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Libraries and Total Quality: Making the Patron a Partner

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I. Introduction - The “Closed Stacks” Mentality

In the late 19th century, philanthropist Andrew Carnegie founded hundreds of libraries in the United States (Bobinski, 1969). His libraries were the first to feature “open stacks” - shelves of books that library patrons could browse by themselves. Before Carnegie libraries, most libraries had “closed stacks” where the librarians would locate the item on behalf of the patron and retrieve it for them. This change to “open stacks” enhanced the average person’s access to information, and greatly improved the quality of service that libraries offered.

Although as a profession librarians are very service-oriented, service to the patron is more like a “book” retrieved from the “closed stack” of the librarian’s professional training rather than a real collaboration. The patron is rarely perceived as being an equal partner in the transaction. To achieve Total Quality Management (TQM) in library service value, that value must be both *technically-defined* quality as assessed by the librarian (e.g., the value of the library collection and the accuracy of reference service), as well as *functionally-defined* quality as defined by the patron (e.g., “I received good service”) (Edgar, 2006). To achieve the latter, a true librarian-patron partnership is required.

Libraries began to see service competition for the first time in the 1990s, due to the Internet and Google. The necessity of being more customer-focused became apparent, and this resulted in the creation of LibQUAL+, a tool developed to quantitatively measure the quality of customer service (Saunders, 2007). While LibQUAL+ serves as a first step toward increasing quality and value for patrons, library commitment to responding to survey results is essential.

Although LibQUAL+ has been used by a wide range of libraries, this paper focuses on the use of LibQUAL+ by academic libraries, using two university libraries (Vanderbilt University and the University of Pittsburgh) as sample cases for assessing library response to survey results. The theme of engaging the patron as a partner is further explored by examining a procurement project at the University of California at Los Angeles.

II. TQM Rising: Facing Competition, Libraries Embrace Total Quality

Historically, librarians have been focused on the quality of the library's collection rather than customer needs or expectations. The main role of a librarian has been to maintain the quality of the collection itself (Martell, 1983; Saunders, 2007). Librarians focused on developing their collections, buying books and journals to fit the needs of their patrons. As noted by Martell, libraries have been "more inclined to invest in things [than in people]", meaning that both staff development and assessing customer needs tended to not be addressed.

The quality of a library collection can certainly be considered an indirect service to the patron, but with the arrival of the Internet and Google, libraries were no longer the sole source of information resources (Saunders, 2007). In order to compete, libraries have to develop a strategy for assessing and responding to customer perceptions of quality of service.

Service industries such as libraries had been slow to adopt TQM, but by the 1990s a systematic approach to implementing total quality was under way (Mackey & Mackey, 1992). The concept of TQM was adapted and defined to fit within the library realm (Mackey & Mackey, 1992; Fitch, Thomason & Wells, 1993; Miller & Stearns, 1994), and these early attempts embraced TQM concepts such as the formation of "quality circles" among staff (Desirey, et. al., 1988) and the re-organization of the library staff hierarchy (Fitch, Thomason & Wells, 1993). However, by the late 1990s it had become apparent that librarians were "better at collection evaluation than service evaluation" (Saunders, 2007). Although some libraries conducted patron surveys, this was the exception and not the rule. The need to develop an industry-wide quantitative service assessment tool became apparent.

III. The Development of a Total Quality Assessment Tool: LibQUAL+

No longer being the “only game in town,” libraries needed to establish a means of quantifying and assessing customer needs and satisfaction. Patrons became customers, and libraries found themselves striving to prove their value.

For many years, service sector industries relied on a simple Likert scale when testing customer satisfaction (Saunders, 2007). Customers were asked to rate their experience on a scale of one to five. What became apparent however was that not only was it necessary to ask customers their perception of the quality of service, it was also necessary to ask what their expectations were. Measuring the gap between experienced service and expected service is the “true measure of satisfaction” (Saunders, 2007). The increase in competition and the need to assess customer expectations led to the New Measurements Initiative, launched in 1999 by the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) with a grant from the U.S. Department of Education. Under this initiative libraries utilized and adapted the ServQUAL tool to suit library services, resulting in the LibQUAL+ survey.

LibQUAL+ was developed by ARL as a standardized survey that would test libraries’ strengths and weaknesses and, because it was standardized, could also be used for libraries to compare themselves to their peer institutions (Saunders, 2007). It contained twenty-five core questions in four primary areas: Access to information, affect of service, the library as a place, and personal control of information. Each of the twenty-five questions was comprised of three parts - the customer’s perceived level of service, the customer’s minimal expectation of service and the customer’s desired expectation of service. Since then the LibQUAL+ survey has evolved to comprise twenty-two core questions in three primary areas: Affect of service (nine questions), information control (eight questions), and the library as place (five questions) (fig. 1). LibQUAL+ was first used in 2000, with a peak number of 309 libraries utilizing the survey in 2003 (fig. 2) and a total of over 1,000 libraries using the tool by 2007 (Saunders, 2007).

