

Journal of the Patent and Trademark Resource Center Association

Volume 32

Article 1

7-1-2022

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Recommended Citation

Schlipp, John and Sheehy, Christian (2022) "PTRC Customer Assessment Survey and Best Practices," *Journal of the Patent and Trademark Resource Center Association*: Vol. 32, Article 1.

Available at: <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/jptrca/vol32/iss1/1>

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PTRC Customer Assessment Survey and Best Practices

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Abstract

Assessment of customer activities in academic, public, and special libraries demonstrates their impact and value to library administrators and constituents. In turn, this assists in securing and maintaining advocacy and financial support. Although many formal and informal assessment best practices have evolved to measure the quantitative and qualitative impact of information literacy instruction, few if any best practices have been established to measure impact specific to Patent & Trademark Resource Center (PTRC) customers. This article reviews the results of a survey of PTRC Libraries and their customer assessment practices. Such analysis reveals best practices for other PTRCs to build upon and to improve their customer assessment of specialized research, instruction, and outreach related to Intellectual Property Information Literacy (IPIL) of patents and trademarks. Academic libraries utilize the Association of College and Research Libraries' Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education, more commonly known as the ACRL Framework. On the other hand, public libraries tend to evaluate patent and trademark patron satisfaction, rather than learning outcomes based upon the ACRL Framework. Certain public and academic libraries utilize Project Outcome for such assessment. In some instances, PTRC patrons turn to public libraries for computer literacy skills before they can search patent and trademark databases. Although focused through the lens of PTRCs, the results of this study are applicable to other types of library services dealing with IPIL, such as copyright and fair use, scholarly communications, open educational resources, business and entrepreneurship, STEM, digital humanities, makerspaces, and technology transfer library partnerships.

Keywords: assessment, intellectual property, best practices, customer service, instruction, patents, trademarks, demographics, learning outcomes

Introduction

The Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) defines information literacy (IL) as “the set of integrated abilities encompassing the reflective discovery of information, the understanding of how information is produced and valued, and the use of

information in creating new knowledge and participating ethically in communities of learning” (Association of College & Research Libraries [ACRL], 2016). Such IL can be applied to learning outcomes in research and instruction tied to library customers of Patent & Trademark Resource Centers (PTRCs). PTRCs are a nationwide network of public, state, and academic libraries designated by the U.S. Patent & Trademark Office (USPTO) to support the public with USPTO products and services, offer patent and trademark training, and provide reference assistance and outreach. Outcome-based assessment of customer programs and services such as those offered at PTRCs in academic, public, and special libraries demonstrates their impact and value to library administrators, campus or community boards, government bodies, and their constituents. Assessment of information literacy (and increasingly digital literacy, especially in public libraries) assists in securing and maintaining advocacy and financial support of such instructional sessions (Fite & Jackson, 2018; Liebst & Feinmark, 2016).

Several assessment best practices and methods have evolved to ascertain quantitative and qualitative impact, using both formal and informal means of information literacy (IL) instruction and outreach. Assessment data gives IL instructional librarians feedback and reflection to improve teaching and to evaluate objectively such instructional and outreach activities on behalf of one's administration. The academic library instruction literature often refers to three types of assessment: student self-reflection, formative evaluation, and summative evaluation (Ragains & Emmons, 2013). More recently the trend has been to utilize lighter, informal assessment with customer feedback, such as a student's “ah-ha moment” stemming from their library instruction session.

No matter which type of assessment mechanism is utilized, the primary goal is to measure efficacy of such information literacy programs and services (Gire, 2010). Academic libraries utilize the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education, more commonly known as the ACRL Framework. The Framework is “based on a cluster of interconnected core concepts, with flexible options for implementation, rather than on a set of standards or

learning outcomes, or any prescriptive enumeration of skills” (Association of College & Research Libraries, 2016). The Framework could be applied for PTRC libraries related to intellectual property information literacy (IPIL) for patents (and trademarks) “to redesign instructional sessions, assignments, courses, and even curricula; to connect information literacy with student success initiatives; to collaborate on pedagogical research and involve students themselves in that research; and to create wider conversations about student learning, the scholarship of teaching and learning, the assessment of learning on local campuses and beyond” (Association of College & Research Libraries, 2016). Before the Framework concept for information literacy was introduced, the standard IL definition was that “to be information literate, a person must be able to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information” (American Library Association, 1989).

