
Did they Find it? Developing a Revised Materials Availability Survey

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The purpose of this paper is to report on work being done by Curtin University in Perth, Western Australia to bring up to date an old library idea: the "materials availability survey."

Importance of finding specific items

Curtin Library is of the belief that, even in today's world of clients having access to millions of resources, there are times when they still need a specific item. For example:

- undergraduates may need a book or journal article on the reading list for their course;
- postgraduates may need an item for their thesis/dissertation literature search; or
- academics may need a cited paper for a research project.

Support for this belief was provided by recent client surveys run by the library in which both undergraduates and postgraduate students continued to record high mean importance scores (in excess of 85%) for the factor "*The items I am looking for on the library shelves are usually there.*"

Traditional materials availability surveys

In the past, to test how well their library was actually performing in this area, Australian libraries periodically ran a materials availability survey, based on one developed for the Council of Australian University Librarians (CAUL). The strength of such surveys was that they provided the library with information *based on actual client searches and practice* regarding the level of failure clients experienced and where library efforts need to be directed to rectify problems.

These surveys traditionally followed a number of steps:

1. Library staff intercepted clients as they entered the library and handed them a survey form. Clients were asked to search for items on the shelves in their normal way but then record on the survey form:

- What item were they looking for in the library?
 - Did they find it?
 - If they did not find it, why not? For this clients were provided with several multiple choice options including: the library does not own the item; all the copies are at another campus or out on loan or not on the shelves; it is supposed to be available electronically but I can't access it.
2. Clients placed their completed form into a survey returns box.
 3. Library staff verified each client's response including:
 - Does the library actually own the item?
 - Is the item supposed to be on the shelves or did the client misread the catalogue record?
 - Is the item in its correct place on the shelves or is the client searching in the wrong place?

From this the library could compute:

- What percentage of items did clients actually find?
 - For the items clients did not find, what percentage was due to "library failure" and what percentage "client failure." "Library failure" included failure to acquire sufficient copies, failure to locate these at an appropriate library branch, missing items, etc. "Client failure" encompassed making an error searching the catalogue, identifying the correct location, interpreting loans status information, and failure searching library stacks.
4. The library could then develop an action plan to reduce failures in the future and re-run the survey periodically to see if client success had improved.

When Curtin Library ran its first materials availability survey in 2005, it was horrified to find that 58% of clients had not found what they were looking for. By 2010, through making

improvements in the library (purchasing additional copies, improving the wording of catalogue displays, simplifying library layout and signage, etc.) this rate had been halved to 26%.

Obstacles to traditional materials availability survey methodology

There are a number of reasons why the traditional methodology for materials availability surveys is no longer appropriate. Many clients coming into the library are not there to find items, but instead they may be looking for a computer or group study space to use. Many clients who are looking to find items are not in the library—they are at home, in their office or using a mobile device. Many of the items clients are looking for do not need to be found on the shelves in the traditional way—they can be accessed online.

So in Australia at least, materials availability studies have largely been abandoned. Instead, libraries have gone back to assuming that, because they are making so many more items available to clients, more conveniently and with more search options available to find them, clients must be finding what they are looking for, or something else that is satisfying them. However, if the ability to find a specific item where and when you want it is still important, these may be dangerous assumptions.

Searching for an alternative materials availability methodology

In seeking alternatives to the traditional materials availability survey, Curtin looked first at the *MINES for Libraries* survey developed in North America. While the interception methodology used in this survey was found to be useful, the timing of the intervention **prior to** the client attempting to find or access the hardcopy or electronic item they were searching for, meant that this survey could not assist the library to establish the percentage of clients able/unable to find what they were looking for.

Curtin Library therefore set out to develop a version of the traditional materials availability study relevant to current academic library conditions, which would answer this question. To date, the library has run one pilot of the methodology and it intends to run an improved

version later this year. A larger scale survey will be run in 2015.

The revised materials availability methodology

The revised methodology adopted for Curtin Library's updated materials availability survey can be described briefly as follows. It should be noted that Curtin Library uses ExLibris' Alma system and the PRIMO discovery layer.

- A computer program was developed to identify when either the catalogue home page or the catalogue search results page from the library's website were displayed. Custom software was written such that, if one of these pages were displayed, there was a 5% chance of a survey invitation pop-up being displayed. The custom software was written to integrate with PRIMO but could be adapted for other library systems.
- The invitation pop-up asked whether the client was looking for a specific item in the library and, if so, whether they would be willing to assist by participating in the study. If the client was willing to participate, they were asked to provide an e-mail address where they could be contacted; if not, they were thanked and returned to their search.
- Clients who had agreed to participate were sent an automatic e-mail providing a link to a web-based survey tool hosted on the third-party system, SurveyMonkey.
- Participants were asked to complete the survey when they had looked for the item they were searching for in the catalogue when they were intercepted, i.e., when they had looked for it on the library shelves or tried to access it electronically. The survey form on SurveyMonkey was a modified web version of the traditional materials availability survey form used at Curtin, adapted to provide for the possibility of clients trying to find an electronic resource.
- In a full survey, library staff would be alerted to the submission of the SurveyMonkey survey immediately, so they could investigate any items that respondents reported they had been unable to find. This was not done for the pilot but remains an essential part of the methodology.

