Providing a Quality Information Service

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What is a quality service?
or, how to align our customer's expectations with our service provision

A quality service: some definitions

>"quality means providing our external and internal customers with innovative
> products and services that fully satisfy their requirements".
>"quality is meeting or exceeding customer expectations"
>"the totality of features and characteristics of a product or service that bears on its
> ability to satisfy given needs".

A quality service is client/customer focussed, exceeding customer's needs; places emphasis on client feedback in order to improve; aims at continuous improvement of the service, and reduction of errors.

The standard issues relating to the provision of a quality service in manufacturing are: performance; features of a product; reliability (over a specified period of time under specified conditions of use); conformance to standards; durability; serviceability - ability to be repaired; aesthetics; perceived quality (subjective assessment resulting from its brand name, or advertising).

Important dimensions of quality in a service environment are: time (how long will a customer wait for service); timeliness (will a service be performed when promised); completeness (is everything promised there); courtesy; consistency; accessibility and convenience; accuracy; responsiveness (ability to respond to unexpected problems or requests).

Difficulties arise with customer perceptions (eg perceptions of politeness may differ). Human interaction is important - often friendliness is more important than accuracy. Image shapes customer expectations and performance standards. It may be hard to measure service levels as there could be variations in personal judgements about how someone behaves. Often service occurs at a point where supervision is not available - this implies a need for staff training (1).

The main focus is on the customer, and meeting the customer's needs. The Malcolm Baldrige Award for quality management scores companies on a range of items such as leadership, information and analysis, strategic quality planning, human resource management, management of processes, quality and operational results, and the most significant area, in terms of scores, customer focus and satisfaction.

Client/customer perceptions

Since our clients are the major focus of our service, we need to ensure that we know what service they want or need, and that they know what service we are there to provide. Often we assume that our clients will know what we can do for them; often they are not fully aware of either our skills, or our limitations - these limitations may be caused by budgetary restrictions affecting our staffing, our collections, our technological options, our other responsibilities.

How do we find out what our clients need or want? We ask them - eg focus groups, individual consultations, surveys. We often feel that we have a better perception than they do of their needs, because of our greater expertise in the area of information retrieval and management, so we need to lead them in their responses to our questions. It's important to be explicit in gathering information about client needs, rather than rely on past experience of demand. This may be adequate for us, but it doesn't help our clients to move forward in their expectations.

Then we need to publicise the purpose and the extent of our service. We may wish to develop an Information Services Policy document, which will benefit us, because it makes us think about what we're doing, and why, and where more than one person offers a service, enables us to provide a

consistent approach, and because it clarifies for our users what service we offer. Such a process, and document, enables us to shape our clients' perceptions - which makes it easier for us to meet expectations. (See appendices from Murdoch University Library).

Since a policy statement is bound to be somewhat brief, it may be useful to develop some guidelines which assist staff to carry out the policy. At Murdoch we have developed some Client Service Guidelines for Reference Service (appended). The purpose of these guidelines is to ensure that we focus on our clients and their needs. In developing them, we had an opportunity to review what sort of service we wanted to provide, and the development process was to some extent a training opportunity - or at least an opportunity to raise awareness of our service objectives.

These guidelines relate to behaviour in providing an information service; we also have guidelines/instructions which relate to eg how to use a range of cd rom databases, and a training package for staff (technicians).

The preparation of this documentation does not have to be done alone and from scratch; it could be prepared collaboratively, with limited revision required for each individual institution.

Evaluating the information service
Having described the service, and provided guidelines and training in how to provide it, how do we evaluate it?

We need some performance measures - these are the dimensions of quality listed earlier: time, timeliness, completeness, courtesy, accuracy, responsiveness. We need a range of methods, as the above can be difficult to measure, so we need a range of methods. We also need some standards, otherwise how do we know whether our measured service is in fact adequate?

For example:
Queues at service points should be no longer than 5 people long; the Information service should be available for not less than 75 hours a week, and should be available in the evening and for at least 10 hours during the weekend; written requests for information should be responded to within four days;

Statistics provide information on the extent to which the service is used, and which aspects of it are used. These numerical measures will almost certainly be approximate, not accurate, and are intended to be indicative, not precise. They may assist with planning (eg staffing, budgeting), and with focussing on particular areas (eg frequent directional queries may imply a need for better signposting, or constant enquiries about how to use cd roms may suggest a need to produce written guides. They do not reflect how users, or staff, feel about the service.