On the other hand, public libraries tend to evaluate patent and trademark patron satisfaction, rather than learning outcomes based upon the ACRL Framework (Henkel, 2019). As public libraries could rely on a different set of literacy assessment tools than academic libraries, the Public Library Association (PLA) launched Project Outcome (covered later in this article) in 2005 (American Library Association, 2016). Since certain PTRC customers may not be as computer literate as others, PTRC representatives (especially at public libraries) might need to first provide digital literacy instruction to facilitate researcher access to online PTRC patent and trademark databases. Digital literacy is the ability to use online resources to meet one’s information needs (Jaeger et al., 2014). Digital literacy (or one’s digital capability) is applicable to all types of PTRCs or libraries specializing in IPIL as it fosters such literacies and researcher proficiencies promoting inclusivity, social mobility, and digital citizenship (Reedy & Parker, 2018).

Patent literacy is a specialized researcher proficiency skill that PTRC representatives provide their customers. Representatives teach inventors how to utilize a specialized patent classification system to search existing granted patents and patent applications and to determine whether their idea is patentable.

Namely, such patent searching assesses an inventor’s idea for novelty and non-obviousness compared to similar patents and applications found (Zwicky, 2019). PTRCs and librarians specializing in IPIL for patents (and trademarks) “are good resources for learning how to integrate this information into library information literacy initiatives” (Miller & Mann, 2008).

Once library patrons are digitally adept or fluent with personal computers, PTRC libraries can provide IPIL based upon the ACRL Framework and/or outcome-based assessments. The ACRL Framework contains six framed literacy concepts (in no prescribed order), including: Information has Value; Searching as Strategic Exploration; Research as Inquiry; Scholarship as Conversation; Information Creation as a Process; and Authority is Constructed and Contextual (ACRL, 2016).

The Framework could apply to patent searching instruction with PTRC customers as identified by Zwicky’s PTRCA article entitled “Thoughts on Patents and Information Literacy” (Zwicky, 2019). The obvious frame for discussion with most PTRC customers is the frame “Information has Value,” based upon the economic value of information in patents to inventors and society. Furthermore, Zwicky emphasizes that “patents represent a means of staking a claim to an idea.” The entire patent searching concept, such as the recommended use of Cooperative Patent Classification (CPC), falls under “Searching as Strategic Exploration.” A patent classification system is a comprehensive searching method organized by the invention features described in a patent document. Such classification systems are thesaurus or controlled vocabulary structures like library subject headings (Schlipp, 2019).

Zwicky emphasizes the ties of patents in the engineering field as fitting well with the frame “Research as Inquiry” to find out how other researchers approached a problem and how solutions were developed. Likewise, “Scholarship as Conversation” documents an entire patent examination process whereby the interaction notes of the patent examiner and the inventor (or the inventor’s attorney) are available to view on public documentation tied to a patent application. Moreover, the concept of patents in

the research and development process and the knowledge creation setting supports the frame “Information Creation as a Process.”

Finally, as patents are government documents, they qualify as authoritative primary resources. Patents could apply to the frame “Authority is Constructed and Contextual,” as they contain legal information. All six IL frames applied to patents (and trademarks) could be tied to the Learning Outcomes and Assessment of PTRC customer interactions as surveyed in this article (Zwicky, 2019).

Ideally, assessment feedback by PTRC customers utilizes outcome measures met in an instruction session (or a research consultation). Besides assessing a single “aha moment” reported by a student or patron, Zwicky shared two types of made-to-measure learning outcomes (via the PTRCA Listserv) which he applied to assess independent inventors and graduate students for their one-shot patent searching instruction sessions. His patent learning outcomes are excellent examples to support assessment.

Example #1 (Zwicky, 2018): An independent inventor using patent information to determine patentability will be able to:

1. Identify the parts of a patent.
2. Define patentability and prior art.
3. Recognize the difference between provisional and non-provisional patent applications.
4. Execute the seven-step strategy to conduct a patentability search.

Example #2 (Zwicky, 2018): A graduate student using patent information to investigate the state of the art in a given field will be able to:

1. Identify the parts of a patent.
2. Evaluate which patent databases are most appropriate for this type of search.
3. Create an effective search strategy combining classification searching with other search tools and techniques.

An example of an assessment best practice applicable to both public and academic libraries includes Project Outcome, which is a formalized and shared outcome-based assessment program. This service is a

partnership with ORS Impact (Organizational Research Services, Inc.). Project Outcome interviews participating public libraries and community stakeholders to provide best practice success stories to share with other public libraries’ programming and outreach efforts. The study supports libraries “to leverage their outcome data into actionable results ... libraries are tracking their impact across time; improving and expanding programs and services to meet community needs; supporting new and deepening existing partnerships; and increasing library championship” (Lopez, 2017).

