

# Customer Satisfaction in 21st Century Libraries

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Libraries are changing, and the measurement of their performance must change too. How do we judge what is important to library users? Measures can tell us where we've been, where we are and in what direction we are heading. They can also guide our decisions. (1)

Let's consider our educational environment and some of the changes which are impacting on library services and resources. Some of our students at University of Technology Sydney (UTS) are studying courses entirely in an "online mode". To them we are a virtual university with a virtual library.

The most noticeable changes in university libraries in the twenty-first century is the increasing use of online resources. As well as the development of huge amounts of scholarly material in electronic formats, there is an increasing amount of "free" information available online. This is mainly through the development of networks, including the internet and the World Wide Web. There has been a noticeable improvement in the quality of information which is freely available. There is still rubbish, but now we have reputable sources such as news, health care, and government services where most people would expect to find information online. At UTS, our research shows that the majority of our customers use the web everyday, whereas they may only use the library once per week.

Google describes itself as the developer of the world's largest search engine, offering the fastest, easiest way to find information on the web. You may have heard of Google's new

Scholar Service. (2) Google applies its own search technologies to selected online papers and citations. Many of the search results turn out to be to citations to offline resources, which is only moderately useful as most researchers would like to get immediately to the full text. However this service is still in Beta test mode at this time and you can see the potential for rapid improvement, especially with the wealth of a commercially successful company such as Google behind it. Recent developments such as this suggest researchers will rely as much on search engines such as Google and Yahoo in the future as they have on libraries and Abstracting & Indexing services in the past. (3)

Another major change is the heightened consumer awareness in general society which has lead to the demand for increased accountability by all stakeholders. For example, the Australian government has established the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) which is an independent national agency that promotes, audits, and reports on quality assurance in Australian higher education. All universities (and that includes their libraries) are required to be audited by AUQA in order to demonstrate that they are providing quality management.

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"In the free market environment, education is

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increasingly seen as a commodity purchased by consumers from providers..." (4)

We must be accountable to our administration – by providing value for money and working to support the goals of our organisation. We must also be accountable to our customers as they are becoming increasingly assertive about receiving good service. "These two areas of accountability are not unrelated. The opinions about the library that are held by our customers – ie staff and students - will eventually influence the views of those who allocate resources".

(5) So there is an imperative to confirm with our customers that we are meeting their service needs. This is why we use performance measures.

Performance measures are useful in general. They can

- Tell others what we actually do
- Show changes in the type or balance of services or activities
- Help us to understand the customer better and find out if we are meeting their needs
- Help us to plan
- Provide evidence for funding – for our future needs and to prove we are managing in a cost-effective manner

### **Cost effective and sustainable**

A lot of new measures are developed as projects. Will they be sustainable when the pilots finish, and they must be included into the normal running of the institution? In the interests of working smarter, not harder, this would be my wish list for effective performance measures:

- Deliver a good response rate
- Require minimal effort for library staff in administration and analysis
- Be cost effective
- Build on and use the expertise of others
- Ask the right questions
- Focus on outcomes
- Present the results in a format that is easy to understand (6)

### **International Trends**

Let's look at some national trends in performance measurement in libraries. In the

USA, the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) has committed a lot of resources to the identification and development of performance measures which "strike the right balance between measuring the continuing and the emerging realities of the modern research library." (7) In October 1999, the ARL Statistics and Leadership Committee supported the initiation of specific projects to advance what has come to be called the New Measures Initiative. (8) In the United Kingdom, the Society of College, National and University Libraries (SCONUL) has also been pursuing similar goals. The efforts of both areas are remarkably similar and can be summarised as focussing on:

1. Development of ISO standards
2. E-Metrics
3. Learning Outcomes
4. Qualitative Measures

This paper is concerned with Qualitative measures.

