



# IMHBCO (In My Humble But Correct Opinion) — Four Mantras for the Patron-Centered Technical Services Librarian

by **Rick Anderson** (Director of Resource Acquisition, University of Nevada, Reno Libraries; Phone: 775-784-6500 x.273) <rickand@unr.edu>

In the interest of promoting a more patron-centered approach to technical services work, I'd like to offer four mantras that we can all chant every morning as we prepare for the day. May they help all of us to align our service chakras more effectively.

## **Mantra #1: My job is not to manage information, but to deliver it.**

In the work that we do, all of us have both intermediate tasks (the things we work on and try to accomplish every day) and ultimate goals (the larger things that we hope our intermediate goals will add up to). As librarians, our ultimate goal should be to get the best possible information to our patrons as quickly and effectively as possible, and to do so in the way that works best and makes most sense for our particular patrons. The intermediate tasks that we set for ourselves should be ones that move us toward the ultimate goal of effective patron service. We catalog our resources so that our patrons can find them; we fine-tune approval plan profiles to bring them into better conformity with our patrons' needs; we monitor usage of e-journals and databases so that we can target our scarce re-

sources more accurately to the needs and interests of our patrons.

The problem comes when we get intermediate tasks and ultimate goals confused. Especially for those of us who work in technical services, it's easy to develop a kind of professional myopia — the kind that leads us to lose sight of our ultimate goal as we focus more and more sharply on the intermediate tasks that lie directly in front of us.

Most of the intermediate tasks in technical services areas have to do with managing information. Thus, the more myopic we get, the easier it becomes to think that our real goal is to create and maintain a well-managed collection. But a well-managed collection is really only a means to an end. The end towards which we're working is our patrons getting the information they want, when they want it, in the format that works best for them. Our ultimate goal is not to *manage* information, but to *deliver* it. This doesn't mean that we neglect important management tasks, of course, but it does mean that we design them with our patrons in mind — our real patrons, not necessarily those who do what we wish they'd do or who know what we wish they'd know.

## **Mantra #2: I will not try to think like a good librarian, but like a bad patron.**

Despite all the progress we've made over the past ten years, our libraries are still primarily designed as if our patrons lived in a world in which good information is hard to get. To really make effective use of a research library, you should know how to use **Boolean** logic; you need to know how to formulate a good search strategy; you need to be willing to ask for help when you need it (and you will). For some bizarre reason, we librarians tend to see this complexity as a badge of honor — as part of what separates us from (insert derisive snort here) the **Google** world.

The problem is that **Google** is not simply a new, simplified window on the same old world of online information. By virtue of its straightforward user-friendliness and the quality of the results it delivers, **Google** itself has fundamentally changed the world of online information. In general, we librarians are not doing a good job of adapting to this new world. One problem, I think, is that we're still trying to think like good librarians. When faced with the Internet, we ask ourselves all the Good Librarian questions: "How can we categorize this mass of information?" "How can we guide our patrons away from the garbage and toward the gold?" "How can we make our online interface more like the traditional catalog that our patrons know and (we're pretty sure) love?"

People prefer **Google** because it's designed for bad patrons, not for good librarians. The ideal **Google** user is someone who doesn't know how to use Boolean logic; who doesn't want to ask for help; and, most importantly, who is much more interested in finding information than in perfecting her searching skills. If we really want to be of service to our patrons, I suggest that we'd do well to focus less on teaching them how to search and more on making it easier for them to find.

## **Mantra #3: Not everything worth doing is worth doing well.**

Your father was wrong about this. Here's the harsh reality: almost all of us have more work to do than we have time available to do it. If you do the math, that means the option of doing everything well is not available to us. Instead, we have three choices:

1. **Try to do everything well.** Unfortunately, this way madness lies, and also ineffectiveness. Try to do everything well and you'll end up doing a few things well and everything else will come out more or less half-baked.

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2. **Give up and sit at your desk in a drooling, glassy-eyed stupor.** Actually, this is usually where you end up if you try to go with the first option.
3. **Set priorities rationally.** Sounds obvious, right? But just try to do it. What makes it hard is that if you have a priority list, something has to be at the bottom. What's that going to be? Review of shelf-ready books? Claiming? Check-in? I guarantee you that whatever you put at the bottom of your priority list will be something that someone else in your library thinks should be at the top, or at least somewhere near the middle, which means you'll have to defend your decision rationally (and sometimes go ahead and proceed without achieving a consensus). Remember, though, that things at the bottom of the priority list will usually be things that still need to be done — it's just that they may be things that can be done less perfectly than other things.

How do we determine which tasks need the most of our time and attention? One good way is to rate them in terms of patron impact. For example, let's suppose that you always review the spine labels on shelf-ready books before sending them to the stacks. Ask yourself how

many times, over the past year, you've found errors that would have kept the patron from finding the book in question. (I'm not talking about an extra zero in the date or a minor typo in the cutter number, but something that would have put the book in the wrong area of the library.) Did you find and fix enough errors to justify the delay the review process puts between receipt of the book and its placement in the stacks? If not, then stop doing it — or put it at the bottom of the priority list, doing a cursory review once in a while as time permits. (Will mistakes get through? Yes. But the question is whether they matter enough to be worth the cost of preventing them.)

This leads to the final mantra:

### **Mantra #4: I can't eliminate error — I can only prioritize it.**

Since most of us work in libraries, chances are good that most of us have been trained, at some point in the past, by someone who would have trained us and trained us for ten years if he could have, hoping that he would finally get us to the point where we never made another error. People like that believe that it's possible to eliminate mistakes, and they're setting themselves up for a life of bitterness and frustration. (Just the other day, I actually had a staff supervisor in my library fume to me that another staffer had made a minor mistake “for the *second* time in *six months!*”)

Now, even the most perfectionist among us can probably admit that some level of error is inevitable. But does that mean we should just

sit back and say, “Hey, mistakes happen”? No. What we need to do is *strategically prioritize* error — decide which types of error are least acceptable, and put the most effort into preventing these. Again, how do we decide which errors are least acceptable? By putting ourselves in the shoes of our patrons. What mistakes will really keep them from getting the information they need?

If we take a hard, rational look at that question, the answers may surprise us. For example, those of us who work in technical services tend to regard authority work as essential. But is all of it equally so? Yes, it's important that the catalog offer accurate cross-referencing for author names. But how important is it that the subject authority work all be accurate and up-to-date? Again, think in terms of patron impact. How often do your patrons search the catalog by LC subject? Maybe a certain level of error in subject headings can be accepted, if that's what's needed to ensure a higher level of quality in other tasks.

Or maybe not. It all depends on how important the other tasks are, and on how your patrons use the catalog. But that's the important principle — it's not a question of professional standards (“How does a good library do subject authority work?”) but a question of patron service (“How can we make our library more useful to our patrons?”).

Are there other mantras that I've left out? If so, please submit them to <rickand@unr.edu> for inclusion in a future instalment of this column. 