroverted (Laney, 2002; Scherdin, 1994). In the library profession, however, introverts seem to have a place they can feel at home. In Scherdin's landmark study of librarian personality types (1994), 63 percent of librarians tested as introverted, based on the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator®. However much the composition of library personnel may have changed since this study was conducted, introversion surely remains a common trait among our library colleagues. Yet, despite its prevalence among library professionals, introversion's effect on the work we do appears to have been little studied.

The question arises, then: how might the introverted tendency among library professionals mesh with the service-oriented nature of library work? Customer service work in libraries, especially the front-line variety practiced by access services and reference staff, can involve nearly constant interaction with patrons. This degree of face-time with others necessitates an outward orientation, normally considered the comfort zone of extroverts and the worst nightmare of introverts. As it turns out, this is not giving introverts enough credit when it comes to service. Many of the qualities shared by introverted personalities actually make them ideally suited to provide exceptional customer service, particularly in libraries.

Customer Service Strengths of Introverts

While it is true that an introvert's natural focus is inward, the consequences of this in a customer service situation may be unexpected. An inward orientation often means that introverts are very self-aware, and as Laney (2002) explained in her book, *The Introvert Advantage*,* this sensitive insight into self can carry over to insight into others:

Rather than being self-centered, introverts are often really the opposite. Our ability to focus on our internal world and reflect on what we are feeling and experiencing allows us to understand the external world and other human beings better. What appears to be self-centeredness is actually the very talent that provides the capacity to understand what it's like to put ourselves in someone else's shoes (p. 45).



In the library this ability to put oneself in the shoes of another can translate into a patron-centered approach that is flexible, depending on the needs of the individual. The naturally reflective stance of introverts may predispose introverted library professionals to the patron-centric attitude that is the basis of excellent customer service in the library.

Being partial to internal processing and reflection also means that introverts put a premium on listening. In contrast to the “talking it through” method of understanding employed by extroverts, introverts tend to listen first, silently process what they hear, and only then speak (Laney, 2002). Furthermore, whereas extroverts tend to aim for breadth in their experiences and understanding, introverts prefer depth (Laney, 2002; Scherdin, 1994). Because of this preference, it follows that in conversation, when introverts choose to speak, it may likely be first to ask questions with an ear toward deeper understanding. This way of conversing is reminiscent of the reference interview, where listening and reflecting and asking clarifying questions are keys to a successful patron interaction.

In one-to-one interactions with patrons, introverted library professionals are poised to excel. Despite their undeserved reputation for being anti-social, Laney (2002) noted that introverts are often socially adept, albeit in a very different style than extroverts. Introverts, while not inclined toward small talk, value making meaningful connections and feel most comfortable in conversation with one other person or a small group (Laney, 2002; Scherdin, 2002). Laney (2002) pointed out that far from being indifferent to those around them, introverts are often fascinated by people and like letting others take center-stage. In patron interactions, introverted library professionals may be naturals at letting the patron do the talking, putting the focus where it belongs to set the stage for excellent customer service.

In many ways, including their reflective stance, listening skills, and strength in one-to-one interactions, introverts have the potential to give their extroverted colleagues—whose people skills are certainly enviable—a run for their money in the customer service department. Of course, customer service for introverts is not without its challenges. Fortunately, customer service is as much a set of skills to be learned as a natural aptitude, and introverted library professionals can employ a number of strategies to cope with a work environment heavy on people-time.

Challenges Introverts Face in Customer Service

Customer service in a library means interacting with patrons all day long, whether you are answering simple directional questions, troubleshooting computer problems, or assisting patrons. Your skills and knowledge are constantly in demand, which can be mentally draining for introverts. As Laney (2002) explained,

Just being around people can be over-stimulating to introverts. Their energy is drained in crowds, class, or any noisy or invasive environment. They may like people very much, but after talking to anyone, they usually feel the need to move away, take a break, and get some air (p. 23).



Any introvert who has worked a busy reference desk at a public library or a crowded circulation desk at an academic library can probably relate to experiencing these feelings of overstimulation.

I (Robin) can attest to this overstimulated sensation first hand. I am introverted by nature, so it is ironic that my official job title is Access Services Assistant. I often find myself thinking over the double meaning of the “access” part of my job. In a literal sense, my title indicates that I should strive to facilitate access for patrons. As a metaphor, my title means that I must be accessible. This often means going above and beyond sitting behind the circulation desk. As the circulation manager, I am the person that patrons interact with most frequently, so it is my job to make them feel welcome and comfortable by smiling and being friendly. By the end of the day, constantly interacting with other people can make me feel worn out and irritable. I experience the typical brain drain of introverts exposed to too much stimulus.

Beyond feeling exhausted, I have also found that the different ways introverts and extroverts communicate can sometimes result in misunderstanding. Laney (2002) noted, “Because introverts tend to speak slowly, with long pauses, they can appear hesitant and uncertain of their opinion. Actually, they give deep thought to their ideas” (p. 197). Good customer service means meeting the diverse needs of your patrons quickly and efficiently, while at the same time maintaining a pleasant demeanor. Often in a customer service situation, there is little room for hesitation or pensive reflection. Patrons want answers to their questions, and they want them now. Customer service also means being frequently interrupted, something introverts have difficulty recovering from because it is hard for them “to pull themselves up and out of their deep well of concentration” (Laney, 2002, p. 24).

