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Going the Extra Service Mile:
The State of Reading Recommendation Services in Libraries

"We believe it is an obvious choice to offer reading recommendations," responded one librarian, echoing a sentiment shared by many of those who responded to an early 2017 survey coordinated by Demco Software, a division of Demco, Inc. *"Libraries have always offered this service!"* noted another. *"It's a mainstay of what we do."*

This paper will explore the results of the survey, specifically:

- Support of reading recommendations services
- Promotion of these services
- How librarians discover titles to recommend to their patrons
- How librarians share their suggested titles
- How recommendations differ across audiences
- The goals and metrics of success for these services

Survey Demographics

Of the 338 librarians surveyed, 93% work for libraries within the United States. While the vast majority of respondents work within public libraries, those surveyed also included librarians from academic, school and special libraries. Respondents represent libraries serving populations of all sizes.

Recommendations Viewed as an Integral Library Service

A majority of librarians surveyed work in institutions that currently offer some form of reading recommendations to their patrons, either as a formal service or on an as-requested basis, and more than half of those work in libraries that have been doing so for more than three years. "Offering Reader's Advisory services is a core part of library service," offered one respondent. This librarian is not alone — many respondents noted the long-standing tradition of reader's advisory services within libraries, and emphasized that patrons often request recommendations. In fact, patron demand reinforces the idea that reading recommendations are integral to library service. Of those surveyed whose institutions do offer reading recommendations, 78% of respondents believe that demand has either maintained or increased since their library first began providing reading recommendations.
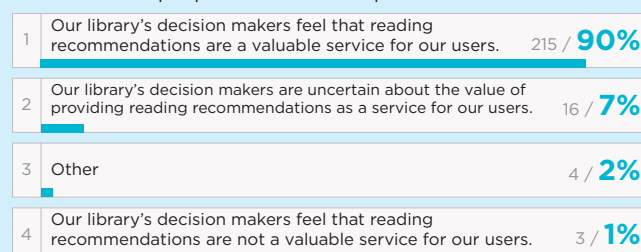
Providing excellent customer service while saving patrons time is another motivation for libraries to offer recommendations. "Many people seem to have a hard time picking out books — there are so many to choose from and it is time consuming," noted one respondent. Another agreed, and described how their library's "large collection can take a long time to browse — time our busy patrons don't always have! Recommendations can streamline a patron's visit, and introduce many to materials which might have been otherwise overlooked." Others surveyed believe that by providing reading recommendations, librarians are fostering a love of reading and libraries. One respondent suggested that providing reading recommendations "is a core library service and a way for us to connect with readers, who then become library advocates."

There appears to be a large amount of stakeholder support within libraries offering reading recommendations to patrons. When asked how various audiences feel about the value of providing reading recommendations, nearly all of those surveyed feel that their library's decision makers and staff recognize that offering reading recommendations are a valuable service for their users. While many librarians at these institutions believe that their users also recognize reading recommendations as a key service, 39% of those surveyed lack data that would offer them insights into how users feel about their reading recommendations.
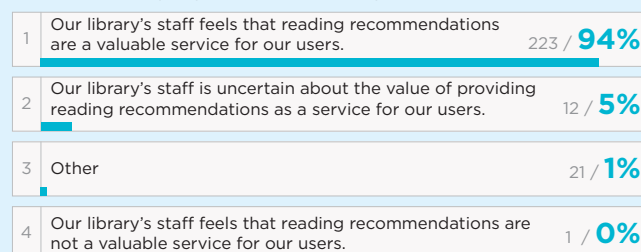
How do your library's decision makers feel about the value of providing reading recommendations?

238 out of 338 people answered this question

1	Our library's decision makers feel that reading recommendations are a valuable service for our users.	215 / **90%**
2	Our library's decision makers are uncertain about the value of providing reading recommendations as a service for our users.	16 / **7%**
3	Other	4 / **2%**
4	Our library's decision makers feel that reading recommendations are not a valuable service for our users.	3 / **1%**

How does your library's staff feel about the value of reading recommendations?

