

Access the Web – Problem Patrons **by June L. Power, M.L.I.S.**

The original version of this article appeared in the *Journal of Access Services* 4(3/4), 2006.

No matter what type of library you are working in, most have experienced difficult situations with “problem patrons.” Some are serious and some are humorous, but all need to be diffused as calmly and effectively as possible in order to ensure the safety of those in the library and their ability to utilize library resources. Problem patrons, though usually a small percentage of our customer base, can affect everyone around them. Spending time preparing for problems, whether potential or real, is essential to dealing with such difficulties effectively. No list of problem behaviors or library policy can be exhaustive; however, having somewhere to begin is important in supporting library staff and ensuring them that they will be equipped to handle volatile situations. The web sites below all tackle the subject of problem patrons and can give you direction if you need to create a policy, want to brush up on your customer service skills, or would like to provide staff training with such problematic situations. Additionally, many courses and workshops exist to assist you in gaining further experience in dealing with those few “bad apples” in your patron population. After all, the sooner and more effectively we can resolve problematic situations, the sooner we can get back to focusing on the more positive aspects of customer service.

Problem Patrons and Situations

<http://mercury.southern.cc.oh.us/Home/bedwards/introduction.html>

Ever been in a difficult situation with a patron and not been sure of exactly the best way to handle the situation? This web site provides a series of problematic situations, set up as a what-would-you-do type of question. Each scenario is linked to a suggested response. Since the best defense is a good offense, the web site also has a list of crisis prevention tips to help diffuse a potentially heated situation before it becomes problematic

Northeast Iowa Service Area Public Library Problem Patron Policy

http://www.neilsa.org/policy_manual/problem patrons.html

This web site contains policies covering three libraries – Corning Public Library, Conrad Public Library, and Guthrie Center Public Library. This means that there are three very different statements in one document, as each policy is tailored to the needs of its particular branch, making this web site a useful model for public library systems serving diverse communities. The Corning and Conrad Public Libraries have very simple statements. The former focusing on the expected decorum of patrons and the consequences of abuse of library privileges, while the latter speaks directly to disruptive patrons and unattended children, illustrating the need to tailor responses to the needs of each library. The Guthrie Center Public Library Problem Patron Policy is much more detailed, addressing a number of very specific patron problems such as irate patrons, destructive behavior, alcohol, drugs, etc. Each problem is defined, examples are given, and the appropriate staff response is detailed.

Grace Under Fire: Difficult Behaviors, Appropriate Responses

<http://www.nwcentral.org/files/Selected%20Resources%20on%20Dealing%20with%20Difficult%20Patrons.doc>

You will find here a bibliography developed by consultant Sara Behrman of a bibliography of sources aimed at empowering you to deal with those difficult patrons. While it would have been even better had the sources been annotated and the web page updated since 2005, it is still a good list of resources and a good place to start if you want to do some explore the topic more fully.

Managing the Problem Patron and Reporting - University of California Santa Cruz Library

<http://internal.library.ucsc.edu:8080/Internal/Zope/forms/incident/man>

I found this site to be useful not only for developing specific staff procedures for handling problem patrons, but also as a model policy for academic libraries. From general guidelines for handling questions, concerns, and minor annoyances to physical altercations and patrons under the influence of drugs and alcohol, many possible

scenarios are explored. Each problem is described and then is followed by the appropriate staff procedures for handling the situation. Often staff can be hesitant when dealing with problem patrons due to being unsure about the best course of action. Having a detailed policy for staff to rely on not only makes it easier for staff to deal with problem patrons, but also increases the consistency in how these problems are handled from one staff person to the next, ensuring fair treatment of all library patrons.

Security Issues in Ohio Public Libraries

<http://www.uncoverthenet.com/articles/listing/9305.php>

This web site is from a study published as "Security Issues of Ohio Public Libraries," ERIC ED 416907, February 1998. In the author, Michael Lorenzen, notes that the information is becoming dated, but that he is "putting it online as there is a dearth of good information online about library security." I found the references at the end to be especially interesting, leading me to find several articles worth reading. Mr. Lorenzen provides a brief introduction before discussion of library staff perceptions of library security. Electronic security systems and security policies were the topics rounding out the article. The article does a wonderful job of emphasizing the importance of security in libraries. As the author asks in the conclusion, "If library staff do not know how to define or deal with a security problems [sic] due to a lack of a written policy and training, how are library staff going to deal effectively with threatening and harassing patrons?"

