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Running head: Case Study Mid-Peninsula Group

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Abstract

In this case study, the authors consider management issues that arise as a result of a public library's decision to carry the controversial *Playboy* magazine. A fictional conflict between a library customer, outraged by the presence of *Playboy* on library shelves, and the under-prepared, untrained employee who must deal with her is described. The authors suggest a comprehensive solution, taking into consideration library policy development, the development of customer service procedures, marketing library policy, and political issues that may arise. Alternative solutions to this management issue are also considered.

Case Study Mid-Peninsula

Managers in all professions face a wide variety of challenges, but the managers of libraries and information science organizations must overcome an array of unique problems. Collection development and censorship are two issues that concern libraries in particular. Usually there is a librarian in charge of choosing materials for a collection based on popularity, patron requests, and local interest, but what if these choices do not meet the approval of some of the library's patrons? The problem is now in the manager's hands. The library may lose patron support or funding if they keep an item deemed inappropriate, but they can be challenged on First Amendment grounds if they remove an item because of its content.

The issues of censorship and collection development are especially interesting in the public library setting because these libraries have the most varied clientele. What one person may find interesting and essential, another may find offensive. A public library serves both children and adults, and there is a sharp societal divide in what information is considered appropriate for children and what is considered appropriate for adults. Movie rating systems, parental controls for the television, and opaque wrappers on pornographic magazines are all examples of our society's attempts to limit the information available to children. If a central mission of libraries is to provide information freely without censorship, how can they fulfill this mission while upholding these societal rules?

One magazine in particular has been a continuing challenge for libraries: *Playboy*. The magazine's complicated mix of nude pictorials, liberal politics, and top-notch fiction has made it tough both to accept and to reject. Academic libraries often have no problem stocking this title but public libraries must consider the possibility that

children will see this material and that parents and community members may protest the addition of *Playboy* to the collection. The community, both through tax dollars and through donations, funds public libraries so patrons who are uncomfortable with *Playboy* may threaten the library with a reduction of budget since these monies are being used to purchase the magazine. A manager must weigh the community objections against the need for a free uncensored library.

Problems in Terms of the Manager

It is not uncommon for patrons to complain about library materials that they find personally objectionable. When this happens, a dispute often arises, creating problems that the manager must be prepared to solve. She must determine if the library's collection policy speaks effectively to the issue of controversial materials. If it does not, the policy must be revised. There is also the problem of balancing successful public relations between the wants of opposing groups of patrons. The manager must stand up for freedom of choice (and those patrons who see value in the disputed materials) and at the same time she must be responsive and caring about the worries and qualms of the person who is complaining (American Library Association [ALA], 1999). Most importantly, the manager and the staff must be trained as effective communicators who are adept in handling difficult people and situations. In other words, they must be well versed in providing top-notch customer service. The manager must also be prepared to deal with an angry or unsupportive library board.

Background and Narrative Details

The Mid-Peninsula Library has stocked *Playboy* for a year now, and the collection development librarian plans to renew the subscription. It is a relatively

inexpensive subscription, and seems to offer good value. The magazine has some thoughtful articles and some of the best contemporary writers contribute fiction regularly. It doesn't seem to be read all that much, but enough to continue its tenure in the Current Periodicals section.

However, one Friday afternoon, a situation arises. A mother and her 10-year-old son have come in after school to check out a few books for the weekend, and the son, on a search for *Popular Mechanics*, stumbles upon *Playboy*. His mother comes around the corner to see him flipping curiously through an issue. She is furious. Taking her son by the ear and the *Playboy* in hand, she drags both to the circulation desk to confront the person on duty. "What is this smut, and why is my child reading it???" The hourly employee, Sarah Taylor, is taken aback. "We do stock this magazine, ma'am, and it is considered a valuable addition to the collection." The patron snorts angrily and folds out the centerfold, pushing her son behind her so he won't see. "Do you call this a 'valuable addition'?" Sarah turns her head away from the picture, and looks around for help, but the managers have gone home for the weekend and there are only a couple of volunteers on duty, who are now looking over to see what the problem is. The mother is now leaning over the counter, red-faced, asking Sarah what she is going to do about this. Panicked, Sarah reaches for the magazine and places it behind the counter. "I will make sure these magazines are off the shelf, ma'am," she says. "I want them out of the library!" the woman screeches, "They are pornographic and my tax dollars should not pay for them!" "Yes, ma'am, I mean, no, ma'am, uh, I will look into that right away," Sarah tries. Finally the woman moves back from the desk, saying "I am a member of the Friends of the Library and we fund this operation! I will make sure this smut is out of the

library or there will not be a library to put it in!” With this, she marches out, pulling her son behind her. Sarah sees the woman whip out a cell phone on her way to the car and begin yelling into it.