238 out of 338 people answered this question

1	Our library's staff feels that reading recommendations are a valuable service for our users.	223 / **94%**
2	Our library's staff is uncertain about the value of providing reading recommendations as a service for our users.	12 / **5%**
3	Other	21 / **1%**
4	Our library's staff feels that reading recommendations are not a valuable service for our users.	1 / **0%**

How do your library's users feel about the value of reading recommendations?
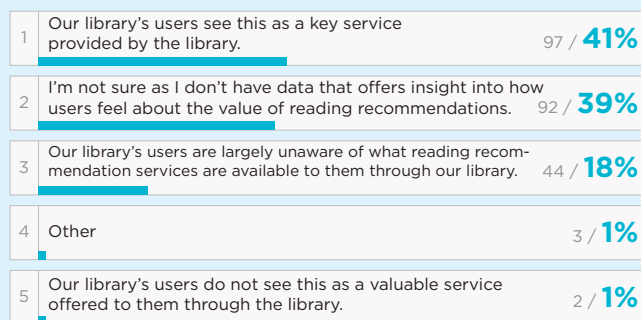**238** out of 338 people answered this question

1	Our library's users see this as a key service provided by the library.	97 / **41%**
2	I'm not sure as I don't have data that offers insight into how users feel about the value of reading recommendations.	92 / **39%**
3	Our library's users are largely unaware of what reading recommendation services are available to them through our library.	44 / **18%**
4	Other	3 / **1%**
5	Our library's users do not see this as a valuable service offered to them through the library.	2 / **1%**

How does your library promote your reading recommendation services? Choose all that apply.
238 out of 338 people answered this question

1	Word of mouth	166 / **70%**
2	On our website	160 / **67%**
3	Signs around the library	112 / **47%**
4	Email	70 / **29%**
5	No promotion — we only offer reading recommendations in response to individual requests.	66 / **28%**
6	Other	22 / **9%**
7	Unpaid advertisments outside of the library	16 / **7%**
8	Push messaging in our library's mobile app	14 / **6%**
9	Paid advertisements outside of the library	3 / **1%**

The primary reasons provided for why libraries do not offer reading recommendations services regard a lack of resources, whether those resources be financial, staffing or time. "When patrons ask, we try to help them, but it is just something we have never thought about implementing," shared one respondent, "We are small with a limited staff." Another described offering reading recommendations as a formal service as "not easily feasible due to technological, privacy, and cost constraints."

Within these libraries, there is a large amount of uncertainty among stakeholders regarding the value of reading recommendations. Though respondents from nearly half of all institutions that do not offer reading recommendations believe their institutions' decision makers recognize the value of providing reading recommendations, 42% believe their decision makers are uncertain about the value of reading recommendations. And while nearly 75% of those working within institutions that do not offer a reading recommendation service to their users wish they could, there is uncertainty about how much their users would value the service, with 43% of respondents expressing a lack of data and subsequent lack of insight. Despite this uncertainty, however, more than half of respondents without reading recommendation services expressed interest in integrating recommendations into their institution's catalog or into an app for patrons to easily access, if possible.

Finding Material to Recommend and Promoting the Service to Patrons
Despite the perception that reading recommendations services put additional pressure on staff that is already stressed for time, the majority of institutions who offer reading recommendations do not spend an inordinately large amount of staff time on the service. Just over 67% of representative institutions spend less than five hours each month developing recommendations, and 52% spend less than five hours each month communicating these recommendations to patrons. Most institutions surveyed promote their reading recommendation services through word of mouth and on their website. Other common ways of promoting the service include signs around the library and via email.
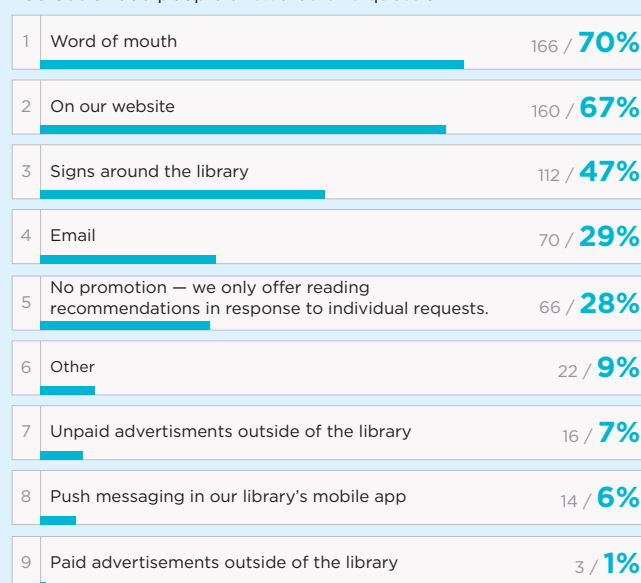
When learning about the types of recommendations a user is seeking, nearly all institutions engage in conversations with individuals to determine their needs, and 68% of institutions offer a read-alike suggestion for a title that a reader enjoyed. This reliance on in-person interviews, however, has its pitfalls, and many of the librarians surveyed described their patrons' reluctance to engage in a reference conversation. As one survey participant described, "People are often in a hurry and don't want to 'waste time' talking."