Upcoming OLA Board Meetings

| Date | Location | Coordinator |
|---------|------------------------|--|
| 9/30/11 | Hood River | Buzzy Nielson/ Robert Hulshof-Schmidt |
| 12/2/11 | OSU | Anne-Marie Deitering |
| 2/3/12 | Washington County | Eva Calcagno |
| 4/25/12 | Bend (conference) | Todd Dunkelberg |
| 6/8/12 | Bandon | Sean Park |
| 7/30/12 | Silver Falls (retreat) | Abigail Elder/VP |
| 8/24/12 | Tualatin | Abigail Elder |





How to Cope

In order to do their jobs effectively, introverts need to develop coping strategies for dealing with the challenges of working in customer service. First and foremost, it is important as an introvert that you find time to refuel your energy reserve. As mentioned previously, if you are in a customer service position at your library, you are most likely interacting with other people all day. As such, when you get home from work, finding time to yourself is especially important. It is no revelation that finding a good work-life balance can be extremely difficult. Finding the time to treat yourself to a lavender-infused bubble bath after work is easier said than done! The reality is that most people have busy lives with social obligations and responsibilities that involve other people (children, spouses, friends, etc.). Often taking time to ourselves is a luxury most of us cannot afford. Simply taking the following small steps at work can go a long way toward nourishing your inner introvert.

Take a breather, literally.

Focusing on your breathing is a surprisingly simple and effective method of calming yourself down when you are feeling anxious or overwhelmed, and it is something you can do without retreating to the break room. A quick and simple breathing exercise you can do at your desk is focusing on breathing in and out deeply while counting backwards from ten. If you have a little extra time, practice abdominal breathing, the process of breathing air into the lungs using the diaphragm. Abdominal breathing is the most effective way to breathe because it delivers more oxygen to the body.

Take five.

Or ten, or fifteen, or whatever your scheduled break allows. Laws about designated breaks and lunches exist for a reason, so do not skip them. Breaks are particularly important for introverts so they have time to recharge their batteries. If it is nice out, go outside and soak up some Vitamin D. If it is raining, try to find a quiet spot where you can be alone and reflect. Do not feel pressured by a supervisor or other employees to work through your breaks or cut your lunch short; let them know that you work better when you have time to stretch and recharge.

Take a (mental) hike.

Prepare for work the same way you would if you were going for a challenging hike in the Gorge. Bring a water bottle to stay well hydrated and plenty of healthy snacks (fresh fruits and veggies, nuts, organic turkey jerky) to keep your energy up throughout the day. Make sure you wear appropriate and versatile attire, such as comfortable shoes. Bring a warm cardigan in case it gets cold. Being physically prepared for the emotional workout of overstimulation can make a huge difference.

Take an empathy check.

Put yourself in the shoes of your patron. It may sound like a simple solution, but it is often easy to forget. Imagine that you have just finished a long day of work and still have to complete a long list of errands. You stop into the bank and the teller seems distracted, tired, and annoyed by your presence. How do you feel? You might just chalk it up to her having a bad day, but you probably also feel a little frustrated. Try to remember a scenario like this whenever you feel drained from a long day of interacting with patrons. Also try to remember that for every difficult patron, there are hundreds of wonderful and appreciative patrons who value your hard work and make your job enjoyable and fulfilling. Try to be cognizant of your nonverbal communication, as it can often overpower your verbal communication. A simple smile can go a long way in your interaction with a patron.

Take charge.

Introverts need to own their introversion by acknowledging their respective strengths and weaknesses. The director at our library is a classic extrovert, someone that loves socializing and gets energized from fast-paced, high-energy environments. She is a genius at off-the-cuff banter and comes up with innovative ideas in a spontaneous manner. When I (Robin) started working for her, I thought, "I'll never be able to keep up!" When she would ask me questions or want my opinions on issues like changing library policies, I would often freeze. I eventually came to accept that however differently we may relate to people, by asserting my need for time and space, we have fostered a more productive and comfortable working relationship. For example, now when she asks me a question I am unsure of, I will say, "I don't have an answer for you on that right now. Let me think about it and I'll get back to you with some possible solutions." She is understanding of this approach and appreciates that I work more effectively when I have time to take in information and then reflect on it. I have found that this is also an effective approach when dealing with demanding patrons. Promise to get back to them via phone or e-mail if you do not have an answer to their questions right away and then keep them informed of your progress. In short, I have come to recognize that while I may not be the best at spur of the moment decision-making, I excel in other areas like research and organization. Being a self-aware introvert has given me more confidence, which in turn makes me feel more enthusiastic about and proud of my customer service position. I have always loved helping patrons. Now I no longer feel like I need a nap to recover from doing so!



Parting Thoughts

Rather than being the exclusive domain of outgoing people-persons, customer service actually requires a combination of outward- and inward-focused processes and skills. Library professionals, like our patrons, are a mix of introverted and extroverted personalities, each type possessing unique strengths and facing unique challenges when working with people. The introverts among us (a sizable bunch) are well suited to excel at customer service, especially if we learn the art of self-care to recharge our energy reserves. We introverted library professionals can at once be inspired by our extroverted colleagues and take pride in our own distinctive contributions to customer service in libraries.

*Thank you to Jane Scott for recommending the excellent book by Marti Olsen Laney, *The Introvert Advantage: How to Thrive in an Extrovert World*. 🌿

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