

## What does it take? Reader's Advisory Core Competencies

By **Sharron Smith**

**A**nyone who works with readers has the best of intentions, eager to get the right book into the hands of the right reader; however the best readers' advisors know that good intentions will take them only so far. The process of connecting book and reader is complex and it can seem like the more you know, the more you realize what you don't know.

It was for this exact reason that OPLA's Readers' Advisory Committee took on the task of developing a set of RA competencies, key skills needed to ensure consistent and successful reader interactions. The four areas of development are: the reader's advisory conversation, collection knowledge, reader service skills, and reader development. The competencies are posted on the committee page on the OLA website ([accessola.com/opla](http://accessola.com/opla)). So what does it take to be a skilled RA?

### **READERS' ADVISORY CONVERSATION**

The cornerstone of this service is the RA interview, or interaction, or more simply the readers' advisory conversation. It is during the interaction between staff and reader that a dialogue takes place, when the advisor learns what is needed to match reader needs and interests and library materials. Solid interviewing skills are essential so that the advisor can clarify the customers' interests, and then make suggestions for materials in a variety of genres, subjects, and formats and at an appropriate reading level. It is critical for the advisor to have an understanding of the appeal

factors of books such as subject, treatment, characters, setting, ending, and physical size.

### **COLLECTION KNOWLEDGE**

To connect reader and book, it is necessary to have an understanding of, and familiarity with, the depth and breadth of materials and resources in the branch and/or library system, including material in all formats and media, both fiction and non-fiction. Competency comes from having the ability to use tools and resources such as reading lists, suggestions from the media, schools and community groups, and personal knowledge of current culture. With this knowledge, customized reading lists, read-alike lists, or reading maps, specific to library holdings, can be developed. These lists will mine the depth of a collection and bring to the attention of a reader the resources available for them to explore. Staff must keep abreast of the variety of formats used to tell a story; technology is ever changing and formats are constantly evolving. Finally, while it is essential to know what is in the collection, the skilled readers' advisor should also be aware of current and forthcoming titles and trends.

### **READER SERVICE SKILLS**

A readers' advisor needs to develop and maintain a non-judgmental approach when exchanging information with a reader. This is achieved when there is an understanding of the importance of story and reading in the lives of our current and potential customers. The most successful service

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delivery will occur in environments where staff, at all levels, are motivated to develop the necessary skills and where a reader-centred focus is encouraged. In these types of situations, staff have ensured that both services and resources are promoted and readers have an awareness of what is available to them.

**READER DEVELOPMENT**

One of the greatest pleasures that readers can have is the discovery of a new author; therefore, we must help our customers to develop an awareness of their own reading interests and of the ability to articulate why certain books appeal, as well as to make connections to similar books. Of course, before helping someone else with his or her development, it is important to understand our own reading interests. Do you know why you read? Do you understand the complexity of your interests, needs, and backgrounds? Advisors must be willing to expand their reading tastes, reading beyond the personal comfort zone. All too often, customers believe we have read everything we suggest. Advisors need to promote the tools and resources available to help us help them. The resources in this area of librarianship have exploded over the last decade, and most libraries now have the tools needed to help readers.

**ACKNOWLEDGING EXCELLENCE**

Many of our colleagues already have highly developed skills in this service area; these are the colleagues we all go to or rely on to help us with the more difficult or challenging interactions. OPLA presents an annual award for Leadership in Adult Readers' Advisory: consider nominating someone for this recognition. Readers' advisory is a key service for our customers and this award acknowledges the importance of the service.

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