

Taking the time to get it right

By **Chris Sheehy**

In today's fast-paced culture where people are always running to somewhere or expecting instant answers of the 2.0 world, how can you provide readers' advisory to people who do not have the time to wait for well-thought-out suggestions?

One way I found to provide an in-depth RA interaction is through form-based RA. This RA service was created by Barry Trott and Williamsburg Regional Library (wrl.org/bookweb/RA/index.html) and was adopted at Markham Public Library. (Note that at the time of writing, MPL's website was being redesigned and a direct link to its form was not available.)

The form allows the customer to create a reading profile that addresses likes, dislikes, favourite authors, moods, perspective, and format, and leads users to really think about what they like to read and why. Once the form is sent in, a staff person spends time using the wide array of RA tools to create a response that provides 10 to 15 titles that match the customer's preferences. The reply form contains the jacket cover, a brief write-up or review and, if sent electronically, it is linked to the catalogue so the customer can place holds. At MPL we promise a two- to three-week turnaround of the forms, but it rarely takes that long. Libraries considering this service have a number

of frequently asked questions. Most relate to *the how*, *the how long*, and *the how much*?

How do you start this service?

Once you decide to offer this service, the first step is to create an RA committee to answer the forms as well as to offer a wide variety of RA services for the system. If there is already a committee or department in place that handles RA, then this step can be skipped, but depending on size, reading interests, and ages that the form is focusing on, you may need more members.

Here are a few guidelines for your volunteer members:

- Must love to read.
- Must be able to spend at least two to five hours per week working on forms when required.
- Must have access to readers advisory tools.
- In a system with more than one branch, try to have members in each branch to help coordinate forms and responses.
- Do not limit to adult information staff; we have circulation, teen, and children's staff as well.

Once this committee is formed, the fun begins!

Decisions have to be made on what to include on the form (we based our form on WRL's), how the form will be

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made available to the public, what the replies will look like, etc. You will definitely need to have IT on board to have the online form created and placed on the website.

How long does it take to get the service up and running?

If you have a fully functioning RA department that is well versed in all the RA tools, then really it shouldn't take longer than it would to create or modify the form, create the web component, and work out the details of how the service is to operate.

If your library doesn't have an RA department, then things can take a bit longer. Forming the committee, training members in the RA tools, plus everything mentioned above, will take time ... but it's well worth it!

How much staff time does a single form take to answer?

It depends on the individual answering the form and the information on the form. The more information provided, the more in-depth the research may have to be. For the Markham team, the answer is a range of one to five hours. If the members have off-desk time to fully concentrate on the form, it would probably be on the low end of the range; if they work on it on the desk in between answering customer requests, it may be longer. This is why the promised turnaround time for us is three weeks. This timeframe allows for more than enough time to do the work regardless of the staff situation.

My committee and I have been offering the service for the past three years and have answered close to 300 forms. We have found that a wide variety of people use the service, from teens and recent university grads to the recently retired and the lifelong avid readers—all of whom are looking to pleasure-read and discover something new.

An unanticipated bonus? I have found many great books for myself while finding ones for others!

Chris Sheehy

is Branch Librarian at the Markham Village Branch of the Markham Public Library. csheehy@markham.library.on.ca