

PRODUCING QUALITY BOOKMOBILE SERVICE WITHOUT GOING BROKE

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I've been asked to tell you what I know about producing quality bookmobile service. Please bear in mind that I'm a working librarian. What I have to say is what I found out the hard way, by stumbling around and making mistakes. I am not a world-class expert--unless you accept the definition of an expert as "a person who's fifty miles from home." In that case, I'm definitely an expert.

My ideas are strictly practical, in the sense that they work for me. Please remember that they may, or may not, work in your circumstances.

On the other hand, don't assume they won't work, either. I once worked for a man who responded to every new idea with, "We tried that in 1950. It doesn't work." Things had changed, but his mind hadn't.

I fall into that trap, too. Five years ago, I put my staff on a schedule of four ten-hour days a week. It saved lots of money. This year, my boss suggested we might do better on five eight-hour days, but did I want to consider that? Hah! The 4/10 week was my personal innovation. She had to drag me kicking and screaming even to look at the alternative that just because it saved money five years ago, didn't mean it still did.

The moral of that is: no matter how "obvious" it seems

that your way of doing things was handed down by God on Mount Sinai, make sure you're right by testing it against other ways. Because if there's one thing that is essential to good outreach service, it's change.

If your service hasn't changed much in five years, the odds are 100 to 1 that you're doing something that's outmoded, inefficient, or no longer fits the needs of your community.

#### WHAT IS QUALITY SERVICE?

My library has had four directors in six years. I asked each new director, "Should I go for maximum circulation, or serve those who need us the most?"

Every one of them said, "Maximum circulation!" But then they added, "Ah...but..be sure to serve those who need us, too."

I thought they were copping out, but now I see they were right. The most responsible way to use the taxpayer's dollar is to go for big circulation. Your friendly, local government officials (who love you so dearly) are less likely to see your bookmobile as a "frill" and cut it out of the budget.

Then you can also serve the needy people. You just put their stop on the same day you go to a popular stop nearby, and say, "Really, it's costing us almost nothing to serve them, since we had to go right past there anyway." Sneakiness pays off.

This worked so well for me that after several years of threatening to cut the bookmobiles, my County Commissioners

gave up. They couldn't handle the letters and phone calls. Being popular is your best guarantee that you'll still be there to serve the needy.

I'm sorry to tell you that this means that your key to good bookmobile service is cost per circulation. That doesn't sound as inspiring as taking culture to the country, but it's vital. Because, if your cost per circulation is much higher than the Main Library's, you're going to have a hard time justifying keeping that bookmobile on the road.

So how can you lower costs, and still give terrific service?

#### LOWERING COSTS

1. Look at where you stop. Even a small bookmobile eats dollars, so it makes no sense to send your bookmobile to nursing homes or the homebound: those people can't get up the bookmobile steps. If you use a regular van with a wheelchair ramp in the back, you can wheel a booktruck right to their bedside if necessary, and it only takes one person to do it.

Same goes at jails, unless all inmates can come out to the bookmobile. And they hardly ever can.

For the same reason, I'm horrified at the number of bookmobiles that go house-to-house, or stop for one or two families. That's a shameful waste of taxpayers' money.

When I did a workshop for the bookmobile librarians in South Carolina, one guy came up afterward and said, "It's okay for my bookmobile to go house-to-house, because

we get our gas free."

"How the heck do you manage that?" I said.

"Oh, we get it from the County garage."

Who did he think was paying for that gas--the tooth fairy?

It's irresponsible to ignore costs that don't come out of the library budget. Nothing's free if the taxpayer is paying for it, and house-to-house service is very, very expensive.

We've known for years that if you build a new library, your circulation will always double, but only if you build it on a main street. The same goes for bookmobile stops: they won't attract circulation if they aren't visible. Painting them white helps, but it's amazing how people can fail to see a 30-foot bookmobile parked in plain sight.

Put your bookmobile stop on a main road, someplace where people have to go anyway: grocery stores and post offices are good. Please! Not inside a trailer park or housing project. Only the people who live there will use it. Pick a central spot.

I can hear some of you thinking, "If we do that, the kids won't be able to get there." Right. That's because you're going out between 3 and 5 in the afternoon. Naturally the kids can't get there. Mom isn't home from work yet, and they're not allowed to ride their bikes on the highway.

So, you go after 5 o'clock when Mom can drive the

kids to the bookmobile. That way, Mom gets to check out books, too.