Sarah writes up a note for her manager, mentioning the incident, and then goes home for the night. The next day, a manager, Gloria Smith, opens up the library for the day and starts work. She sees Sarah’s note briefly but has enough to do without pursuing the matter further. But at 10 am, the phone rings and it is an angry library board member. “I did NOT know that you carried pornography in the library!” the man shouts. “We have a board meeting tomorrow and I plan to make this issue the primary topic of concern!” Out of the corner of Gloria’s eye, she notices a local television station’s truck pulling into the library’s parking lot.

What does the manager do??

Solution to the Problem

To keep *Playboy* on library shelves, there are no simple solutions that will appease all parties. In our case, the library manager not only has to deal with library patrons or outside groups that may take issue with *Playboy*; she also needs to deal with a potential showdown between management and at least one library board member if not the entire board.

Developing a Coherent Policy

If it has not done so already, the library will need to develop and clearly spell out its policies concerning issues such as materials selection. These policies may not need to deal directly with *Playboy*, but with sensitive issues in general that may encompass other sensitive materials as well.

Developing library policy is no easy task, and will most likely need to include input from most if not all of library administration, input from the library board of directors, as well as city officials such as the city attorneys. Such policy should include the library's position on sensitive materials, the library's role in the community, the materials selection process, laws that may govern the library, and may even include a discussion of social issues at stake.

Developing Customer Service Procedures

The library will need to develop new customer service procedures, and subsequently retrain, at minimum, their frontline staff with these procedures. The news of *Playboy*, or any other potentially objectionable materials, may spread like wildfire. The library will need to be prepared for many concerned if not angry patrons.

Developing new customer service policies can consume many resources. There is the need to do research for new customer service policies. If the library has the resources available, they can hire professional customer service trainers. There is also the cost in time and pay associated with the retraining of staff. This in the end can be a mixed blessing as retraining can improve overall staff performance.

The library staff may also need to deal not only with individual patrons, but others that may require more specialized handling. These can include reporters from various media outlets as this situation can reach the local or even national news. The library staff may also need to deal with larger special interest groups that may fall on either side of the debate. Someone with public relations experience may be needed to represent the library in these types of situations.

Getting the Word Out

When dealing with such a sensitive issue, the library has an opportunity to disclose and publicize their policies and the situation at hand. These can be simple steps such as including a small copy of a policy on a bookmark with each checkout or putting up large postings of the library policies throughout the facility. These steps fall short of a full-blown media campaign, but may create enough disclosure of information to have a constructive discussion rather than a belligerent argument.

The Boardroom

The steps mentioned can only go so far. In the worst-case scenario, there will be a showdown between library management and the library board. At best, the library manager will convey the steps taken by the library, as well as the importance of keeping the sensitive material as part of the collection, and include a discussion of the larger social issues at hand such as free speech and privacy. This may produce positive results such as a discussion of the issues at hand. On the other hand, the library board may become polarized and any discussion and decision-making may come to a standstill until there is a victor in the battle of wills.

In the worst-case scenario for library management, the library board may be set on the removal of the sensitive materials. This can come after discussion of the issues, or even with a preconceived decision, it does not matter. The library manager will either need to make a last stand to keep said materials on the basis of its utility to the collection and the social implications, or she will need to capitulate and remove the materials. If the manager decides to make a last stand, they could lose their position by either demotion or

being let go. If the manager decides to bow to the authority of the library board, there are still alternatives that may be suitable as compromise solutions.

Alternative Solutions

Alternative Solution #1

One of the easiest alternatives to carrying *Playboy* is to carry comparable, but less controversial titles. In the past few years, there has been the introduction of a number of gentlemen's magazines aimed at younger audiences.