Communicating Recommendations to Users
When communicating recommendations, more than half of institutions surveyed include information such as author, genre, title and reading level. Less than a quarter of institutions include information such as types of creatures, year published, character names and edition. These numbers map very closely with the types of information institutions surveyed would like to include in their recommendations, regardless of whether or not the institution currently offers a formal service. The numbers show that some of the librarians surveyed would like to be able to include information beyond what they currently provide. For instance, among institutions that offer reading recommendations, only 13% include character names, yet 23% of institutions would like to feature this information as part of their recommendation.
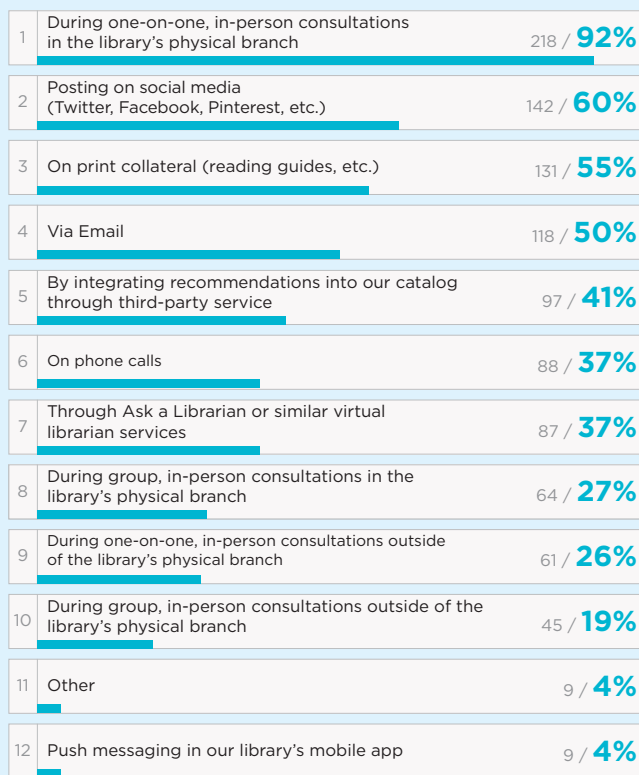
Limitations to providing information as part of the reading recommendation service commonly include time and availability of information. "We don't often dig that deeply into the additional details that aren't readily available in our catalog," noted one respondent. Others shared their discomfort recommending titles they are not personally

familiar with; one librarian surveyed felt that "sometimes the only way to know all of these [pieces of information] is to have read the book!" Another agrees, and feels that "it is simply impossible to have read all the books in a library's collection! There are some genres in which my knowledge is less complete than in others."

Nearly all institutions within the survey communicate reading recommendations to users during one-on-one, in-person consultations in the library. Other common methods of communication include posting on social media; print collateral, such as reading guides; email; integrating recommendations into their catalog; phone calls; and virtual librarian services such as Ask a Librarian.

How do you communicate reading recommendations to users? Choose all that apply.
238 out of 338 people answered this question

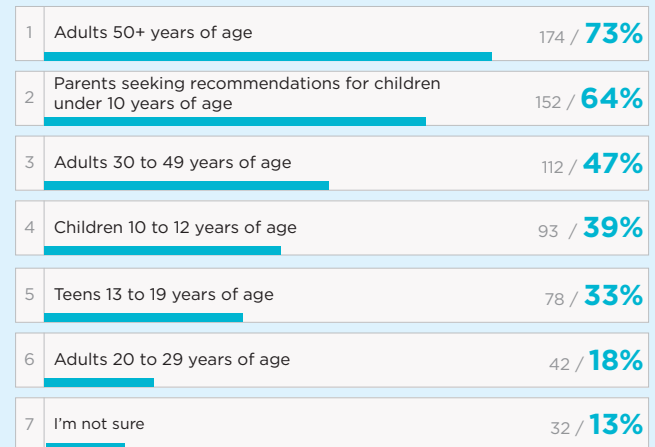|			
1	During one-on-one, in-person consultations in the library's physical branch	218 /	**92%**
2	Posting on social media (Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest, etc.)	142 /	**60%**
3	On print collateral (reading guides, etc.)	131 /	**55%**
4	Via Email	118 /	**50%**
5	By integrating recommendations into our catalog through third-party service	97 /	**41%**
6	On phone calls	88 /	**37%**
7	Through Ask a Librarian or similar virtual librarian services	87 /	**37%**
8	During group, in-person consultations in the library's physical branch	64 /	**27%**
9	During one-on-one, in-person consultations outside of the library's physical branch	61 /	**26%**
10	During group, in-person consultations outside of the library's physical branch	45 /	**19%**
11	Other	9 /	**4%**
12	Push messaging in our library's mobile app	9 /	**4%**

