COUNTER POINT ◄

Technology Should Have A Prominent Place

by Jerry A. Thrasher

Yes, there is a lot of hype about technology, Internet, and the World Wide Web in libraries and society as a whole; and that's OK. I don't anticipate that personal computers will "fade into the social background" any more so than the annual fall introduction and daily promotion of this year's latest automobiles. The promotion and proliferation of cellular telephones creeps into every newspaper and magazine we pick up. Televisions are getting more numerous, a lot bigger and smaller, and going digital on us with hundreds of channels. Personal computers will increasingly become a major part of our daily personal and work life. There will certainly be more of them, and they will be smaller, faster, and have a much greater memory capacity.

Many of us remember when personal computers became the hot thing in the early 1980s. Our library purchased a rather large Tandy product for our administrative office in 1982. The computer made it easier for my secretary and me to proof my letters and memos without having to retype the entire document every time I needed to make a major edit. There are scores of them throughout the library system now. They have improved our productivity, communication, and capabilities.

Since libraries are primarily about providing access to information and the written word to our constituents or customers, it is imperative that we keep abreast of new formats and communications technology. Libraries have added new technology, but nowhere near the amount that private companies and small businesses have. Most of us are behind the curve and striving to catch up.

Although our public library has added technology and will add more in the months and years ahead, we have also added more traditional library services. In the last few years we've added a story time program for 12-to-17 month-olds called "Tots 'N Tales." This is in addition to the traditional toddler, preschool, and school age programs for children.

Other non-techie programs recently offered by our library include "Teen Read," a summer reading program for teenagers, "Family" story times for all ages, and several book discussion groups. Besides the traditional "Great Books" series, the Library offers a book discussion group on African-American authors called "Open Gates." Our "New Horizons" book club is for new adult readers with low level reading skills. This book club was created for adults enrolled in adult basic education classes, GED classes, high school diploma programs, and one-on-one literacy tutoring programs. We even have a monthly "Mystery" book club that is coordinated by the library staff for popular detective and mystery stories readers.

Libraries continue to enhance their information services to the public during this age of technology. Many libraries are creating specialized telephone reference services to allow staff at public information desks to concentrate on giving quality information and readers' advisory service to our walk-in customers. The telephone service desk and the walk-in service desk now have computer terminals that allow the staff to access many more information resources to help answer customers' questions.

Many public libraries expanded their traditional services to offer Information and Referral (I&R) services that provide specific information on local community services and resources to meet numerous social needs. From their extensive files, some libraries have developed printed annual community resource directories for distribution. Libraries are now moving beyond that and providing this information on their online public access catalogs (OPACs) and even on their World Wide Web (WWW) home pages. This is a wonderful example of how libraries can use the latest in technology to provide greater community access to a fairly basic traditional library service.

Modern technology requires reading and critical thinking skills. Often the computer can create the incentive for adults or children to work on their reading skills so they can use the computer adequately. Obviously, technology is not a panacea, but it is a tool that libraries must use and provide to our customers if we expect our institutions to be relevant to the current information and recreational needs of our communities or clientele.

Taking significant steps to provide technology in libraries with stagnant budget growth is very difficult. We should, however, use the technological interests of our funding bodies to enhance and increase our funding to provide computer services.

Libraries should continue to adopt and adapt new technology to fulfill their missions. They should also create opportunities for children, teens, and adults to meet together or separately to share their love of reading and intellectual interests. For the benefit of our customers, our goal should be to maintain and augment the best of our past, as we make room for the heavily requested technology services and resources of the future.