Nobody likes working evenings. But, if you don't, you might as well scratch your bookmobile, because (let's face it) in modern America, parents work. You can find a few places where people are home before 5, but not many.

When I took my bookmobiles off an 8 to 5 house-to-house schedule and started going to many fewer, longer stops, circulation went from 25,000 to over 120,000 a year. The way we used to hop around like grasshoppers, you could be in the bathroom and miss the bookmobile. Now, we stay put long enough for people to find us.

2. Hookups. A great way to lower costs. You can put a mobile home hookup on a pole for \$150 to \$200. At mobile home parks, they cost nothing: you just borrow one of theirs.

Most rural towns will gladly pay for a hookup to ensure that bookmobile service keeps coming. Get your Friends to pay for some, or budget a few each year, but get them. They'll pay for themselves the first year, because you won't have to run your generator. Fewer trips to the gas pump, no cloud of stinking exhaust, and no noise. You won't believe the difference in staff morale until you've worked on a bookmobile where you can actually hear yourself think.

We figure hookups save us \$5,000 to \$10,000 a year in gas, plus lower maintenance bills.

3. Scheduling. There are a million ways to schedule bookmobiles: experiment and see what works for you. Four ten-hour days allow longer routes and evening stops, plus maintenance days. Weekly stops are easier for patrons to remember. If you stagger shifts, one group can take the bookmobile out; later, group two drives out in a car and takes over. This gets more mileage out of your bus. Some libraries leave the bookmobile out overnight, while the staff goes home by car. Next day they return and drive a couple of miles to the next stop. It saves a lot of gas. You can even leave the bookmobile in one spot all day or all week.

My bookmobiles are on a "fifth day" schedule. Stops may be on first and third Mondays, second and fourth Tuesdays, and so forth. So, if there's a fifth Monday (or whatever) in the month, there is no run scheduled for that day. We can catch up on in-house work, take vacations, and schedule maintenance. When I told another librarian this recently, she said, "Don't tell me you're still on that old fifth day schedule!" as if we were desperately old-fashioned.

The fact is very little in libraries is really new. Everything has been tried by somebody, someplace. She thought fifth days were old hat, just because her library had dropped them for something else. Fine. The question is, what works for you?

4. Schedule for the convenience of the public, not the staff. Yes, Virginia, that means evenings and weekends.

5. Don't change your schedule very often, once you get one that works. Give word of mouth a chance. It takes at least one year, and maybe five years, to build a stop to maximum potential.
6. Make routes economical. At some libraries, the bookmobiles drive all the way back to the main library for lunch. That's a no-no. Schedule so you hit A on the way to B, and C on the way home.
7. Stop charging fines. They cost more to collect than you make. And fines prevent more people from returning books than they encourage. They're bad public relations, too.
8. Load efficiently. Build a loading dock or extension if you must, but get some way to wheel a booktruck directly onto your bookmobile so you can speed up loading and rotating the collection.
9. Get an easy-to-clear circulation system like Recordak or any system where you just take out the T-slip and the book is ready to check out again. Don't waste hours recarding books.
10. Don't over-specialize service. When I go on a bookmobile and the aisle is full of bags and boxes, I know what they are: Mrs. Jones's romances, Mr. Smith's westerns, and so on. You know how it is; you get in the habit of bringing extra goodies for your best customers. Don't. You can't afford the time. Specialized service rewards the staff, because Mrs. Jones is so grateful. But, it's unfair to other patrons. Let Mrs. Jones get her books off the shelf like everybody else. Tell her your mean old library

director won't let you give some people special service. Having to take the heat is why library directors get paid such fantastic salaries.

11. Get on the same circulation system as Main. It's amazing how this improves communication with the main library staff. Get them to do your overdues; it's much cheaper to centralize the process.
12. Use the fewest possible staff: usually two, except on very small bookmobiles. Be careful, though. A single person may not be safe in some places or in emergencies, and it may create substitution problems.
13. Train all staff to think about cost cutting. They'll have better ideas than you do, because they know their jobs better.
14. Use the smallest possible vehicle. Don't send a 30-foot bus to a five-patron stop. In fact, you shouldn't send a 30-foot bus anywhere unless you have a really busy stop. We have one that circulates 1,000 books each time, so we need a big bus. But, a step van with one staff member can handle up to 50 books an hour.

#### IMPROVING SERVICE

Okay, so you've used these and any other ideas you could locate to cut costs. Now, how do you keep service so good people will beat on your doors?