Libraries may opt to participate annually in the survey or participate in particular years, as designated by the library.

Although many libraries have used LibQUAL+ to assess patron satisfaction, it should be noted that LibQUAL+ is simply a first step in the quality improvement process. Although a reliable and valid assessment tool, LibQUAL+ survey respondents are self-selected, meaning that regardless of survey size there will always be some question of selection bias (Saunders, 2007). LibQUAL+ provides libraries with significant amounts of data, but follow-up activities with customers are a necessity, as demonstrated by the experience of two institutions that utilized LibQUAL+: Vanderbilt University and the University of Pittsburgh.

IV. Quality of Service Assessments: Vanderbilt University and the University of Pittsburgh

Vanderbilt University and the University of Pittsburgh libraries both participated in the 2002 LibQUAL+ survey of 46 Association of Research Libraries (ARL) members across the country. Both academic libraries published papers in 2004 detailing the results of their respective survey (Knapp, 2004; Wilson, 2004). These LibQUAL+ surveys were chosen as a starting point in order to contrast different academic library approaches to improving service, comparing information collected and reported during the same time period, and assessing the direction of each institution afterward.

Vanderbilt University Library

Vanderbilt University library reported results of the 2002 LibQUAL+ survey with a heavy emphasis on detailed statistics. Vanderbilt library noted that it had identified areas of service that needed improvement to meet customer's expectations but that additional analysis was needed: "The wealth of information to be gained from the survey results complicates the identification of areas of clearest opportunity for improvement" (Wilson, 2004). A commitment

to continual improvement is a key aspect of Total Quality, and Vanderbilt did identify the need for further evaluation via focus groups, follow-up surveys, and follow-up with peer institutions that scored higher in the LibQUAL+ survey (Wilson, 2004).

Two action items were identified for immediate response (Jean and Alexander Heard Library, 2002): First, in response to complaints about library hours from undergraduate students, Vanderbilt launched a trial program of making one of the campus libraries a 24-hour open facility. In an executive summary report, Vanderbilt identified a library and developed a budget for a trial project in spring 2003 (Jean and Alexander Heard Library, 2002). Beginning spring 2003, the Vanderbilt Science and Engineering Library established a 24-hour open Monday through Friday schedule that is still in place as of 2011, demonstrating the success of that initiative.

Second, a service quality improvement program was proposed, which was to be developed by three library directors at Vanderbilt. The service quality improvement program team met regularly in 2003 with the charge that “the team will limit their activities to identifiable issues that seem to be easily fixed. Issues that are not easily fixable or that deal with organizational structure or policy will be referred to the Library Management Council” (Service Quality Improvement Team, 2003). Reports of the team from 2003 end with the September 12th meeting. There appears to have been no publicly available final report or conclusions.

Vanderbilt has since participated in additional LibQUAL+ surveys in 2006 and 2009. The 2006 survey resulted in a number of substantial initiatives including: the implementation of a new electronic discovery tool, “DiscoverLibrary,” that combined the library’s catalog and other resources, simplifying patron searches; creation of a library delivery service for faculty; the addition of group study rooms to the library; and the addition of fourteen workstations to the library (Jean and Alexander Heard Library, 2009). The 2009 survey was conducted by new staff

under the direction of a new Dean of Libraries, and featured a heavier focus on marketing, campus outreach, and project management than the previous surveys (LibQUAL+ Share Fair, 2009).

The University of Pittsburgh Library

In contrast to Vanderbilt's initially cautious approach in 2002, the University of Pittsburgh library listed several new initiatives and demonstrated a real commitment to quality improvement as a response to its 2002 survey. A particularly TQM viewpoint is presented in the Pittsburgh library's response to customer perceptions: "Even if you disagree with the information offered [based on customer's perceptions], you can't say their perceptions are wrong. Your challenge is to address these perceptions..." (Knapp, 2004).