A "permanent cookie" was used so that a client who was presented with the pop-up invitation once would not be presented with it again during the

life of the survey. The library could have opted for a “session cookie,” whereby the client would not have been presented with the pop-up invitation again within the same session, but could have been presented with it in subsequent sessions. However there was concern that clients would find this annoying.

The library could have avoided requiring clients to input their e-mail address, for example by developing an interception method which identified who the client was or by asking the client to input their user or student/staff identification number, from which their university e-mail address could be derived. However this was not done as it could have raised some privacy issues or objections about the inappropriate use of their university e-mail address. The library preferred clients to “opt in” to the survey by supplying their e-mail address, rather than providing for them to “opt out.”

Response rate

The pilot survey was run for three days (66 hours) between Tuesday 29 October and Friday 1 November 2013. During this time, 800 catalogue searches were intercepted. One hundred fifty-seven clients agreed to participate and provided an e-mail address. Of these, 76 clients clicked on the link to the survey and 55 completed it. Taking the 55 respondents who completed the survey out of the 157 who indicated (by supplying an e-mail address) that they were prepared to participate, results in a response rate of 35%.

It should be noted that very little promotion of it was done and no incentives for participating were offered.

Compared with traditional materials availability survey distribution methods, the 55 responses obtained in the pilot were achieved with very little effort on the library's part once the methodology programming and development had been done. When Curtin Library last ran a materials availability survey, 16 hours of staff time were devoted to handing out survey forms to clients as they entered the library building. This task was not necessary with the new methodology.

Results

Of the 55 clients who provided usable responses to the survey, 33% reported that they had **not** found the item they were looking for. Although, since the

study was a pilot, library staff did not attempt to ascertain the reasons for clients' lack of success, it is known that many of the items they were looking for were available and accessible electronically at the time of the survey.

While the response rate was a little disappointing and the figure of 33% of clients not finding what they were looking for was of concern, on the positive side the pilot did demonstrate that the methodology developed could be successfully implemented.

Issues and possible improvements

Since conducting the initial pilot, the library has reflected on the methodology and how it could be improved in the future.

System-dependence of interception

It was intended that the program developed for intercepting catalogue searches would be system-independent. However the solution developed for the pilot included components which were tied specifically to Curtin Library's server infrastructure and the Curtin Library catalogue. The library's programmers feel that this could be overcome if they had more time to develop the solution and now that they have a better understanding of what is being sought.

Bias in interception method

The method adopted was biased towards clients who were doing multiple searches or paging through multiple pages of search results—each search result page had a 5% chance of triggering the invitation pop-up. To overcome this, the library is now investigating using an additional “session” cookie on the search results webpage to remove the pop-up trigger during search result paging or further searching.

Placement of invitation pop-up

The programmers managed to get the invitation pop-up to work on four different web browsers. However getting it to display properly on a mobile phone was a challenge.

Survey delivery by e-mail versus pop-up link

Curtin Library wanted clients to complete the survey **after** they had looked for the item. It was for this reason the link to SurveyMonkey was e-mailed to them rather than linking to it in the invitation pop-up.

However, it was found that many clients went straight to the survey and completed it before they had tried to find their item. It would be preferable if clients who have agreed to participate could follow the e-mailed link to the survey straight away and (before they forget it) they could input the details of what item they were looking for at the point of interception. Ideally they would be able to stop at this point and save their response, then return to complete their survey only after they had actually tried to find the item. While it has been found that technically this can be done, it would require each client to be e-mailed a unique, personalised survey link and a perceived loss of anonymity in client responses could result.

Automatic population of sought item details

To save clients' time, consideration was given to having survey forms automatically populated with a citation for the item the client was seeking. However, this was not done as it was decided that the way in which the client writes down the details of what they were looking for could provide some explanation of why they subsequently do not find it.

Detection of completed surveys

Both the traditional and the revised methodology rely upon the client submitting their survey form as soon as possible after they have tried to find an item, and library staff being alerted to its submission, so that a library staff member can search for the item with as little delay as possible. Any delay could result in the circumstances in which the library staff member is searching for the item being different from the circumstances in which the client searched, invalidating results. An alert will therefore need to be developed for library staff signalling that a SurveyMonkey form has been

lodged and that action on it needs to be taken as soon as possible.

Curtin Library believes that all of the challenges and refinements outlined above are manageable. The biggest obstacle will be the final detection and verification stage since clients are able to access electronic items 24 hours per day, 7 days per week and, in many libraries including Curtin, can access library buildings to find and borrow print materials long after most library staff have left work for the day.

Conclusion

Traditional materials availability surveys were a valuable tool for libraries to assess whether their clients were finding the items they were actually searching for, the reasons for their failures and what corrective action needed to be taken to increase success in the future.

Investigations at Curtin University Library in Western Australia suggest that while the ability to find library items remains important to clients, a high percentage of them may be continuing to experience difficulties.

Since the types of library items clients are searching for and when, where and how they are searching has changed since materials availability surveys were developed, a revised methodology is needed. Curtin Library has commenced and is committed to this work which, if successful, it intends to share with the library community for the benefit of all our clients.

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