A variety of survey methods exist, including unobtrusive testing to measure accuracy etc. Perhaps a very simple survey of client satisfaction is all that's required in conjunction with the other sources of information. Murdoch University Library runs a survey on an annual basis, and for the past two years has used the CAUL Performance Indicator A, *Library/client congruence,* prepared by Dr G.E. Gorman and Dr B.A. Cornish, CAUL, 1995. By using a survey instrument which is in common use, it is possible to compare ourselves with others. This is useful, so long as we're comparing like things, and gives an objective indication of how we're doing. We would also compare ourselves against our own previous results.

Individual feedback at time of providing the service or a suggestion scheme is another facility for evaluation.

Benchmarking
By looking at what other similar, or even quite different institutions are doing, we can work out what directions we might take in order to offer a higher quality service. We're looking for examples of "best practice" - but there's no point in deciding to emulate a service or product which cannot realistically be achieved eg I can't aim for a wider range of reference tools if I don't have an adequate

budget. But I might look at how others in the same situation manage, eg using a transaction based charging service such as FirstSearch.

Features of a quality information service

1. Staff: client-focussed; skilled; innovative; enthusiastic about change; significant and on-going training, and the ability to define skills requirements. The four public universities in Perth are preparing a joint IT competencies development and training programme - to train for the future, not just the present.

In particular, we know that technology will impact more and more on our service provision, and consequently our skills need to be developed - or we will be by-passed either by IT competent people taking over our jobs, or by users helping themselves to digital libraries and other sources of information. The Internet already offers many resources for theology; these will grow, and our capacity to exploit them must grow too.

For example, Murdoch is about to open a "virtual campus" at Mandurah, about 70 kms south of the main campus. The campus will offer a library service to students enrolled in "virtual courses", that is, courses offered over the Internet. The Library will have to supply information over the Internet as well, and one of our major concerns is whether we will be able to employ staff who have the skills to train students to access the Internet and identify appropriate sources of information, to develop learning packages for Internet delivery, and to relate effectively with students in the usual face to face environment. They will also have to market Murdoch University effectively to the community. They will need a range of skills which many of us do not have.

2. Subject resources

Our capacity to provide a quality information service is obviously related to our capacity to access appropriate information sources. In the past these have been print resources; now they are print, cd rom, online databases, Internet sites, discussion lists etc. Increasingly, information is available in electronic form. Some information is now available only electronically, and this will become more frequent. We have to plan for better access to electronic resources; this has financial implications not just for purchasing the information, but also for providing the technical infrastructure. However, even now, if we don't have access to electronic sources of information, we are not exceeding our clients' expectations. (Some clients don't want electronic texts - are we failing them by providing them? No - but we do have to provide a variety of resources, and if our clients are not able to make the most of electronic resources, we have to persuade them!)

Increasingly, publishers are considering how to ensure that their products receive the widest possible use in an electronic environment. Transaction pricing is becoming available eg FirstSearch, Silver Platter, which means that institutions with small budgets are able to pay for what they use, rather than pay subscriptions for databases which they use only infrequently, and can't currently afford. This is particularly relevant in the context of reference databases, where providing access to bibliographic data may, in the absence of significant collections, at least offer a means of identifying items subsequently available via ILL.

The development of electronic journals, and services such as Blackwells Navigator, mean that it will be possible very soon to acquire access to journal articles on demand, delivered to a client's desk, once again without paying high subscription rates. Permanent storage of the data is an issue yet to be resolved - copyright, licensing costs.

Document delivery (ILL) is an efficient and often cost effective means of providing access to information resources. Small similar libraries may benefit by negotiating arrangements with each other for ILL, in order to reduce costs.

3. Technology

As already noted, this is now a major component of providing a quality information service. Our clients are now still largely required to use our libraries in order to fill their information needs (at least to acquire access to significant collections of printed and other resources), but in future they may all be remote users, accessing our email reference services, using our Web site to access electronic texts,

and receive guidance on where to locate other materials. Technology enables us to improve our services, and to extend them vastly. It also offers us the opportunity to do things collaboratively more easily eg development of a Web site.

