

Roving “Myth Busting”

Responses to 8 Common Myths and Misconceptions about Roving Reference

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1. Myth: “Getting few complaints means our service is good.”

Response: A common misperception among Library professionals is to believe that a lack of complaints proves that they provide good or even superior service. At the same time, many believe that if their service were not good, their users would certainly let them know. A sad fact is that for every customer who bothers to complain, there are many others who remain silent. Only two to four percent of dissatisfied customers actually direct their complaints to the person or organization that provided poor service. Dissatisfied customers are much more likely to tell others, such as relatives and friends (who are also potential customers), about their complaints. Think about the last time you experienced service bad enough to make your blood boil. Now think about how many times you’ve told the story and to how many people?

To combat this situation, provide ways to encourage your customers to talk to you about their experiences with your services, as well as their expectations, needs, and problems. One way is to solicit feedback via satisfaction surveys, either online via your Web site (such as Libsat by Counting Opinions) or good old fashioned paper surveys and comment cards.

2. Myth: “We’re already busy...”

“Our desk is busy, and our statistics show some growth, so don’t need to provide roving reference.”

Response: This perception is not entirely wrong. Many Libraries are finding that they have trouble keeping up with the demands at their Reference and Circulation desks. Unfortunately, this can be as much a symptom of “lean” staffing levels as it is of anything else. Many Libraries are finding that, although they are experiencing some growth, when they examine it carefully, it is not really keeping pace with the growth of the communities that they serve. In addition, there is an upswing in the complexity of more reference questions, as people use the internet to answer what once were those “ready reference” topics. This means that more time may be spent with each customer. Both factors contribute to make the desk seem busier.

Roving Reference is one of many pro-active service approaches being adopted by Libraries in order to meet the changing expectations of their customers. Customers are now judging a Library’s service by the standards of service and information available to them elsewhere.

3. Misconception: “We already care about customers, so we don’t need to do anything different...”

“Customers express how much they appreciate our help...”

Response: This may be true – but is only a partial picture! Those customers who have experienced the wonderful, knowledgeable, resourceful assistance of Library staff do express their appreciation and delight. BUT - **What about those customers who are reluctant to ever approach the Reference desk and so remain un-served?** Studies have shown that between 40%-60% of Library customers will likely not approach the desk for assistance, even when they need it. Without roving staff, these “hidden” customers are destined to remain frustrated and underserved. The goal of roving reference is to find those hidden customers who need and would like some help, and offer it to them, thereby creating relationships with more customers, who may then grow into more loyal patrons.

4a. Myth: “Patron’s will hate it.”

Typical quotes from Library staff members who are imagining a retail model, and who are unfamiliar with the most professional methods of providing roving reference:

- **“When I go to a store, I don’t want someone hovering over me. I hate that when I’m shopping!**
- **“Most patrons do not appreciate getting harassed with the dreaded “Can I help you?” question familiar to retail sales clerks.”**

- ***“I didn't go into this field to become a floating sales rep”***

Response: Can't disagree with any of this – ***IF this were a true picture of roving!*** I too hate to be badgered or stalked in a store. If this were what was being advocated as the correct method for Roving Reference, then I would be against it too!

Having said that, the truth is that **providing a professional standard of roving service is both “an Art and a Science”**. Doing it successfully requires **“Artfulness”** such as: using your own natural style of friendliness and approachability, showing discretion, sensitivity, keen observation (to determine which customers look like they would like some guidance), and good judgment and common sense. It is also a **“Science”** involving certain laws of Communication and Psychology, with proven methods, most useful approaches and best practices all of which generate positive responses from customers more often. **For these reasons, training in the best professional roving practices is essential to success.**

4b. Associated Myth: “We can ‘do’ roving without any special training”.

Response: See above under “patrons will hate it”, and the reasons why training in the “Art” and “Science” of Roving is essential to success.

4c. Associated myth: “Roving means we have to approach and talk to every patron – even disturbing those who are obviously happy”

Response: See description of “Art and Science” above.

