

Readers' Advisory Services: New Attention to a Core Business of the Public Library

by Kenneth Shearer

What customer service provision occurs most frequently in public libraries in North Carolina?

If you chose reference transactions, you are incorrect. The most common transaction in modern public libraries is circulation. In North Carolina, there were approximately 36,000,000 circulations during 1996. Compare that with the number of reference questions during the same year (about 6,500,000), or with the number of people attending meetings annually (just over 2,000,000). Even the total number of visits to facilities for all reasons (just over 25,000,000) was less than circulation.¹ The preponderance of those transactions comes from the circulation of recreational books, most often novels, although videocassette and audiocassette circulation are growing more rapidly than book circulation. Yet readers' advisory services are not getting the attention they deserve.

The following table illustrates circulation in North Carolina's public libraries during 1996 broken down into categories: fiction versus non-fiction and adult versus children. While there is no question that programming and reference are important services today or that NC Live constitutes an exciting new direction in North Carolina, borrowing books from library collections is the most common reason that people use the public library today. This suggests that sustained recreational reading plays a major role in the

lives of large numbers of Tar Heels.

	Adult	Children	Total
Fiction	35%	32%	67%
Non-fiction	23%	10%	33%
Total	58%	42%	100%

From the table we can see that fiction constitutes 67% of all circulation in North Carolina libraries, just over two-thirds. Since much nonfiction reading is also recreational, the circulation of recreational books is a core business of the public library. Recognition of this fact is reflected in a recent cover of *American Libraries*, which had a mock-up of an imaginary advertisement:

INFORMATION MANAGER

21st-Century Public Information and Public Culture Center seeks dynamic customer service-oriented professional to direct strategic visioning and technologically advanced facility.

Bookstore experience required.

MLS helpful²

Because of the great frequency of circulation transactions, it is not sur-

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prising that the area given highest priority in public library planning is the Popular Materials Center.³ That priority clearly suggests that readers' advisory transactions have a claim to support equal to that given to reference service in terms of education for librarianship, bibliographic aids, and budgetary and staffing priorities. Citing a 1994 poll that showed that 67% of Americans used public libraries and of them, 80% went to borrow a book, Wayne Wiegand asks: "What do these statistics suggest to you about the value that 140 million readers place on the act of reading?"⁴

One may wonder how or whether reference and readers' advisory transactions differ. What knowledge and skills do they require? How well are public libraries providing staffing to deal with the leisure reading interests of their clientele?

Reference and Readers' Advisory Compared

In conducting reference transactions, the librarian must first ascertain the precise need of the questioner and then find a frame in which the information can be located. For example, after determining that a questioner wants to know about moderately priced restaurants in Paris, Ohio (and not Paris, France), the librarian, probably relying on an Internet site, locates a current listing of restaurants there with authoritative information on costs and menus.

Readers' advisory transactions differ in

that the reader wants a new enjoyable reading experience that mirrors earlier ones. Duncan Smith identifies the steps in a readers' advisory transaction:

1. The advisor must elicit information about the reader's interests.
2. The advisor must look for the similarities and links between titles and not just their uniqueness.
3. The advisor must be able to establish links between titles based on both the reader's interests and on the advisor's knowledge of titles and readers' advisory resources.
4. The advisor must be able to present identified titles and communicate how each title relates to the reader's interests.⁵

In the past, readers' advisory transactions have appeared to be more difficult to handle than reference transactions because the proliferation of reference tools and classification of nonfiction are decades ahead of developments in readers' advisory tools and fiction classification. A compounding difficulty is that education for adult library service has consistently and for a very long time paid careful attention to provision of reference service but inconsistently, or sometimes not at all, addressed provision of readers' advisory service. The fact that readers' advisory service has its most obvious application in public and school libraries also may have contributed to its neglect in MLS programs, which frequently focus on the needs of academic and special librarianship.

Sharon Baker traced the neglect of readers' advisory service to a failure to demonstrate its value when cuts had to be made during the Depression in the 1930s, a consequence of a failure to collect appropriate statistics and conduct related research.⁶ Nonetheless, in the 1980s and 1990s new attention and emphasis on readers' advisory service developed, especially related to the offering of advice on entertaining novels to read. The readers' advisory transaction, which in the early twentieth century was more involved in the provision of a course of studies related to a nonfiction subject, has changed to the present emphasis on a good book to read for personal satisfaction.