### **Developing customer focus and tailoring to their needs**

Ideally, measurement gives us unbiased evidence which enables us to make informed decisions when planning for the future. It can confirm what librarians think they know, or it can indicate services that are not working effectively or not valued by our customers - therefore not worth continuing. It can lead to insights into ways in which current modes of information delivery impact on customers.

### **Qualitative measures – input from the customers**

Customer satisfaction is dependent on a mix of their perceptions, expectations and importance. You can measure performance for example by the number of online journals the library provides access to, and you may meet internal goals in terms of providing resources, but it is possible that customers are not satisfied with the resources or access to them. (9) Customers might prefer the results to be full text, or the use of the software may be difficult, or network access may fail frequently, or they may be located in some place on the website where they can't easily be found!

You can also have services which the customer rates as very important, but they may have low expectations. For example, everyone may like to have a computer each, but may expect to have to wait some time in a queue to get to a computer. In a service environment, the service needs are defined by the customers.

Within a service quality assessment model "only customers judge quality: all other judgements are essentially irrelevant"... (10) Therefore we should be aware that for the purposes of performance measures, the term "quality" is defined as "perceived quality" rather than "objective quality" that is, it is dependent on the customer's perception of what they can expect from a service and what they believe they have received, rather than any "objective" standard as determined by a professional group or in conventional performance measurement. (11) The perception of the customer is really all that counts. Customer satisfaction surveys are a very effective way of gaining feedback about service quality in general.

#### Types of qualitative measures

Gorman (12) refers to four types of qualitative measurement

- Observation
- Interviewing
- Group Discussion
- Historical Investigation

Interviews are the most popular and useful tool and they can take many formats. With large numbers of students or customers, group interviews or surveys are probably most effective. Some of the more effective tools which could be used to measure online resources and services would be customer satisfaction surveys and exit surveys, the latter pop up as customers leave a website. Surveys usually only give an indication of problems or issues in general terms. They need to be followed up with more in-depth analysis which can be achieved through focus group discussions. Focus groups are usually homogenous – ie representatives from the science faculty or representatives of postgraduate students. The added benefit of focus group interviews is in the interaction between group members as well as with the interviewer.

There is another group method called "nominative group technique" which does not use homogenous members but aims to be as varied as possible. This is valuable before setting up a survey by identifying issues and describing them in the language of the customer.

I will be giving examples of observation and a group interview – or a customer survey.

#### Observation

An example of observation or a field study was conducted in the University of Toronto Library, which is a large research library in Canada. A field study was conducted of the information behaviour of members of the Faculty of Pharmacy in 2003. (13) The primary goal of the field study was to understand the way that the scientist (or the end-user) went about finding information from the context of their everyday research activity. Some of their findings demonstrated:

- That the information systems the library taught people to use in the library instruction programs are not necessarily the systems they actually use - particularly in the case of younger academic staff.
- That the library's perceptions of frustrations their users encountered in accessing a variety of information resources – each with its own interface – were confirmed.
- That it was a significant problem to receive too many or too few results in answer sets. – Confirming the library's view that users need to be taught how to search effectively. But 92% of use of the system was from outside of the library as researchers worked remotely. So they were considering a pilot project to develop a Web services based system.
- That usability of university library websites must be considered one of the most significant usability issues encountered by researchers – As a result they redesigned their website to display the most frequently used links at the top of the page. (As obvious as this may appear, such a "user designed" approach to an academic library website is uncommon; most library sites exhibit a content-based organisation).

This is an example of how performance measures resulted in identifying some services being ceased if they were not valued by customers. Other areas were identified which could be usefully developed or improved.

#### THE UTS experience and LibQUAL

In 2004, UTS Library was the first Australian site to use LibQUAL+ customer survey. In my opinion, it was a good example of an effective performance measurement tool.

