

# Don't lead a road warrior existence

## What Access Services can do to survive

by James F. Farmer

**D**riving at 75 miles per hour on the highway, you're halfway to your destination. Your tires are balding and the terrain suddenly gets rough. Are you getting nervous?

That much-needed wheel maintenance might have seemed expensive and unnecessary a few months ago, but now look where you are. Our work lives in the last moments of this millennium are beginning to parallel this nightmarish story. Sure, reengineering, reorganizing, restructuring are commonplace, but is moving around in these circles going to secure our future in Access Services? I don't think so.

### The tire treads are wearing thin

Last year after the flood that rocked our library at Colorado State, we in Access Services got a glimpse of the "Road Warrior" existence that we might lead if we don't aspire to new heights. For the entire month of August 1997, the 12 full-time employees and 20 students of my department were without a home. For us this meant no building, no service desk, and no in-person patrons to check books out to. Rather than outline here how we survived the nomadic aftermath of this event, I want to focus on how it became clear to me that the phrases "no desk" and "no patrons" are prophetic.

How many of you who work in a circulation setting sometimes feel that everyone outside your realm only thinks of you as "the people who check out books?" When you get down to brass tacks, our jobs can indeed be distilled

into checking out books. It's why our job descriptions and the fancy circulation desk with slots for book returns exist. For academic access departments, this single-task orientation is a dinosaur heading for extinction. Your future undergraduates are skilled at computer resources.

It will be more and more commonplace to overhear those jovial, graduating 20-somethings declare how they never set foot in the library their entire stay at school. Our tires are definitely wearing thin.

### A whole new set of wheels

Stopping to put on the spare tire at this point won't help—which of the four aging tires do you replace? If you are going to stop, do so strategically at the next gas station and make wholesale replacements.

In order to be positioned for the new century, some drastic measures must be undertaken now. Peter Senge, a leading advocate for learning organizations, states, "There are two great energies of change in human affairs: fear and aspiration. A problem solving orientation tends to reinforce fear; crisis certainly does. People become addicted to waiting until a problem develops before taking action, becoming more dependent on the problem, the crisis, the reaction and the individuals who excel at this approach."<sup>1</sup>

Don't wait for the coming shift in the "access" business to become a problem or a crisis. Look at the evolution for what it is: a natural

### About the author

James F. Farmer is coordinator of access services for Colorado State University in Fort Collins, e-mail: [jfarmer@manta.colostate.edu](mailto:jfarmer@manta.colostate.edu)

result of technological advances. This is supposed to be happening!

Consider what you aspire to. Perhaps this means positioning yourself with more robust technologies. How is your online circulation system performing in terms of outreach capabilities (for example, electronic mail notification and self-services)? Have you contemplated or implemented an electronic reserves system? Perhaps the direction you will follow will be more high-tech than high-touch. Since print media will probably not disappear in our lifetimes, find ways to take the book to the patron. By far, this is the best reason for your new wheels! I hesitate to keep listing options because, although this is my challenge as much as it is yours, your circumstances may be radically different. Only you will have the creative insight to guide your library when formulating a vision to pull this off.

### **Patching the tires to prevent blowout—for now**

Can't afford new tires? In the short term, there are many things an Access Services department can do to prevent an otherwise inevitable breakdown. Begin by stepping up customer service right now—today! Every patron contact should be cherished. With every computer byte added, our lives seemingly become less and less human. Don't give up this humanity so easily. Your patrons are already your lifeblood, and you must acknowledge it. Future patrons may well transact all of their business via the Internet. Such anonymity breeds a more demanding client. You can be reactive by entrenched and growing a thicker skin, or proactive by improving good customer relations now, while you have the chance to do it face-to-face.

Driving at 75 mph on balding tires can have disastrous results. If nothing else, perhaps now is a wise time to slow down to a safe speed and take inventory of what services you offer and where you want to go with them.

Revolutionary changes can come from small modifications. Don't wait to let fear and crisis drive your planning. Even if you can't act big right now, at least think big! It's about time to prove, yet again, that Access Services is more than checking out books.

### **Note**

1. Senge, Peter M. "Learning to alter mental models," *Executive Excellence* 11, no. 3 (March 1994): 16–17. Available online in ABI/Inform. ■

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