Personalized Online Reading Recommendations

Service Summary: Librarians will create personalized reading lists for patrons. Patrons will request this service by submitting a short online form with information about their reading preferences. Librarians will respond electronically with a few suggestions tailored to that patron.

Background: This is a growing service, now offered by over 100 libraries of a variety of sizes across the country. It is still new and innovative, but these libraries have created a roadmap for success. They often report astonishing popularity and an outpouring of community support.   According to the Williamsburg Regional Library, the best-known provider of this service, Wisconsin is behind the curve. Only Madison's South Central Library System offers personalized reading lists. By comparison, about 10 libraries in the Chicago suburbs do.

Value:
Reinforcing the library's core values. Helping people navigate an overwhelming amount of online and physical information is at the core of the librarian's value to the community. Discovering a novel that ignites somebody's passion is no less critical to this function than locating a practical or scholarly resource.   Putting our readers' advisory services online will make this essential service more widely available and better publicized.

Reaching teens and twentysomethings. The online format of this service will allow it to reach populations which face-to-face interactions often miss, such as online-only users. Librarians report that this service is extremely popular with our elusive younger patrons.

Advocacy. Individualized attention from a librarian reinforces the the librarian's value in the community. Many libraries that have started such a program have had an outpouring of appreciation and gratitude; this contributes to greater community awareness and commitment.

Description:
Patron fills out an online form. A short form will be available to fill out online. Common questions on this type of form ask about favorite authors or titles, recently read books that the patron enjoyed or disliked, etc.

Librarian creates and sends a short personalized reading list. A librarian will create a personalized reading list with a predefined number of items, perhaps 3-5. Drawing on personal knowledge, readers' advisory tools like NoveList, blogs or reviews, etc, the librarian will select books the patron might like. Each item will be accompanied by a short annotation – no more than a sentence or two – on why the librarian is suggesting it. Turnaround should be as short as possible; 2-3 days is ideal, and no more than one week.

Feedback and Evaluation. With the list, the librarian should also ask for follow-up. Did the patron like these titles? Would they like more in the vein of one or more of the suggestions? This keeps the patron engaged and also helps us evaluate and improve our RA.

Possible Obstacles: The immense popularity of this service can consume a significant amount of staff time. However, this issue can be resolved. Libraries have tried or suggested these solutions: keeping the lists and annotations short, creating a database or wiki of responses to avoid duplication, advertising selectively, adjusting the submission form, or only offering the service at certain times of year. Trying a pilot here would help us evaluate the level of response and decide on an appropriate strategy.

What are other librarians and patrons saying about online personalized reading lists?

Personalized online reading lists have taken off recently, and they've been a hot topic on the RA listserv Fiction_L. Here's what some librarians said.

"Our own library had a very good pilot … a fabulous experience that garnered great patron feedback." – David, Seattle Public Library

"When we did survey, responses were universally happy. We continue to receive repeat requests and gushing emails from people excited about getting their personalized list. We continue to believe that this is both the best way to provide high quality RA service to the many patrons who won't approach a librarian directly and the best way to give practical hands-on RA experience in a workable "off-stage" environment for librarians who are developing RA skills." -Neil, Williamsburg Regional Library

"Teens are heavy users of our online RA service at Edmonton Public Library." - Lindy, Edmonton Public Library

"Teenagers and twenty-somethings use this service at a higher proportion than they use most of our other services. That last fact gives me special pleasure, as reaching those age groups is one of the most difficult things for libraries to do." – Neil, Williamsburg Regional Library

I started doing Online Personalized Readers' Advisory in January, and have met with really great responses from patrons!" - Lexi, North Kingston Free Library

We've really enjoyed providing this service because it gives us a chance to increase our own knowledge and create a personal connection with the patron. – Alison, Multnomah County Library

A few user responses from the files of the Seattle Public Library:

"I was expecting a computer generated list and was so pleasantly surprised by what I got instead. Really, it is as good any present I have ever received. I am excited by every book listed and am so completely looking forward to reading them all! What an amazing service! Thank you from the bottom of my heart!"

"WOW - when I completed that form I didn't think I'd get such a thorough and thoughtful list. Thank you so much for putting this together! I'm completely looking forward to reading my way through this list."

"The only way I'd be more excited is if all these books showed up on my doorstep at once! Thank you SO MUCH for giving this thought! Can't express my appreciation enough. I feel like I won the literary lottery! … I LOVE YOU AND EVERYONE WHO HELPED OUT WITH THIS. I'll most certainly let you know how it's going with the list, and again, I really appreciate your time and attention to this! Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

Contact Audrey B at albarba@milwaukee.gov for more details, specific information on other libraries' programs, a map of similar programs across the United States, example forms, related reading, and general questions.