The Project Outcome assessment service offers libraries a best practice to support their efforts to confidently measure the outcomes of their programs and services, such as instruction sessions and consultations. The service offers training for libraries on how to plan for measurement, administer surveys, understand data, and leverage outcome data into actionable results. Libraries track their impact over time, thereby “improving and expanding programs and services to meet community needs; supporting new and deepening existing partnerships; and increasing library championship” (Goek & Plagman, 2020; Lopez, 2017).

The success stories of the ORS Impact study demonstrate that data-driven decision making is made possible with Project Outcome results. One library program manager affirmed, “it’s not just a matter of measuring attendees, but in measuring the effectiveness, or the immediate impact that it has on patrons that attend these workshops” (Lopez). Outcome assessment measurements could also be focused on specialized user groups, such as inventors and entrepreneurs attending PTRC programs.

The ACRL introduced Project Outcome for academic libraries in 2019. The ACRL version of the outcome-based assessment expands assessments to include digital & special collections, events/programs, research, teaching support, instruction, space, and library technology (American Library Association, 2020; Association of College & Research Libraries, 2019).

Project Outcome: Measuring Impact of Libraries by ACRL (and its original PLA assessment program) is cited here as a source which could be used as a benchmark for most libraries. It is an example of a national benchmark assessment service that PTRCs could apply to their assessment best practices of customer interactions and metrics related to PTRC customer service and outreach. Similarly, the PTRCA or a group of PTRC libraries could build upon this assessment concept by creating a best practice or collection database for data shared among those libraries.

Survey & Results

While studies have been conducted about assessing customer interactions in academic and public libraries and tangentially related institutions, minimal data exists for the assessment of customer interactions at PTRC locations, such as reference, consultations, and instruction sessions. To begin the work to inform these best practices, a brief 12-question survey was distributed in January 2022 to 129 representatives across all 83 PTRC locations. The survey announcement was distributed directly to PTRC representatives using an internal PTRC distribution email list. It was also sent to a shared PTRCA listserv. The survey was open for one month after distribution. A listing of specific questions is included in Appendix A.

Of the 46 respondents, 45.7% identified as being from an academic library, 41.3% from a public, and 8.7% from a special. The 4.4% who identified as other were part of a state government.

PTRC libraries answering the survey reported that 35 assess scheduled consultations, 28 track unscheduled consultations, and 32 count scheduled classes. Although the survey didn't measure the number of intuitions that provide PTRC assistance through social media, only 13 reported that they assess social media interactions. Some respondents indicated that they collect customer email addresses to provide follow-up assistance and to help promote other workshops and events hosted in their communities.

Instruments each PTRC library used to collect their customer assessment data vary widely from institution to institution, but the Springshare suite was the highest

reported tool with 13 respondents. LibCal and LibInsight, both tools in the Springshare suite, provide automatically generated statistical reports. Although Springshare was the dominant tool among respondents, the second most popular tool used to assess customer interactions is pen and paper. A variety of other disparate electronic resources are used to collect data including Gimlet, Google Forms, and Qualtrics. No respondents indicated they use Microsoft Forms or Access, although one indicated they use a "home grown" solution. Although no reporting institutions use Project Outcome for gathering data, one institution noted that they will start using this online reporting tool in the coming year.

Twenty-four respondents reported not collecting demographic information in addition to the PTRC required reporting criteria. Some institutions reported collecting data about student type (e.g. undergraduate, graduate, etc.), student major or field of study, community member, or creative customer type. One institution reported collecting assessment data specific to underrepresented minorities, and no institutions reported assessment related to gender identity. Another institution reported collecting information on a customer's business type (small business or independent entrepreneur).

Although many libraries assess every customer interaction (38.2%), many do not assess individual interactions at all (35.3%). Two institutions conduct a quarterly sample of customer interactions, and one institution conducts a yearly sample.

Respondents that collect assessment data indicated they use the data to inform certain procedures and decisions made at their institutions. One organization noted collecting customer email addresses to provide opportunities for follow-up reference help and to have a current, vetted list of possible workshop and outreach event participants. Another collects email addresses to send a follow-up survey to customers.

Some respondents also capture more granular customer interaction data, such as the precise date and time the interaction took place, how long the interaction lasted, and where the customer is located so that more focused outreach efforts can take place.