Reading Recommendations Across Age Groups

Libraries that offer reading recommendations find that some demographics are easier to serve than others. When asked which audiences most frequently take advantage of their library's reading recommendations services, most believed that adults 50 years of age and older and parents seeking recommendations for children under 10 years of age are their easiest-to-reach audiences. Only 33% of respondents found teens 13-19 years of age to be a frequent user of the reading recommendations services offered by their institution, and for adults ages 20-29, the percentage of respondents was only

18%. Not surprisingly, these two populations are the audiences institutions would like to better connect with to offer reading recommendations; 58% of institutions would like to better serve adults ages 20-29, and 48% feel a need to better serve teens ages 13-19.
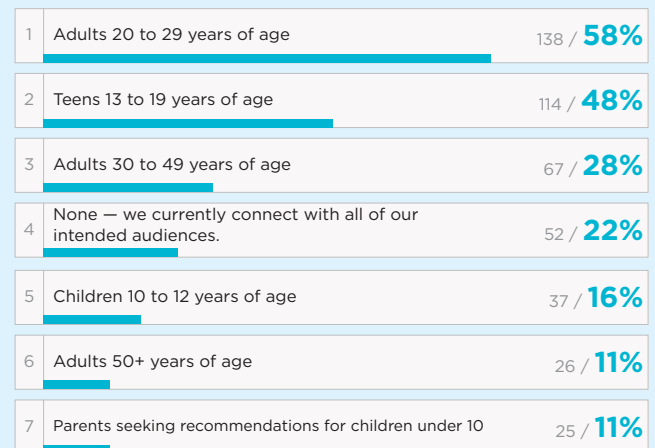
In general, which audiences take advantage of your library's reading recommendations services most frequently? Choose all that apply.
238 out of 338 people answered this question

1	Adults 50+ years of age	174 /	**73%**
2	Parents seeking recommendations for children under 10 years of age	152 /	**64%**
3	Adults 30 to 49 years of age	112 /	**47%**
4	Children 10 to 12 years of age	93 /	**39%**
5	Teens 13 to 19 years of age	78 /	**33%**
6	Adults 20 to 29 years of age	42 /	**18%**
7	I'm not sure	32 /	**13%**

Which audiences would you like to be able to serve but have difficulty connecting with to offer reading recommendations? Choose all that apply.
238 out of 338 people answered this question

1	Adults 20 to 29 years of age	138 /	**58%**
2	Teens 13 to 19 years of age	114 /	**48%**
3	Adults 30 to 49 years of age	67 /	**28%**
4	None — we currently connect with all of our intended audiences.	52 /	**22%**
5	Children 10 to 12 years of age	37 /	**16%**
6	Adults 50+ years of age	26 /	**11%**
7	Parents seeking recommendations for children under 10	25 /	**11%**

The most commonly noted obstacle keeping these institutions from connecting with these two audiences? As one respondent succinctly put it, "They don't ask for recommendations." Respondents viewed teens and young adults as being especially busy and less likely to physically come to the library. This prompts many of those surveyed to view this as an outreach issue, with respondents suggesting that better networking or digital marketing is needed to encourage these

audiences to seek reading recommendations from librarians. However, many respondents make it clear that the obstacles they noted are only suspicions, and that there's a lack of clarity into why they are unable to reach these two audiences. "People either aren't aware of the services … or maybe they're not finding our recommendations as useful as we'd hope," shared one librarian, "We're not sure."