A specific example illuminates the two institutions' different responses to the 2002 LibQUAL+ results. Both universities' surveys showed a negative balance between customers' minimal requirements for having complete collections of journal titles and customer perceptions of the journals offered by the library. For Vanderbilt library, this meant acknowledgement of the negative balance but coupled with a statistical analysis showing that the complaint primarily came from faculty, and that this complaint was "common" for many libraries (Wilson, 2004). In contrast, the Pittsburgh library also showed the same negative balance, but the response was more pro-active: The library followed-up with customers and discovered that patrons wanted complete collections in *specific* journals. The Pittsburgh library then developed a dual service response to address this service need. First, electronic back issues of the journals being requested were obtained, and second, the off-site storage facility was relocated closer to campus and shuttle service to it was provided (Knapp, 2004). This dual approach improved access to the specifically requested journals and made obtaining print back-issues more convenient for patrons, beginning the process of improving customers' perception of service.

Pittsburgh's response exemplifies a critical aspect of TQM - embracing customer-defined value. For the customer, the product or service must be what the customer wants, of expected quality, and delivered courteously and promptly (Goetsch & Davis, 2010). By taking steps to obtain the specific e-journals that customers wanted, Pittsburgh addressed the issue of providing the product customers desired. The relocation of the off-site storage facility improved speed of access, addressing customer desires for faster access. Rather than considering lack of access to journals a "common complaint," Pittsburgh followed the philosophy of TQM by letting the customer define the value, and responded accordingly.

Pittsburgh library identified other areas for improving service and took steps to do so. A "Rethinking Public Services" team, tasked with improving public services, followed up the LibQUAL+ survey results by investigating national research studies and by holding open meetings with staff. Following up on LibQUAL+ results proved to be pivotal in the establishment of new services, in particular, the creation of a "peer-to-peer" library service plan where students could get assistance in their dorms and in the library from other students.

Pittsburgh has since participated in annual LibQUAL+ surveys (with the exceptions of 2008 and 2010), although further results and initiatives have not to date been published. As of 2011 Pittsburgh has opted to develop their own survey "to focus ...survey efforts toward [their] individual community's concerns and be able to utilize the data in a more agile manner" (J. Fudrow, personal communication, February 24, 2012). This shift away from the LibQUAL+ tool demonstrates that the importance of connecting with the patron to ensure quality is a bigger issue than the utilization of a particular tool. While there are clear positives of using LibQUAL+, particularly for libraries that have little experience assessing customer-defined value, ultimately a library must determine the best way to keep an "ear to the ground" and maintain that patron connection.

Vanderbilt and Pittsburgh, Summary

Although Vanderbilt had responded to its first LibQUAL+ survey in a tentative manner, adapting only one (albeit quite important) identifiable change in response to customer desires, subsequent survey responses demonstrated a movement toward a more engaged approach. The implementation of “DiscoverLibrary” in particular demonstrates the merge of customer-defined functional quality and librarian-defined technical quality. At Pittsburgh, a customer-focused approach was in place from the beginning. By addressing customer perceptions in customer’s terms, Pittsburgh fully utilized their LibQUAL+ survey results to improve their customers’ perceptions of the service value of the University of Pittsburgh libraries. The commitment to service quality has since led Pittsburgh to focus efforts on developing local assessment tools that fit their patron base. To further ensure success libraries must not simply focus on patron perception discovery tools such as LibQUAL+, but also engage patrons as full partners in all library endeavors.

V. The Patron as a Partner at UCLA

In 2001 the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) library needed to obtain a new Integrated Library System (ILS, a system that combines elements for acquiring materials, cataloging materials, and loaning materials). The library made the commitment to involve faculty and students in the process of assessing different ILS options. After three ILS options had been identified, the library overview committee tasked with the project established an advisory group of “Functional Sponsors” - faculty and students who assisted the overview committee. The “Functional Sponsors” worked with the committee to craft a survey for patrons, focusing on questions important to customers, and to develop “test runs” of the ILS options that focused on how patrons would use the service (Ryan, 2004). Bringing in patrons as actual

partners added clarity to the survey questions and identified which features of the ILS were most important to patrons. Ultimately, the UCLA library's selection was influenced by the participation of their customers.

The above example demonstrates the TQM strategy of bringing in customers as partners in innovation (Goetsch & Davis, 2010). By involving patrons in the entire process of deciding on an ILS, UCLA was addressing customer needs from the very beginning. The inclusion of faculty and students in the crafting of a customer survey about the ILS ensured that UCLA was asking the right questions. Involving customers in the test runs of three different ILS options gave patrons a voice in the process, ensuring that the chosen system had the attributes that customers desired.