5. Myth: “Roving can only be done when there are two or more people staffing the desk. You can't leave the desk empty”.

Response: You'd think so, wouldn't you? While there are many busy times when leaving a line-up at the desk to go robe would just be silly, the truth is, there are many times during a typical day when there isn't a line at the desk, aren't there? At these times, a single staff member can move around somewhat to provide some roving service. I say this with a couple of caveats. 1. There should be a nice sign on the reference desk clearly stating that the reference staff person is temporarily away from the desk, assisting customers, and will be back in 5-10 minutes. 2. The reference person really must return every 5-10 minutes, or must rove in what I call a “starfish” pattern, keeping the desk in sight as much as possible, and frequently coming back within sight of the desk to see if anyone is waiting there for assistance.

6. Misconception: “Roving really hampers our ability to get our work done.”

Response: Perhaps we need to reconsider priorities here. What is the most important function of staff at the desk? Shouldn't it be serving customers? At the very least, it is critical to examine what kinds of work people are doing when they staff a public desk. The best approach may be to do it from the perspective of the uninitiated outsider, the person who approaches a desk (or not), and who really doesn't know what the staff are doing there. For all they know, the desk is where they do their entire day's work. They have no idea that many actually have another desk in a nonpublic area. So, from their point of view they may be interrupting staff while they are in the middle of something else. How often have you heard a customer say “I'm sorry to bother you...but”? Every time you hear this phrase, you are hearing yet another piece of evidence as to how Library staff are perceived when working at the desk. Customers should never feel that they are an interruption. Customers need to know that they are the reason you are there. Remember – everything you do is observed and interpreted by the customer, based upon their misconceptions about Library staff.

So how do you overcome this problem? Many Libraries are providing desk space and computers behind the scenes where staff can take some scheduled time to work on “off-desk” tasks and projects. Then when they are “on the desk” their main function is serving the public.

7. Misconception: “When it is slow and yet we can't go back to sit at the desk, then I feel that Roving is a waste of my time.”

Response: Certainly we don't want to see highly trained I/S staff wandering empty stacks and deserted computers in vain at slow times, counting ceiling tiles or wearing out the carpet as they doggedly complete their assigned roving ‘rounds’. This is where the “Art” of roving comes in, requiring observation and good judgment on the part of the “Rover” to decide what to do. Is the Branch usually empty at this time? Then rove for 5-10 minutes to make sure there aren't “hidden customers” that you just can't see from the desk, and if you find no one, then go back to the desk for awhile. Develop “customer radar” to notice when traffic starts to pick up again, and get up and go on a roving foray again.

8. Misconception: “If I rove and get a lot of “No’s” to my offers to assist, then my roving was a failure.”

Response: When you **keep in mind the goal of roving**, you realize instantly that “No” is not a bad response from a customer at all. **The goal of roving is to seek out those “hidden” customers who will not approach the desk, and, using good judgment to determine which ones look like they need some guidance, offering to assist. The secondary objective of roving is to demonstrate to customers** (both those you are speaking to, and other “witnesses” nearby) **that you are approachable and that your role is to help them.** So, no matter what response you receive from a customer, your approach was not in vain.

Note: In training, staff learn NOT to say something like “May I help you” as their initial comment or greeting. This is a hackneyed phrase, is not a greeting, and will result in the automatic “brush off “ phrase we ALL use when we are customers in retail environments (“No thanks, just looking”). A Library is NOT a retail environment. Library staff are NOT trying to sell anything...and so the approaches they learn in training are less direct, more casual ...and more readily accepted by customers. But even so, if a customer refuses the offer of assistance, this is not a bad thing. The customer, and others nearby, now know that the staff member is approachable, and is there for them. How many times have you seen a customer who has refused help approach the staff member later?



Joan Giannone is available for Library Workshops, Presentations and Audio Conferences on Roving Reference, Pro-active Service, Leadership and Communication, Managing Behavioural Styles and other topics of vital interest to Libraries in today’s changing Information Environment.

Contact Information

Joan Giannone

President, Mentor Group Training Inc.

(P) (416) 219-9851

(E) joan.giannone@mentorgrouptraining.com

www.mentorgrouptraining.com