Some respondents noted that the way their institutions develop and/or communicate reading recommendations varies depending on the demographics or age of the patron requesting them. "We have children, teen and adult service librarians who focus on their specific populations," remarked one respondent. Many libraries rely on different resources and tools to promote reading recommendations to different audiences. Libraries with non-English speaking patrons help each patron in their own language. Yet many respondents noted that they do not adjust the delivery of their recommendations depending on age or demographics of the requester. As one respondent described, "We generally approach reading recommendations in the same way, regardless of age — find out what the patron likes to read, is interested in reading that day, and build from there."

## Gauging Success of and Improving the Service

While libraries likely have a host of goals for their reading recommendations services, there seems to be a consensus around three main goals. Over three quarters of institutions that offer reading recommendations to patrons agree that their goals include:

- Fostering greater community engagement by offering additional value to users
- Driving discovery of all of the library's resources
- Increasing circulation of the library's print titles

Over half of respondents hope that their recommendations service will increase usage of the library's digital titles. For some librarians, the goal is simple — as one respondent put it, "Make the reader happy!"

What goals do you have for your reading recommendations service? Choose all that apply.
238 out of 338 people answered this question

1	Fostering greater community engagement by offering additional value to users	191 /	**80%**
2	Driving discovery of all the library's resources, whether print, digital or in another format	184 /	**77%**
3	Increasing circulation of the library's print titles	180 /	**76%**
4	Increasing usage of the library's digital titles	132 /	**55%**
5	Other	15 /	**6%**
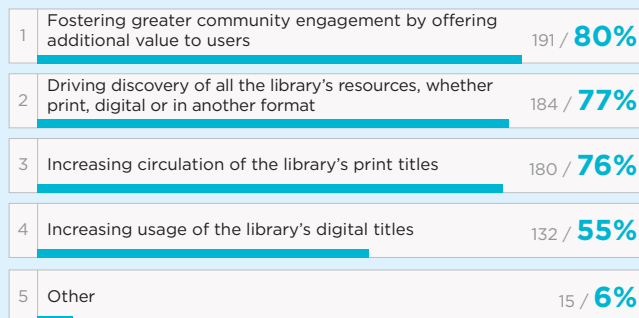
Librarians also have ideas on how they would like to expand or enhance their institution's reading recommendation services. Over half of respondents noted the following avenues for

reading recommendations service integration: summer or year-round reading programs, library catalog and an app for patrons to easily access.

Despite these goals and ideas for improvement, nearly all libraries surveyed have no formal system in place for tracking patron satisfaction with reading recommendations. Most institutions rely on informal feedback, such as comment cards or casual user feedback. The most common complaint received around reading recommendation programs, noted by nearly half (47%) of the respondents, is patron disappointment when a librarian recommended a book in a series that the library didn't offer in its entirety. However, 45% of respondents are unaware of the various complaints received, likely due to the aforementioned lack of data collection of patron satisfaction regarding reading recommendations.

Conclusion

Overall, patrons and librarians alike recognize reading recommendations as a valuable service. Users benefit from easily finding titles that match their interests since librarians offer the sort of on-demand, highly targeted suggestions they've become accustomed to with other online experiences. Perhaps most importantly, librarians have an easy avenue to cultivating the future generation of avid readers, the ones who will fight to keep libraries thriving for years to come.

Appendix — Complete Reading Recommendations Survey Results

Where is your library located?
338 out of 338 people answered this question

1	North America — United States	313	**93%**
2	North America — Canada	17	**5%**
3	Australia/Oceania	3	**1%**
4	Europe	2	**1%**
5	North America — Mexico	2	**1%**
6	Africa	1	**0%**
7	Antarctica	0	**0%**
8	Asia	0	**0%**
9	Central America	0	**0%**
10	South America	0	**0%**

In what type of library do you work?
338 out of 338 people answered this question

1	Public	304	**90%**
2	Academic (2-year or 4-year institution)	19	**6%**
3	School (K-12)	7	**2%**
4	Other	5	**1%**
5	Special	3	**1%**

What is the size of the population that your library serves?
338 out of 338 people answered this question

1	25,001 to 50,000	72	**21%**
2	Under 10,000	68	**20%**
3	50,001 to 100,000	66	**20%**
4	100,001 to 500,000	59	**17%**
5	10,000 to 25,000	58	**17%**
6	Over 500,000	15	**4%**

Does your library currently offer reading recommendations as a formal service?
338 out of 338 people answered this question