One respondent expressed their strong belief that the privacy of PTRC customers is vital to maintain, especially when sharing information about their invention and/or business trademarks. Another respondent reported that any details about such customer demographics or intellectual property were generalized to protect the confidentiality of PTRC customers.

Survey Analysis

Our analysis of the surveys reveals an efficacious best practice for other PTRCs to build upon and to improve their customer assessment of specialized research, reference, instruction, and outreach related to IPIL. Hopefully, advancement of outcomes-based customer assessment with Digital Literacy, the ACRL Information Literacy Frames, and shared library assessment tools such as Project Outcome will further advocate the assessment process for PTRCs in the future.

Many institutions capture their assessment data using electronic tools. Although this provides the luxury of quickly and easily reporting data, some institutions expressed difficulty in entering assessment in a timely manner. One institution notes that although they collect assessment data, it is not collected consistently, and each entry may not have the same level of detail. Another indicated that although they want to assess every customer interaction, the number of customers and the time spent with each one makes this prohibitive.

Other respondents use analog tools to capture data, and although this might save time in the short term and serve as an immediate visual cue to help remember to capture data, it is more difficult to process trends or substantive automated data analysis. This is consistent with other findings. For example, according to Swoger and Hoffman (2015), paper forms can help effectively organize thoughts and spark discussion, but they can also limit the “flow” of a customer interaction and affect how they communicate and make eye contact. Using an electronic tool to capture data also ensures consistently formatted data that makes periodic reporting easier to automate.

Due to the COVID pandemic and other factors, some institutions recently reduced or modified the number of in-person interactions in favor of using remote video conferencing for both scheduled classes and one-on-one consultations. Social media and email marketing campaigns play a role here, too, and should subsequently be assessed similarly to ensure consistent customer service and needs assessment on all fronts. Interacting with customers using social media is a valuable and necessary way to engage with some customers (MacDonald, 2020).

Observing PTRC interactions at their own institution, the authors note the increased need to enhance outreach and services to include all customers. Such outreach inclusivity is further reflected in President Biden’s January 20, 2021, executive order, to advance racial equity and support for underserved communities, including USPTO outreach efforts such as those provided at PTRCs (Executive Order No. 13985, 2021).

Whether through increased outreach or community partnerships, awareness of how interactions are managed and assessed can assist PTRC locations in building upon their excellent work of serving underrepresented groups, people of all skill and comfort levels, and customers from every background. Many PTRC locations already show evidence of this, as captured in our survey—by including bilingual surveys, inclusively worded assessment questions, and dynamic relationships with their regions and communities.

Fourteen respondents volunteered to share their assessment questions. Although there were similarities among each submission, some informative questions emerged that others may choose to incorporate into their assessment plans (duplicates are consolidated and standardized here). While most assessment questions answered provided qualitative insight, a few addressed quantitative measures as shown below. Only shared questions beyond the PTRC program office quarterly reports are included. Specific questions were targeted by library or customer focus.

Library-focused questions:

- How much time was spent with the customer?

- What was the query/session modality (e.g., in-person, chat, email, phone, etc.)?
- Was the patron referred to someone else/another department/service point?

Customer-focused questions:

- How helpful was this session? What could be improved?
- Are you more confident with your research skills after meeting with us?
- What suggestions do you have for future events or sessions?
- Did you visit us because of a specific class/course? What was it?

Finally, one PTRC reports anonymously the number of customer innovation/creativity types and intellectual property types pursued. This includes the number of inventors, musicians, small business start-ups, etc., and the number of customers actively pursuing patents, trademarks, copyrights, etc.

Conclusion

While focused through the lens of PTRCs, the results of this study are applicable to other types of library services providing intellectual property awareness, such as copyright and fair use, scholarly communications and open educational resources, business and entrepreneurship, STEM, digital humanities, makerspaces, and technology transfer library partnerships. The authors of this article hope that these results provide a solid starting point in developing a robust and impactfully consistent way to assess customer interactions to further enhance and build upon the work and services that PTRCs provide to their communities. Future best practice surveys of this type could offer some separate questions for different applications between libraries, such as academic versus public. Additional ties to outcomes-based customer assessment with Digital Literacy, the ACRL Information Literacy Frames, and shared library assessment tools such as Project Outcome will further advocate the assessment process for PTRCs in the future.

The authors of this article thank our PTRC library colleagues who contributed feedback to this customer

assessment survey. Your participation leads to the development of a prospective best practice and possibly a shared assessment tool for PTRC libraries to establish or improve their customer assessment reporting. We appreciate your contributing valuable time and information to support our study.

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