What is a readers' advisory transaction today? Joyce Saricks characterizes it as conversations about books that may lead to suggestions for further reading. With this approach, the transaction simply may provide an opportunity for the reader to express feelings about current reading. The advisor may suggest other

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books that the reader might find of interest.⁷ This approach acknowledges the importance of talking with a sympathetic listener about books that have been read. Since reading is such a private act, having an interested person who shares the enjoyment of reading is in itself a valuable service performed by the staff of the library.

Mary Kay Chelton points out a similarity between reference and readers' advisory interviews: a readers' advisory interview is "An interview aimed at getting readers to articulate what they want ... as in a reference interview you need to probe with open ended questions."⁸

Kenneth Shearer emphasizes the expectation that suggestions for further reading will come at the conclusion of the readers' advisory transaction. He defines the transaction as

An exchange of information between two people with the purpose of one person's suggesting text for the other's later reading interest ... The success of the readers' advisory transaction is reflected in a reader discovering a book (or cassette or software) which is enjoyable, entertaining, stimulating, mind-stretching, and eye-opening; it is in the realm of the subjective.⁹

Readers' Advisory Aids Increase in Number and Scope

Not only is the readers' advisory transaction in the realm of the subjective, it often has a discursive quality and demands a Brobdingnagian-sized memory on the part of the advisor to work successfully in the absence of advisory tools. Fortunately, the number and specificity of these tools is proliferating. In the most popular fiction genre — including romance, mystery, science fiction, inspirational, adventure, western, historical fiction, medical, and law thrillers — many advisory tools have emerged. A Public Library Association preconference in Kansas City this year identified bibliographies of such tools, most of which are current.

At the same time that readers' advisory print guides are proliferating, new automated advisory resources are

making interactive searching of fiction titles possible. For example, NC LIVE contains a version of *NoveList*, including (1) information on over 34,000 novels; (2) listings from major lists of prize-winning novels; and (3) lists of genre and subgenre fiction books recommended based on *Genreflecting* and other advisory tools. The Internet site at www.webrary.org, gives links to over 400 other sites devoted to guiding readers to good books. This site is an excellent source of information about recreational reading generally.

If all that were not enough to demonstrate the new vitality in readers' Advisory service, note that one of the toughest problems in public librarianship, the question of the classification of fiction for recreational reading purposes as opposed to scholarly access, is moving forward. Work by Sharon Baker, Gale Harrell, and Jeff Cannell all shed light on why genre classification should be used in public libraries, and which categories have been most commonly employed.¹⁰ Saricks and Brown's excellent recent book on how to make readers' advisory service succeed in public libraries is already in its second edition.¹¹ Perhaps the most complete fiction classification for recreational reading purposes was presented in a recent Master's paper.¹² An annotated bibliography on the classification of fiction in public libraries appeared in print recently as well.¹³ The Library of Congress's assignment of fiction subject headings makes the search for related works by using library catalogs more and more useful.

Staffing Issues in Readers' Advisory

Some of the major reasons that library staff members found readers' advisory service difficult to provide in the past are disappearing rapidly. Well-stocked collections of advisory tools, one or more online fiction search engines, and proper signage can offer the sophisticated and motivated user the tools needed to search for more recreational reading for personal pleasure. To offer successful readers' advisory transactions, however, library management needs to hire staff with a thought to the provision of readers' advisory transactions.

Research has indicated that much of that service in the adult collections of li-

barians is given by nonprofessional staff, so directors may wish to consider placing tools and terminals near circulation desks and hiring non-professionals who exhibit a lively interest in bestsellers and genre fiction. Robert Burgin has published a survey that suggests that paraprofessionals are far more likely than professionals to encounter readers' advisory questions.¹⁴ Training for circulation and advisory staff and workshops for the general public in use of print and online advisory services, however, is probably best supervised by a professional with an ongoing, lively interest in both the service and the books themselves. It may be worth noting here that books on tape and videotapes can be handled in the same fashion. My video rental store staff spends more time and energy on advisory service than any public library I have worked in or used on a regular basis. They also provide guides to films in a book format and a computerized guide to films. They always carefully classify films in appropriate, popular genres. I find that my students benefit from visiting a variety of book and video rental stores and comparing notes in the context of our Readers' Advisory Studies. The successful strategies of these stores should be adapted for public libraries' print and nonprint-based services.

The Case for Prioritizing Readers' Advisory

I have been asked by library directors how they can possibly justify spending the kind of resources on readers' advisory that they devote to reference. Isn't reference more important and valuable? To answer that question, think about the consequences of each of these transactions. What is the added value of answering a reference question or giving advice on how to spend more enjoyable leisure time? Clearly, the value varies from one reference transaction to another as it does from one readers' advisory transaction to another. The answer to a reference question fills in a gap in a framework that the user wants but does not have. The advice on a good book answers the need for how to best spend many good hours of leisure time. Why would readers' advisory service be thought to have less importance or value than reference service?