1	Yes (either as a formal service or on an as-requested basis).	238	**70%**
2	No.	100	**30%**

Do you wish that your library could provide a reading recommendation service to users?
100 out of 338 people answered this question

1	Yes.	72	**72%**
2	No.	28	**28%**

How do your library's decision makers feel about the value of providing reading recommendations?
72 out of 338 people answered this question

1	Our library's decision makers feel that reading recommendations are a valuable service for our users.	35	**49%**
2	Our library's decision makers are uncertain about the value of providing reading recommendations as a service for our users.	30	**42%**
3	Other	5	**7%**
4	Our library's decision makers feel that reading recommendations are not a valuable service for our users.	2	**3%**

How does your library's staff feel about the value of reading recommendations?
72 out of 338 people answered this question

1	Our library's staff feels that reading recommendations are a valuable service for our users.	43	**60%**
2	Our library's staff is uncertain about the value of providing reading recommendations as a service for our users.	24	**33%**
3	Other	3	**4%**
4	Our library's staff feels that reading recommendations are not a valuable service for our users.	2	**3%**

How do your library's users feel about the value of reading recommendations?
72 out of 338 people answered this question

1	I'm not sure as I don't have data that offers insight into how users feel about the value of reading recommendations.	31	**43%**
2	Our library's users are largely unaware of what reading recommendation services are available to them through our library.	26	**36%**
3	Our library's users see this as a key service provided by the library.	13	**18%**
4	Other	2	**3%**
5	Our library's users do not see this as a valuable service offered to them through the library.	0	**0%**

What information would you ideally be able to provide when offering a reading recommendation? Choose all that apply.
72 out of 338 people answered this question

1	Author	66	**92%**
2	Genre	66	**92%**
3	Title	61	**85%**
4	Reading level	43	**60%**
5	Setting	34	**47%**
6	Types of characters	33	**46%**
7	Awards won by the title	29	**40%**
8	Year published	24	**33%**
9	Character names	14	**19%**
10	Types of creatures	13	**18%**
9	Edition	4	**6%**
10	Other	1	**1%**

Which of the following reading recommendation services would you be interested in, if possible?
72 out of 338 people answered this question

1	Integrating reading recommendations into our catalog.	45	**63%**
2	Integrating reading recommendations into an app for patrons to easily access.	41	**57%**
3	Integrating reading recommendations into our summer or year-round reading programs.	31	**43%**
4	Integrating reading recommendations into our library calendar and event management software.	20	**28%**
5	Other	3	**4%**

When did your library first start providing reading recommendations as a formal service?
238 out of 338 people answered this question

1	Over three years ago	126	**53%**
2	I'm not sure	71	**30%**
3	Within the last year	17	**7%**
4	Within the last three years	15	**6%**
5	Within the last two years	9	**4%**

What trends are you seeing around your library's reading recommendations service?
238 out of 338 people answered this question

1	It's the same amount of demand as it has been since our library first started providing reading recommendations.	118	**50%**
2	Users are seeking reading recommendations from our librarians more frequently than before.	67	**28%**
3	It is becoming less in demand as users rely more frequently on recommendations they find online.	45	**19%**
4	Other	8	**3%**

How much of your staff's time each month is dedicated to *developing* recommendations?
238 out of 338 people answered this question

1	Under 5 hours	160	**67%**
2	6 to 20 hours	66	**28%**
3	21 to 30 hours	9	**4%**
4	Over 41 hours	3	**1%**

How much of your staff's time each month is dedicated to *communicating* recommendations to users?
238 out of 338 people answered this question

1	Under 5 hours	124	**52%**
2	6 to 20 hours	94	**39%**
3	21 to 40 hours	12	**5%**
4	Over 41 hours	8	**3%**

How does your library learn more about the type of recommendation a user is seeking? Choose all that apply.
238 out of 338 people answered this question

1	We have conversations with each individual user to determine their needs.	216 / 91%
2	We focus on offering a read-alike suggestion for one title that the reader enjoyed.	162 / 68%
3	We have a multiple question survey that users complete so that we can gain a better understanding of their general interests.	44 / 18%
4	Other	6 / 3%

What information do you *currently provide* when offering a reading recommendation? Choose all that apply?
238 out of 338 people answered this question

