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COVERED BEVERAGES NOW ALLOWED: PUBLIC LIBRARIES AND BOOK SUPERSTORES

Abstract: As evident in the professional literature (e.g., Fialkoff 1999, Glick 1997, Sannwald 1998), the growth of book superstores in North America has been of concern to public libraries. Despite this little research has explored the relationship between libraries and book stores. A British study (Cartwright 2003) found that book store customers and public library patrons each tended to prefer their own venue. In an earlier study (Dixon et al, 2001; Miller et al, 2003) we reported on observations of customer behaviour in book superstores. This study complements our earlier work, seeking to more fully answer the following research questions: What do people do while they are at public libraries? How much are these behaviours like those that commonly happen in book superstores? How much are they different?

We are doing unobtrusive observation at a large central library and several smaller branches to capture the naturally occurring behaviour of library users. Purposeful sampling is being used to uncover different behaviours associated with time of visit, location and diversity of users. Data is being recorded as field notes. We are using a grounded theory approach with ongoing analysis of for emerging themes.

Our CAIS paper will report on the preliminary results of the study based on our observations up to mid-March 2004. Emerging results suggest that while book store customers and library users share many behaviours, there are differences, particularly differences in emphasis, between the two. For example, reading, browsing, and studying were common to both settings, but appear to occur more frequently in the public library. Our earlier study identified the book superstore as a place where people went to meet friends. Socializing in the public library seems to be quite different. We have observed children playing together while their adult caregivers chat in the children's area. What differentiates this from the book store is that in many cases the families clearly did not know each other before visiting the library. We have observed individuals resting and sleeping in the public library, behaviours that were rare in the book store. While only 16% of book store customers purchased an item, about 60% of library users appear to borrow materials. While many book store customers consumed onsite café beverages, at the library very few users were seen with library café products and when a user had a coffee, it had often been purchased elsewhere. While almost no one was observed using the pay-per-use Internet computers in the bookstore, the free Internet work stations in the public library were usually occupied. Finally library users were frequently observed photocopying and printing library accessible information resources, a service not available through the book stores. These observed behaviours suggest that public libraries appear to provide more access to information than book superstores.

The results of this exploratory study coupled with our earlier study of customer behaviour in book superstores, will help libraries make sense of their relationship with the new book superstores and contribute to our understanding of information behaviours in public as opposed to commercial settings.

References

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