4. Processes

The way we offer our information service, and the requirements we place on users, are very important in assuring client satisfaction - or extreme dissatisfaction. For example, do we provide a single service point, or a multiplicity of service points; do we offer an email or telephone service so that people don't have to physically come to the library; do we ask people to fill in too many forms when requesting eg a subject search, or an ILL? Do we expect clients to help themselves, when they'd prefer us to help them? Do we network our cd rom databases, or make clients collect them from a service point and load them to a workstation? Do we make it easy for people to access our collections and services? Often, despite the most client-focussed policies, our procedures are really aimed at making things simpler for us. However, this is often the area in which client feedback can be most useful in enabling us to improve our service.

5. The future

In 5-10 years' time, when talking about quality information services, will we be talking about the same issues? (Will it be us, librarians, talking about these issues, or will it be computing people? Will the two areas have coalesced?)

Fundamentally, yes. Our clients may have disappeared into their homes, with their network access, and our collections may be rapidly diminishing because people are acquiring what they want, when they want it, from the networks, and because large archival collections are available for subscription electronically.

The performance standards we apply in this environment will be different in specific terms eg a response time of not more than 3 seconds for accessing a reference database, but our service objectives will be the same - to meet, or exceed our clients' needs.

1. DEAN, James W and Evans, James R *Total quality: management, organization and strategy.* West Publishing Company, St Paul, MN, 1994, pp. 4-11.

Appendix 1:

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MURDOCH UNIVERSITY LIBRARY
Information Services Policy

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1. Definition

Information Services comprise both ready reference and reference services.

   1.1 A *Ready Reference Service* provides a rapid referral service to sources of information, directional information, easily identified information and brief instruction in the use of basic information sources.

   1.2 A *Reference Service* provides in-depth assistance in identifying, locating and using sources of information. It includes providing the information itself, and instruction in how to find it.

2. Role of the Information Service

2.1 The Information Service provides individuals with both information itself, and the means of access to it through appropriate reference materials and instruction in their use.

2.2 The Information Desk is usually the first point of contact for Library users, who should feel that it is a positive experience. Their needs will be treated with respect and confidentiality.

2.3 All users of the Library are entitled to receive
      directional information relating to the Library and the University
      basic information about how to find items in the Library's catalogue and to locate materials.

2.4 Murdoch University staff and students are entitled to ready reference and reference services. Murdoch students are taught how to find information for themselves, and in addition both students and staff may be provided with the required information, or directed to appropriate sources. Further assistance is available from subject specialist librarians to enable staff and students to carry out more extensive research.

2.5 Students from other institutions who require instruction in the use of reference sources, are directed to guides to the sources, or to their home libraries. It is expected that reciprocal borrowers will in the first instance approach reference staff in their parent institution.

2.6 Information Services for users with disabilities or medical conditions are available. Users needing these specialised services are advised to make prior contact before coming into the library, so that appropriate staff can assist them.

2.7 Members of the public, commercial enterprises and reciprocal students may receive in-depth assistance through the Library's commercial services programme, in which they are charged for any costs incurred by the Library, including Library staff time.

2.8 Services may be provided through telephone, mail, email etc, as well as personal enquiries. Personal enquirers are given priority at the Information Desk over those who make telephone requests.

2.9 Queries received at the Main Information Desk which cannot be dealt with due to unfamiliarity with the subject of the request, lack of time, or lack of resources, are referred to the subject specialist librarians, or carried out by the librarian on desk duty at the completion of the shift.

3. Management
3.1 The Information Services Division is managed by the Information Services Librarian. It is divided into three sections - Humanities/Education/Social Sciences, Economics/Commerce/Law and Science.

3.2 Information services are provided from the Main and Law Information Desks, and the subject specialist Librarians offices. The Main and Law Information Desks provide ready reference services, while in depth reference services are provided from the subject specialist Librarians offices and also the Law Information Desk.
In addition, some information services are provided at the Rockingham Campus Library.

3.3 The Information Desk Coordinator has responsibility for management of the Information Desk Committee, which reviews policy and procedural issues relating to the Information Desk service.

3.4 Services for external students may be provided at the Information Desk or by the External Studies and Document Delivery section. Complex subject-specific queries are referred to the relevant subject specialist Librarians.

3.5 The subject specialist Librarians provide information services related to subject-specific Internet resources. The Network Services Librarian coordinates training in access to Internet related information resources.

4. Staffing
4.1 Provision of reference services is carried out by Librarians. Qualified Library Officers may assist Librarians in the provision of some ready reference services.

4.2 The Main Information Desk is staffed by all subject specialist Librarians, with additional support from Management Services Librarians, and Library Officers at certain times; the Law Information Desk is staffed by Law, Economics and Commerce subject specialist Librarians.