These magazines, which include titles such as *FHM*, *Stuff*, and *Maxim*, provide similar content to *Playboy* including pictures of beautiful celebrities and numerous articles. However, with a younger target audience, these magazines strategically design their photo shoots of their featured celebrities to avoid censors or distribution problems ("*Forever*," 2003). The photo pictorials featured in the magazine are probably no more risqué than many prime-time television shows. Likewise, the articles featured in these magazines are also aimed at younger audiences, covering issues such as professional sports, video games, books, electronics, music, and movies. Such magazines have already taken market share away from *Playboy* (Wohl, 2004).

Alternative magazines may satisfy customers who wish to have access to men's magazines while not raising the concerns of those who oppose the library carrying *Playboy*. The less risqué pictorials will probably appease many of those who spoke out against the nudity in *Playboy*. Though these alternative magazines may not be of the same caliber as *Playboy*, which has featured such notables as Lenny Bruce, John Updike, Jack Kerouac, and Alex Haley (Colin, 1999), these alternative magazines do include content that will appeal to younger audiences.

Alternative Solution #2

The library could carry the magazine only in electronic format, which would effectively remove the magazine from plain sight, minimizing theft and damage to magazine issues.

a) Databases/Print Indexes

Strengths - Online article databases and print indexes are a great way of accessing periodicals. Access to online databases can be restricted by asking the patron to enter their library card number. If the cardholder were underage, database access would be prohibited.

Weaknesses - Some indexes do not include access to full text articles. Adult patrons would have to inquire about magazine accessibility to staff and this raises privacy concerns. Savvy underage patrons can access print indexes and read abstracts of articles. Setting up the magazine online (text, links, graphics, etc) might be a time-consuming effort.

b) Microfiche/Microfilm

Strengths – This solution would enhance access to the magazine that cannot be shelved in plain sight. Also, microfiche and microfilm are durable and standardized ways of preserving documents that can be read by the naked eye.

Weaknesses- Depending on the method used by the library, self-serve or not, underage patrons might still be able to access the magazine. The library must have microfiche equipment already or managers would have to rework the budget to acquire it, taking into account disaster planning and preservation. Adult patrons may not know that the library carries the magazine until they ask the staff for

assistance, which raises privacy concerns and might be cause for embarrassment. Also, microfiche image retrieval can be time consuming and patrons usually need to request help from the staff to learn how to operate the equipment.

c) Digital Storage

Strengths - All issues of the magazine can be stored in one or two compact discs allowing instant access to the documents. Digital storage is less expensive than microfiche/microfilm. Underage patrons will not be able to check out the material, effectively limiting access to adult patrons only. CDs can be easily checked out by adult patrons and reviewed in the privacy of their homes where they can also print, fax, or e-mail sections or entire issues.

Weaknesses - Adult patrons may not know that the library carries the magazine in this format until they ask the staff, which raises privacy concerns and might be cause for embarrassment. Patrons might not have access to private computers, thus having to check the discs' contents at the library's computers. The library's computers must be equipped with the necessary software and hardware.

Alternative Solution # 3

Once a decision has been made to continue to subscribe to *Playboy*, and in an effort to minimize customer complaints, there are several ways to diminish the marketing effect of displaying the magazine on the periodicals shelf.

a) Remove the magazine from the shelf. The magazine will be held behind the circulation desk, and must be requested there.

Strengths - This action may minimize magazine theft and damage (pages being removed), and would deter access to underage children. This may also reduce customer complaints, since fewer customers may be aware of the presence of the magazine in the library.

Weaknesses - The need to request the magazine from circulation staff may raise confidentiality concerns. Some adults who should enjoy unrestricted access may be constrained by embarrassment from requesting the magazine.

b) Leave *Playboy* on the shelf, but use the library barcode system already in place to restrict check out to adult patrons. In a similar case in Stockton, CA, the Stockton Grand Jury recommended this action. The rationale was that, since the community legally restricts the sale of this magazine to underage children, library practice should reflect the same standards enforced upon local businesses by disallowing checkout by children (San Joaquin County Superior County Court, 2005).

Strengths - This action should satisfy parents who are concerned about their children's access to adult material. Further, circulation staff would not need to ask a patron's age or make a judgment call; a children's card would automatically prevent the item from being checked out.