Difficult and/or Problem Patrons

<http://lisstlouis.wordpress.com/2007/01/30/difficult-andor-problem-pa>

"Everyone [has] a right to library services, but [our] challenge is to provide the best possible service to the greatest number. We have to be conscious of when **any** patron interferes with or limits our ability to provide access or services to other patrons." This quote from the blog of the LIS people of St. Louis I felt succinctly stated the reason that library staff are so concerned with problem patrons. It is not that we want to curb what we feel are negative behaviors, but to ensure that all may avail themselves of the opportunities available at the Library equally. This particular post to the blog discussed an informal meeting of library folks in which problem patrons was the focus of discussion. The post itself is short and mainly of interest due to the inclusion of a chart, that classifies problem patrons into broader groups – Dangerous, Who Knows, and Nuisances. The chart was excerpted from the book, Patron Behavior in Libraries by Beth McNeil and Denise J. Johnson. The chart provides a quick and easy way of grouping behaviors in order to define staff responsibilities in handling such situations.

Staying Calm and Collected with Problem Patrons

This Power Point created by Susan N. Roberts, Coordinator Research and Training Services, Georgia Public Library Service in 1998 is still an excellent tool for giving a presentation to your staff or administration about problem patrons – or more accurately problem situations. After discussing various types of problem situations – which she classes into circulation disputes, policy conflicts, personality clashes, behavior problems, time problems, and repeated problems – Ms. Roberts reminds us that our best defense is a good offense. She discusses the qualities of strong offense policies and procedures and staff training. The Power Point was a welcome break from reading policies about bad behavior in the library, and emphasizes the need not just to have policies, but to be sure that library staff are aware of them. Staff education through presentations such as this, role-play, and other means increases their ability to effectively deal with problem situations in the library.

Handling Challenges – Customer Service Module 3

<http://www.hals.lib.tx.us/cust123/3challenges.html>

The Houston Area Library System has a very thorough customer service training web site, which I really liked for its section entitled "Handling Challenges." Keeping with the positive customer service attitude, problem patrons here are called dissatisfied customers, and maintaining a positive attitude is emphasized. Rather than giving problem situations and detailing how to deal with them, the HALS instead is focused on crisis prevention. They adapted from Yale University Library the tips provided by the National Crisis Prevention Institute. This adaptation is clear and very succinct, giving clear and practical ways in which to avoid crisis situations. They

finish with some general guidelines for library staff that underscore that respect of others is the main factor in diffusing problems with dissatisfied library patrons.

Keeping Things from Getting Out of Hand – Some Suggestions for Coping with Problem Patrons

<http://slis.cua.edu/sjp/553-probpats.htm>

Like the Houston Area Library System, The Catholic University of America takes a positive and succinct approach to coping with problematic situations in the library. I was not surprised to see that the academic site did not differ much from the public library system site very much, as again respect for others is the concept most highlighted and the general ways in which to respect others doesn't change much from the public to the academic library. The bulleted format of the list makes it easy to read, and pick out the key ideas.

Problem Patrons – Noreen Reale Falcone Library Staff Blog

<http://lemoynelibrary.blog.com/Problem+patrons/>

I included this library's blog, as blogs and other online communities have become a very popular venue of communication for voicing situations with problem library patrons. This particular blog, used internally for service desk communications, included six posts with the tag "problem patrons." Not only does it assist them in communicating with each other about actual situations that they need to be monitoring, but it also provides documentation of the problems the staff are experiencing. While this blog is for use by the staff at the Noreen Reale Falcone Library, it can serve as a template for other library discussion forums. There are also public venues, many of which are available in through LiveJournal and other similar online communities. After all, just like our "problem patrons," we too need to vent.