1	Author	228 / 96%
2	Genre	207 / 87%
3	Title	201 / 84%
4	Reading level	134 / 56%
5	Types of characters	110 / 46%
6	Setting	102 / 43%
7	Awards won by the title	101 / 42%
8	Types of creatures	48 / 20%
9	Year published	47 / 20%
10	Character names	31 / 13%
11	Other	24 / 10%
12	Edition	14 / 6%

What information would you *like to provide* when offering a reading recommendation? Choose all that apply.
238 out of 338 people answered this question

1	Author	162 / 68%
2	Genre	157 / 66%
3	Title	152 / 64%
4	Reading level	125 / 53%
5	Awards won by the title	119 / 50%
6	Types of characters	116 / 49%
7	Setting	114 / 48%
8	Types of creatures	67 / 28%
9	Character name	55 / 23%
10	Year published	53 / 22%
11	Other	36 / 15%
12	Edition	28 / 12%

Choose all of the following that are key factors that you consider when determining if you should recommend a title.
238 out of 338 people answered this question

1	If the title is available in any format at my library	197 / 83%
2	If the title is on the users' reading level	147 / 62%
3	If the title is available *in print specifically* at my library	124 / 52%
4	If the title was recently published	71 / 30%
5	If the title is available *as an audiobook specifically* at my library	70 / 29%
6	If the title is available *in digital format specifically* at my library	60 / 25%
7	If the title is local	56 / 24%
8	If diverse perspectives are included in the title	48 / 20%

Does your library integrate user reviews into reading recommendations?
238 out of 338 people answered this question

1	No.	134 / 56%
2	Yes.	70 / 29%
3	I'm not sure.	34 / 14%

Is making suggestions based on an individual's expressed or implied behaviors or preferences important to your library when giving reading recommendations?
238 out of 338 people answered this question

1	Yes, we personalize our suggestions as often as possible.	215 / 89%
2	No, we hadn't considered personalizing recommendations.	16 / 7%
3	No, we do not personalize our recommendations due to privacy concerns.	7 / 3%
4	No, we receive too many requests for recommendations so we do not personalize.	4 / 2%

What tools do you use to determine what titles you should recommend?
238 out of 338 people answered this question

1	Open web tools (GoodReads, etc.)	209 / 88%
2	Third-party services that we subscribe to or buy (Novelist, LibraryThing for Libraries, etc.).	190 / 80%
3	Advanced copies of titles	84 / 35%
4	Other	36 / 15%

What complaints do you receive most often around your reading recommendations? Choose all that apply.
238 out of 338 people answered this question

1	The librarian recommends a book in a series but does not have the full series available at the library.	113 / 47%
2	I don't know — we haven't heard any feedback regarding reading recommendations from our users.	106 / 45%
3	The title suggested does not fill all the requirements of the user's requests (e.g., it fits their interest but is not on their reading level, etc.).	39 / 16%
4	Other	26 / 11%
4	The librarian does not spend enough time learning more about the user's need in order to make a good recommendation.	18 / 8%

Is confidentially an issue when attempting to integrate user reviews into your recommendations?
238 out of 338 people answered this question

1	We do not integrate user reviews into our reading recommendations so this is not a concern.	116 / 49%
2	No, we personalize our recommendations and this has not been a concern for us.	74 / 31%
3	Yes, but we have a process in place to help protect users' personal information while still integrating their reviews.	36 / 15%
4	Yes, and this is why we do not share user reviews with other readers.	12 / 5%

How do you track satisfaction with your reading recommendations?
238 out of 338 people answered this question

1	We have no formal system in place for tracking satisfaction with reading recommendations.	217 / 91%
2	Other	14 / 6%
3	We have a formal system in place for tracking satisfaction with reading recommendations.	7 / 3%

If you were to expand or enhance your reading recommendation services, which of the following would you be interested in?
238 out of 338 people answered this question

1	Integrating reading recommendations into our summer or year-round reading programs	135 / 57%
2	Integrating reading recommendations into our catalog	123 / 52%
3	Integrating reading recommendations into an app for patrons to easily access	122 / 51%
4	Integrating reading recommendations into our library calendar and event management software	80 / 34%
5	Other	17 / 7%

Would you like a Demco Software representative to contact you to discuss ways to enhance reading recommendations at your library?
338 out of 338 people answered this question

1	No, I'd prefer not to be contacted at this time.	299 / 88%
2	Yes, I'd like a Demco Software representative to *email* me.	36 / 11%
3	Yes, I'd like a Demco Software representative to *call* me.	3 / 1%

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