Part of the reason that readers' advisory transactions have been neglected in the past is that the task of diagnosing the advisee's need and prescribing books to fill it has been so difficult to perform in the absence of the fiction classifications and tools to help provide

a means to succeed. As we see, those gaps are closing. The other major reason that readers' advisory transactions have been neglected is that reading recreational books, especially fiction, has been seen as less valuable and important than reading nonfiction, especially "serious" nonfiction. The bias in this value scheme belongs more to an industrial age than an age of information, and more to a patriarchal age than today.

The value that modern America places on "quality" free time should not be underestimated when nearly two-thirds of all adults, including senior citizens, work. Just as the problem with information today is managing to glean what one wants from the information overload, the problem with entertainment today is its overwhelming abundance.

The public library is well-positioned to help improve the quality of life by offering guidance through what *Business Week* recently called the "Entertainment Glut." As has been pointed out in library literature, large bookstores such as Barnes & Noble often offer an environment more conducive to the nurture of reading than the public library does. Web sites such as *Amazon.com* often offer more helpful, informed advice on good reading than the public library. One interesting new development reported in *SLJ* in February of this year is the New York Public Library's offering recommended reading in its "Online Bookstore" and allowing users to order books from Barnes & Noble directly from the site. A percentage of the profits go to support the library, and the library promotes books of merit in the process.¹⁵ This imaginative move on the part of New York Public — regardless of one's view of its commercial side — shows that the public library can build on its tradition of being a relaxed place to find joy in reading in the new information environment.

The road to the future of the public library has many lanes. The heaviest traffic is likely to be found among those browsing for entertainment. There is great potential for more and better service in these circumstances. Librarians can create an environment which both helps readers help themselves to find good leisure reading and offers readers' advisory transactions to help users find their way.

References

¹ North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources. State Library. *Statistics*

and *Directory of North Carolina July 1, 1996 – June 30, 1997*, (Raleigh: NC Dept. of Cultural Resources, 1997). See pp. 2, 18-19.

² This item appeared on the cover of the March 1998 issue of *American Libraries*.

³ Kenneth Shearer, "Confusing What is Most Wanted with What is Most Used: A Crisis in Public Library Priorities Today," *Public Libraries* 32 (July/August 1993): 193-197.

⁴ Wayne Wiegand, "Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Why Don't We Have Any Schools of Library and Reading Studies?" *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science* 38 (Fall 1997): 323.

⁵ Duncan Smith, "Librarians' Abilities to Recognize Reading Tastes." In *Guiding the Reader to the Next Book*, ed. Kenneth Shearer (New York: Neal-Schuman, 1996): 103.

⁶ Sharon L. Baker, "Readers' Advisory Services: A Call for More Research," *RQ* 32 (Winter 1992): 167.

⁷ Joyce Saricks and Nancy Brown. *Readers' Advisory Service in the Public Library*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: ALA, 1997): 56-57.

⁸ Mary Kay Chelton, "Read Any Good Books Lately? Helping Patrons Find What They Want," *Library Journal* 118 (May 1, 1993): 33-37.

⁹ Kenneth Shearer, "The Nature of Readers' Advisory Transaction in Adult Reading," in *Guiding the Reader to the Next Book*: 3.

¹⁰ Part II, "The Environment of Readers' Advisory Services: Categorizing and Arranging Fiction Collections," in *Guiding the Reader to the Next Book*: 127-165, contains these three chapters.

¹¹ Saricks and Brown, cited above, is based on the successful practice of Readers' Advisory services at Downers Grove (Ill.) Public Library. It is essential reading.

¹² Charles R. Schabel, "Concerning the Use of a Decimal System to Classify Fiction According to Its Genre: Brand-Named Fiction-Finder." MLS Research Paper. School of Library and Information Sciences, North Carolina Central University, 1997.

¹³ Gouri S. Dutta, "Classification of Fiction in Public Libraries: An Annotated Bibliography." in *Guiding the Reader to the Next Book*: 197-212.

¹⁴ Robert Burgin, "Readers' Advisory in Public Libraries: An Overview of Current Practice." in *Guiding the Reader to the Next Book*: 71-88.

¹⁵ New York Public Library Does Business with Barnes & Noble," *School Library Journal* 44, 2 (Feb. 1998): 18.