1. Motivate staff. The main duty of a manager is to appreciate the staff. They're doing the work. You can't do it for them. All you can do is make sure they know that you, personally, appreciate it.



If you go home and hand my list of so-called improvements to your staff with instructions to implement them, you'll create bad service. Why? Because you're implying that they're doing a lousy job now; whereas, they, like everybody else in the world, are already doing the best they can. If they aren't, they don't have a problem; you do. Because, unless people have been made to feel bad about themselves, they will always do a good job. Always. Ask any psychologist.

Better yet, read In Search of Excellence. If you apply the principles in that book, I guarantee your service will improve.

I repeat, a boss's main duty is to appreciate the staff. Encourage and reward innovation and experimentation. If an experiment fails, you've gained priceless knowledge of what doesn't work. Tell your staff they're great. Notice anything they do well and praise it; they will surprise you.

2. Subscribe to Mobile Ideas and contribute to it. It's the only outreach journal we've got. For heaven's sake, encourage it! Do you want to spend the rest of your life reading articles about computers?
3. Talk to other Outreachers. Take a phone survey around your state and find out what others are trying. It might work for you.
4. Do "Management By Walking Around". There's an old saying that the best fertilizer for land is the owner's foot. None of us wants to hear that. We're so behind in

office work that we don't want to "waste time" visiting bookmobile stops. 'Fess up--How many of you are library directors? And how many have visited a bookmobile stop in the last three months?

You've got to go out! And when you go, no matter what idiotic thing they're doing, don't criticize. Let them tell you what the problems are. They'll be so glad you're interested you won't be able to shut them up. And next time you make a suggestion they'll accept it, because you'll understand the system and your suggestion will be workable and will solve a problem they pointed out.

The best thing I've done for staff morale in a year happened because two of my staff were up for job reclassification and pay raises. At four o'clock one day I got word the raises were approved. My desk was piled high, but I jumped in the car and drove to two bookmobile stops to tell the staff involved.

So they got the word three hours before they'd have gotten it anyway. Big deal. Why did I bother? Because they also got the message that I cared. They've been busting a gut to prove they deserve that raise ever since.

5. Get rid of your separate bookmobile collection. Give the main library staff whatever bribes and guarantees you must, but work out a system that allows you to pull books from Main shelves and load them on the bookmobile without having to check them out of Main. It can be done. With a computer, it's easy. Without one, you have to work out a system for catching reserves on the bookmobiles. At my

library, the bookmobiles are searched for reserves daily.

Do it however you can, but do it! If you don't, bookmobile patrons are second-class citizens who get the same books over and over. They deserve the same service as all other patrons.

6. Work your tail off to make sure people get the books they want. That's the one area where any amount of time and money is worth investing. My library has a really amazing tradition of practically killing themselves to get what the patron wants. Start a tradition like that at your library.
7. Understand your community. Consult city/county planning departments, the regional planning council, the health planning council, and (above all) the school system. If you don't understand zoning and school bus schedules, you can forget after-school stops. Schedule evening and weekend stops for heavy use areas.
8. Carry what people really want. In every library there are two groups: the elitists (or snobs) and the democrats (or slob). I am a slob. I have a staff member who is sure that someday a person will come on his bookmobile panting to read Paradise Lost. It ain't gonna happen.

On a small bookmobile, there's no excuse for carrying anything that's not in real demand. Don't be a snob. No matter how much you think people ought to want to read the classics, they won't. And it's not our job to censor patrons' reading. If they want Harlequin romances and Michael Jackson books, that's what you should carry.

9. Publicize. This is hard. You must have printed schedules and distribute them all over the place--not just in the library. If a local station will broadcast schedules, great, but you need printed ones, too. Use the newspaper, posters near stops, and permanent "Bookmobile Stop" signs. (Get them made by your road department; they're very cheap.)

When you've done all that, the best publicity is still word of mouth.

Next best is direct mail. Get your Friends to mail a flyer to routes near slow stops, using their bulk mailing permit. For \$50 you can cover two rural routes. Even your Friends can afford that. And it gets unbelievable results.

#### CONCLUSION

In conclusion I want to say that I think Outreach people are great! They are the most resourceful, creative, enthusiastic, ornery bunch of mavericks in libraries. They can keep a mob of screaming kids under control, cope with a breakdown in the pouring rain, and know the location of every public bathroom in the county.

There are no people like Outreach people, and I'm honored to have been asked to speak to you today. Keep on truckin'.