Weaknesses - This would do nothing to stop underage patrons from accessing the magazine in the library, as long as they do not attempt to check it out.

c) Cover the magazine or place in a plain envelope.

Strengths - This would minimize the advertising or marketing effect of having *Playboy* in plain sight, since the cover would not be visible.

Weaknesses - The magazine would still be accessible by underage patrons who are smart enough or “lucky” enough to stumble upon it.

d) Combination of barrier solutions. Use a restrictive barcode to limit checkout to adult patrons, in reflection of community values and regulations, and cover the magazine, or put in a plain envelope.

Strengths - This action would allow unrestricted access to adults and prevent the embarrassment or lack of confidentiality of having to ask for it at the circulation desk. Since this magazine tends to advertise itself by its cover photos, covering the magazine would help minimize awareness of the magazine’s presence by underage in-library browsers.

Weaknesses - None perceived at this time.

Alternative Solution # 4

If it is decided that there is too much public pressure and that the library’s funds will be affected negatively, or if the manager does not have the support of the library board to continue to provide *Playboy*, the decision may be made to withdraw it from the collection.

Strengths - This action would satisfy the complaining constituents and remove the threat of possible future complaints regarding *Playboy*.

Weaknesses - Removal of *Playboy* would be giving in to the demands of some while taking away the freedom of choice for others. This could set up a future

precedent in which patrons with varying agendas demand materials be removed from the shelves or else they will remove their support from the library. This could create a slippery slope of no return and affect the library as a democratic institution that supports First Amendment rights.

Alternative Solution # 5

In order to prevent future instances of patron enagement at controversial material, a focus committee could be created. The committee would be composed of several staff members including management, the head librarian, and circulation staff.

The purpose of the committee would be to review potentially controversial or offensive material before it is acquired. Said review would not aim to censor the material but rather to establish solutions and procedures on dealing with patrons' questions, concerns, and complaints beforehand. The committee's findings would be disseminated to the rest of the staff, effectively training everyone on grievances procedures.

The work of the committee would have several positive consequences:

1. The staff would feel confident to have guidance on how to effectively deal with future complaints.
2. The staff would feel valued by having representation by members from different levels of management.
3. The library would be fostering a climate of intellectual freedom by avoiding censorship of material, enforcing patrons' rights to access all types of information.
4. The library would be establishing ethical and fair practices to approach problems.

5. Underage patrons would not be exposed to material they are not yet able to fully comprehend.
6. Patrons would feel secure in their knowledge that the library staff values their patronage and accounts for their sensitivities and needs.

Conclusion

Libraries and librarians are often faced with difficult choices concerning the materials they provide to their constituents. Resources that one group of patrons finds valuable may be deemed inappropriate and unacceptable to another group of patrons. The library manager finds himself in the middle, trying to balance providing freedom of choice and First Amendment Rights with reassuring the opposing party that their concerns are being heard. *Playboy* is one example of a resource that may cause controversy for a library.

In our case study, a patron became enraged when she discovered *Playboy* was part of the library's periodical collection. She was concerned over the accessibility of the magazine to her 10-year-old son. The staff on duty was unprepared to handle the situation and by the next day it had escalated out of control with the library board and the media being informed of the situation.

The manager was faced with the following problems: Did the library have an adequate collection development policy? How was she to balance freedom of choice and at the same time appease the angry customer? Was her staff adequately trained in effective public relations and customer service skills? Was she prepared to address the library board and make a stand if necessary?

Some of the solutions to the problem included: developing a collection policy that would address sensitive materials in general; training the staff in customer service procedures and policies (possibly hiring outside consultants); providing additional staff training for dealing with the media; and publicizing the library's collection policy to members of the library board as well as to the general public.

We also established five alternative solutions. These included: providing alternative men's magazines that would be less offensive; providing access to the magazine via alternative formats, i.e., microfiche, databases, etc; placing barriers between the magazine and the general public; establishing a focus committee for reviewing controversial materials; and discontinuing the magazine all together.

As democratic institutions, which support First Amendment rights and freedom of choice, libraries and librarians must be prepared to defend and protect the choice of materials they add to their collections. In order to do this, it is important to have clearly defined collection policies that address controversial materials and a well-trained staff who can handle any difficulties, concerning the materials, should they arise.

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