

23 (Advocacy) Things (Tips) for Frontline Employees

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So, who are frontline employees? All full-time public service employees, all part time public service employees and public service volunteers.

1. Know your library's issues

Although all employees are familiar with library issues, frontline advocates should be familiar with the issues AND how these issues specifically affect library practices and resources, services, patrons and community constituents.

2. Sign up for e-lists to help you keep up.

The world of information and our libraries are moving along so rapidly, it's important that all employees select processes to keep up with library issues in general and – of course – those issues specific to your own library.

3. Determine what you can say at your public service desk to advocate for the library.

Work with library managers to identify advocacy content that fits into your customer service interactions and represents the library's point of view and articulates needs.

4. Build advocacy issues, text, comments, etc. into your customer service interactions.

Work with library managers to design: comments, phrases, and scripts of advocacy content that fit into customer service interactions and represents the library's point of view and articulates needs.

5. Recognize a "fine whine" when you see it!

Frontline employees typically have standardized communications with patrons. They include exchanges on the task at hand, as well as banter about the weather, etc. Employees should note what makes exchanges successful advocacy interactions vs. whining exchanges.

Whining is:

Patron: I noticed the city's budget was cut. How is the library's budget?

Frontline Employee: Oh, we never get anything! They always cut us first...they have something against us.

Advocacy is:

Patron: I noticed the city's budget was cut. How is the library's budget?

Frontline Employee: Yes, we did have cuts. I know library managers are working on outlines of how the library will be dealing with the cutbacks. Thanks so much for asking, we always need support! Here's a brochure to review how advocates/supporters might help the library.

6. Know your moments.

Frontline employees have extensive experience with patrons. This experience should be used to assess the best moments to advocate. When the patron is rushing to leave the library? When the patron has young children who are tired and loud? When the weather is bad and patrons are juggling rain gear, etc? Pick your moments! Watch for signposts of "not the best times."

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7. Know your patrons.
Patrons come from all walks of life and library planning includes environmental scanning that provides profiles of patrons that assist in planning for resources, services and programs. Profiles aid in identifying possible advocates as well as exchanges that might be more successful between employee and patron.
8. Mentor!
Once frontline employees have fine-tuned their advocacy skills, they should work as trainers and tutors for new employees. Often new frontline employees do not have a commitment to advocacy. This commitment is reached by one-on-one advocacy building.
9. Learn to identify the perfect moment for frontline advocating.
Learn to “read” your patrons to gauge what their interests might be and the best timing for teaming with the library to advocate for issues.
10. Ask for communication/media/presentation training to feel comfortable advocating one on one with library patrons. Request training/continuing education to provide skills sets that includes – for example - a comfort level with communicating advocacy issues.
11. Ask for “frontline advocacy moments” discussions during staff meetings.
Ask managers if they will build in feedback to general library meetings to determine how best to inform other staff as well as identify benchmarks.
12. Connect frontline advocacy comments to services.
Design sets of advocacy content that focus on library services. That is, craft statements that illustrate library services such as “I see you are an elementary school teacher...did you know the library offers special check out to teachers?”
13. Connect frontline advocacy comments to resources.
Design sets of advocacy content that focus on library resources. That is, craft statements that illustrate library needs that revolve around resources such as “Did you get a chance to try out the libraries new databases? We’re requesting more databases for next year. If you use the databases and can provide testimony on how they support you, here’s a brochure. Thanks for your help.”
14. Follow “follow up” protocols.
Patrons may have a number of follow up needs, such as, library requests for expanded advocacy if a patron has indicated interest in working with – for example – local government. Initial contacts with frontline employees should include systematic data gathering from interested patrons.
15. Pick your “battles.”
Not all exchanges are a complete success. Sometimes, asking patrons to support the library or informing them of your needs might bring responses that are negative. Frontline employees need to understand that not everyone agrees, and sometimes “Well, thank you for using the library. I hope you find what you needed” might be the best ending to the exchange.

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16. Distribute library advocacy content to assist in creating an advanced network of advocates.
To accompany verbal interactions, libraries should provide up-to-date, specific issues content to provide follow-up information for interested patrons. Frontline employees provide unique advocacy exchanges that are a combination of discussion and written content. It is likely that general advocacy or raising levels of patron awareness of issues is possible with verbal exchanges but building a network of advocates typically needs written content, instructions and management follow-up.
17. Pass along customer comments – good and bad!
Track comments and let managers know patron complaints as well as patron compliments.
18. Pass along patron questions.
Track comments and let managers know patron questions regarding advocacy issues and initiatives.
19. Refer patrons to others.
Once frontline employees have connected with patrons on advocacy issues, patrons needing referrals for more information and assistance should be noted.
20. Assess success.
How did you do? Did people observe and applaud your style? Have you recruited advocates? Have you referred a number of patrons to the library's advocacy group? Did your advocate testify before local government?
21. Say thank you in advance...
Thank patrons in general or in advance of their support. "Thanks for using the library! Please consider supporting us this fall."
22. Say thank you for supporting the library in the last bond vote!
Thanking patrons specifically is appropriate if the frontline employee is certain of the patron's support. "I voted for the library bond!" "Wonderful, thanks so much, we have a number of needs that the bond money will need. In fact, take a look at this executive summary on our strategic plan. You can see what we will be expanding for patrons these next few years!"
23. Say thank you for patronizing the library!
General closure in frontline patron exchanges can include "Thanks for coming in!" or "Thanks for using the library!" or "Keep using the databases! This brochure gives instructions on how to access them from home."