VI. Conclusion

The development of LibQUAL+ as an assessment tool has assisted libraries to move closer to achieving TQM. Patrons are now being asked directly to assess library services and to judge it against their desired level of service. As a tool LibQUAL+ is beneficial, but embracing TQM organizationally and committing to service improvement as defined by customers is crucial. The Pittsburgh and UCLA examples demonstrate the power of fully embracing TQM by making the patron a partner. In each case, librarian expertise is enhanced by the information provided by patrons as to what they truly want and need. Libraries that commit to a fully engaged TQM philosophy can provide their patrons with the products and services that they want, at a higher quality than they expect, and in a timely manner. These findings are applicable to non-academic libraries and other service industries as well. Organizations that conduct scientific surveys of customer-defined value, and more importantly, act on that analysis, will raise customer satisfaction and establish a culture of continuous improvement.

Author Biographies

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Library Service Quality Survey Questions	
Ratings – 1 (low) to 9 (high)	
Service level definitions:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minimum – the number that represents the minimum level of service that you would find acceptable • Desired – the number that represents the level of service that you personally want • Perceived – the number that represents the level of service that you believe your library currently provides 	
When it comes to...	
Access to Information:	
<u>Question #</u>	
3	Complete runs of journal titles
8	Timely document delivery/interlibrary loan
9	Interdisciplinary library needs being addressed
19	Convenient business hours
22	Comprehensive print collections
Affect of Service:	
1	Willingness to help users
4	Employees who are consistently courteous
11	Dependability in handling users' service problems
14	Giving users individual attention
15	Employees who deal with users in a caring fashion
17	Employees who have the knowledge to answer user questions
18	Readiness to respond to users' questions
20	Employees who instill confidence in users
24	Employees who understand the needs of users
Library as Place Dimension:	
2	Space that facilitates quiet study
10	A haven for quiet and solitude
13	A place for reflection and creativity
21	A comfortable and inviting location
23	A contemplative environment
Personal Control Dimension:	
5	Making e-resources accessible from my home or office
6	Modern equipment that lets me easily access the information I need
7	A library website enabling me to locate information on my own
12	Easy-to-use access tools that allow me to find things on my own
16	Making information easily accessible for independent use
25	Convenient access to library collection

Figure 1: 25 Questions of LibQUAL+ 2002 Survey (source Vanderbilt Library 2002 LibQUAL+ survey)

Figures

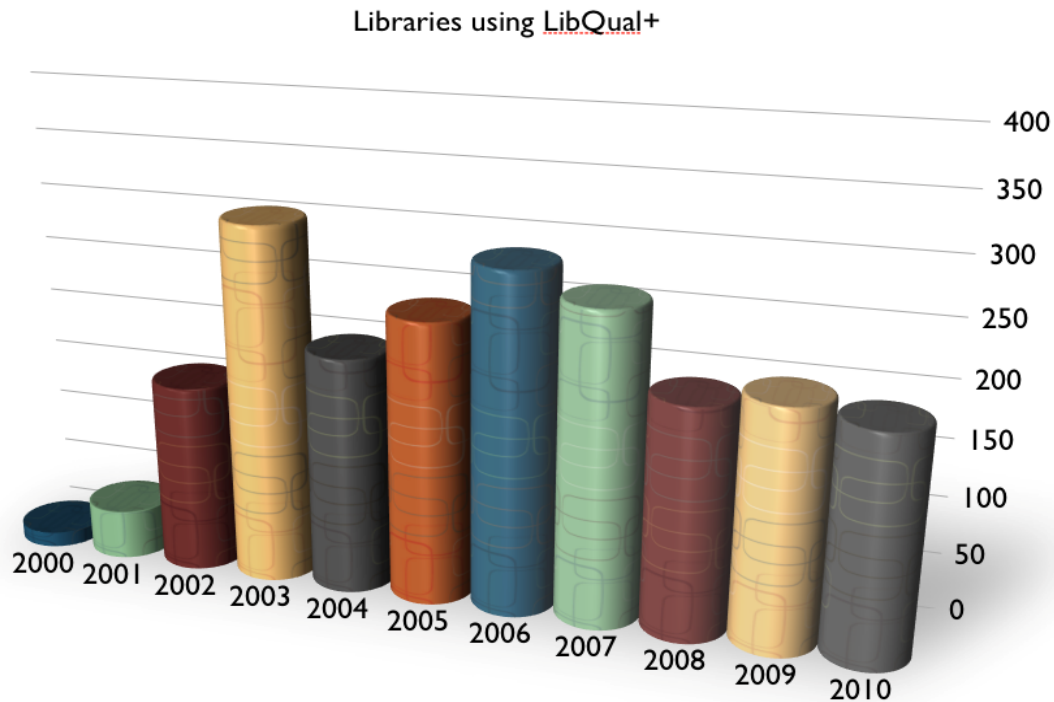


Figure 2: Number of libraries using LibQUAL+ per year (source: author)

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