LibQUAL+ uses gap analysis technique to measure the difference between customer expectations and service delivery. LibQUAL+ had 22 core questions plus A box for open ended comments was also provided. This seem like a small number of questions, but the shorter the survey, the better the response rate. There was a very user -friendly web interface, no technical expertise required. The results were presented immediately after the survey closed in a .pdf document on the website. We received 3,200 usable responses which were presented in graph form by the following groups:

- Undergraduate Students
- Postgraduate Students
- Academic Staff
- Library Staff

Because of the large respondent pool, we had the ability to do reliable subgroup analysis or analysis on differences within the group". (14)

#### Comments

1400 comments were received from the survey. Analysis of the comments was particularly useful as they provided more information to flesh out insights developed from the quantitative data received. Comments were in Excel or SPSS. We worked in Excel which was sufficient for our purposes. Whilst the comments were all made available for library staff to read, it was best to separate them into broad categories. This made it easier for the relevant support areas to deal with specific issues relating to them.

#### Customer Feedback Limitations

Having impressed you with the importance of customer feedback I now want you to keep in mind some limitations about your customers'

comments:

- They may be biased by their experience of libraries so far – if they have experienced better financed libraries their expectations may be high. If they have never experienced better libraries, then they might give a good satisfaction rate without good service.
- They may be biased because of the time they are asked – early in semester if they are a new user, they might require different services to a more experienced user.
- Customers only know what they have experienced. Their view is personal and backward looking.
- They are not experts in the areas of technology, etc and do not know what is possible. If you listen too closely you run the risk of small, incremental changes rather than bold improvements.
- They should be asked to focus on outcomes, not solutions – particularly in focus group or interview follow ups.

Customer surveys will only provide general information. They will still need to be followed up with further research activities such as focus groups or interviews to clarify identified issues.

#### Value-added as a calculation and contribution

The difficulty for libraries is to identify what is the "value-add" of the services which they provide. It is a balancing act between what each of our stakeholder groups require. If they could, each group would put a bias in their own favour.

For example, in the university environment, the government, which is our funding source, would like us to cut costs. Academic staff would like us to provide access to all online journals in their subject area, regardless of costs. Students would like us to provide information in packages to suit their needs and experience level, regardless of the fact that there could be many thousands of them. For all of these groups the library would like to retain a positive image. How is this balance achieved? We need to interpret and present the results of our performance measures in terms and language which are suitable for each of our stakeholder groups.

It is most effective to be selective and present only the key findings, not the entire report. Ask yourself if your funding body will understand it. Make sure that you have already considered and prioritised potential actions and follow up activities.

## Managing Expectations

Customers' perceptions of service quality can be influenced either by raising their perceptions or by lowering their expectations. The expectations which customers bring to the service affect their evaluation of its quality. The higher the expectation, the higher the delivered service must be to be perceived as high quality. So managing customers' expectations...is an essential part of a strategy to attain perceived quality service. (15) Therefore without making any other changes, we could improve customer's perception of service adequacy by managing their expectations better- using strategies such as better or more targeted publicity.

At UTS we have found some success in managing expectations by putting together a "Client Service Charter" (16) which gives service guarantees for the library but manages expectations by indicating that some of our guarantees are dependent on other factors, such as the input of Academic Staff. One example is:

From the UTS Library Client Services Charter ...The Library ensures.... there is adequate access to information resources for new courses.....however

We ask you (ie the Academic Staff)...to provide advice on course developments so that a Library impact statement can be properly prepared within the Faculty's timeline for approval....

In conclusion, the twenty-first century library exists in an era of accountability, customer focus and transition driven by technology. We need to aim for multi-dimensional library assessment in order to present a complete report as we account for our activities. Change is constantly with us, so mechanisms to identify trends and develop new performance measures are required. We need to demonstrate the value of what we are doing

to our stakeholders. Measuring customer satisfaction is a very useful tool to achieve this.

Notes:

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- (15) Zeithaml, V.A, Parasuraman, A, Berry, L.L, (1990) Delivering quality service: Balancing customer perceptions and expectations. New York: Free Press
- (16) UTS Client Services Charter <http://www.lib.uts.edu.au/about/cscharter>