4.3 All new staff receive training in the use of commonly used reference sources and associated equipment, and all staff are trained in the use of new equipment and services. Coordination of training is the responsibility of the Information Desk Coordinator.

5. Evaluation
5.1 Information services are evaluated through a variety of means, including recording of statistics, occasional user surveys, and self evaluation by staff.

Appendix 2
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Draft
CLIENT SERVICE GUIDELINES FOR REFERENCE SERVICE
MURDOCH UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

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The American Library Association has developed a set of behavioural guidelines for staff who provide reference and information services directly to library clients. Many of these guidelines are directly applicable to our reference and information service, and an awareness of them is an effective means of improving our service. The potential benefits to us of adopting these guidelines are many.They include greater levels of satisfactiom with the service we are providing, and therefore better client interaction. Following on from that, the library's image as a quality service provider will be enhanced by adopting these guidelines. As you all know working at the Information Desk can be extremely demanding, but by having clear guidelines to follow in providing the service, our working environment will be less stressful. Following are the major areas discussed and which seem particularly relevant to our library.

1. Approachability

The initial interaction should put the library client at ease. Staff can achieve this by:
* being ready to help - don't get so engrossed in your own work or conversation that you are unaware of the client. Look up regularly to check that noone is waiting.
* behaving in a friendly manner, acknowledging the client by establishing eye contact and initiating conversation, while being aware of cultural differences in body language.
* acknowledging other clients who may be waiting - when busy prioritise queries if possible, so that quick queries are answered first.
* treating all clients with respect.
* being aware of cultural differences in body language.

2. Interest

It's important to appear to be interested in the client's query - the client is then more likely to be satisfied with your response. Show you're interested by:
* being attentive to the client when speaking or listening.
* establishing a comfortable distance between yourself and the client, not too close and not too far away.
* indicating that you understand the query - nod your head, comment on the query, etc.
* trying not to rush the query even if there are others waiting.
* focussing your attention on the client.

3. Listening / Inquiring
It's essential to understand the exact nature of the query to avoid going off at a tangent with a poor grasp of exactly what the query is about. You can do this by:

* waiting for the client to fully explain the information that's wanted. If you're still not sure what's required then rephrase the question and check you understand correctly. Ask for clarification when you don't understand.
* being patient and listening carefully, as clients may have problems in expressing their queries clearly.
* using open-ended questions so that the client expands on the nature of the query, eg "Please tell me more about your topic", "How much information do you need?", etc.
* using clarifying questions to refine the search query, eg "What have you already found?", etc.
* using simple language - avoid jargon.
* being objective, not judgmental about the content of the query and avoiding making unnecessary assumptions.
* being positive by suggesting alternatives when an item requested is not available.
* inviting clients with comments or feedback to submit them in writing.

4. Searching
For any search to be effective there are certain guidelines to be followed including:
* determining the level of information that is required.
* identifying the terms which define the search topic.
* deciding which tools are appropriate for the search.
* explaining where to find the references resulting from the search.
* recognising when to refer the client elsewhere in the library or to an external source.
Before starting a detailed search, remember to ask how much the client has - often we initiate the search and then find that the client's time is limited.

Generally speaking in-depth searches, because they are time-consuming, should be referred to the Subject Group Librarians. If they are unavailable, arrange for them to contact the client later. Guidelines for effective in-depth searching include:
* identifying the terms which define the search topic.
* constructing a competent search strategy which includes relevant terms, qualifiers, etc.
* using relevant database guides when appropriate.
* discussing the strategy with the client, to clarify the search sequence and to check if the client wants to modify the strategy.
* guiding the client, at least in the initial stage of the search.
* explaining where to find the references resulting from the search.
* recognising when to refer the client to another librarian or source.

5. Follow-up
It's important to know if the client is satisfied with the information you've given - feedback is the chief way of knowing whether the query was successfully answered. Although at busy times it's not always possible to follow-up every query, here are some guidelines which can be used for successful follow-up:
* ask the client to come back to the desk if the information sought hasn't been found in the sources suggested by you.
* if you can't find the information immediately due to lack of time, arrange for the query to be followed up later with the client.
* refer to the appropriate Subject Librarian when additional expertise is required.
* if the necessary information is not available in our library, suggest other institutions which may have the information. Advise client to check beforehand, since some libraries don't have the staff or resources to cope with clients other than their own.
* confirm with the client that the information is what was required.

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