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2012 IATUL Proceedings

Jun 4th, 12:00 AM

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Rachel Esson, Alison Stevenson, Maureen Gildea, and Sue Roberts, "Library Services for the Future: Engaging with Our Customers to Determine Wants and Needs." *Proceedings of the IATUL Conferences*. Paper 6.
<https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/iatul/2012/papers/6>

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Library Services for the Future: engaging with our customers to determine wants and needs

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Abstract

The future-focussed academic library “must be distinguished by the scope and quality of its service programs in the same way it has long been by the breadth and depth of its locally-held collections.” (Walker, 2011). To be successful the design and development of those services have to be shaped and informed by the customers. Services must also be under continual evaluation to measure impact on customers, assess customer satisfaction, and encourage the modification of service in response to evaluation.

Like any other customer-centred organisation, the library has a variety of methods at its disposal to gather information from and about their customer, such as usage data, survey results, focus groups, and face to face opportunistic encounters.

Few techniques provide the wealth of information gained from a conversation but provision and popularity of online resource access and self-service options mean that there are now reduced opportunities for face to face contact with customers. Furthermore as all the different parts of the university are expected to be accountable for funding by demonstrating their value students are repeatedly surveyed – as many as 10 times each year according to some estimates (August 2011, Chronicle of Higher Education) Survey fatigue means that both the quantity and quality of responses can be low.

This paper examines the ways in which academic libraries can seek to understand the expectations of their customers, particularly those in minority groups, in order to be able to plan for the future. It does this firstly through a discussion of successful methods for engaging customers, both online and in person, in conversation with particular reference to new generation learners, and the need to demonstrate to participants that their opinions are heard and have an impact.

Secondly the paper attempts to through two case studies of work undertaken at Victoria University of Wellington Library. In the first case the Library sought student participation and input to Te Rōpū Whakamanawa, a working group convened to address the needs of Māori and Pasifika academic staff and students.

In the second case the Library undertook a larger process of gathering client and stakeholder feedback as part of a wider ranging “Library Services for the Future” review. The customer engagement was extensive and robust, including 32 focus group sessions with a diverse range of people, and additional online feedback channels for wider University engagement.

Introduction

At the 2009 New Zealand Library and Information Association conference there was a presentation about research carried out on user surveys in Medical Libraries. The research was a systematic review of reports of survey results in the library literature to see which aspects of survey design had an influence on response rates and therefore validity of the results.

The presentation began by asking the audience to stand up if their organisation had carried out a user survey within the last few years. Virtually everyone in the audience stood up. They were asked to remain standing if they knew what the response rate for the survey was, and to keep standing if the rate was above 20% and to keep standing if the response rate was over 50% and to keep standing if it was over 70%. By this stage there was one person left standing – the response rate for the survey for this library was 100% and the obvious question to ask at this stage is what was the key to successfully obtaining a 100% response rate?

The unexpected reply was that the user survey was administered in a prison library so there was literally a captive audience.

Not many libraries are in the position of serving clients who are compelled respond surveys however all libraries are duty-bound to engage with their customers to understand their wants and needs. The future-focussed academic library “must be distinguished by the scope and quality of its service programs in the same way it has long been by the breadth and depth of its locally-held collections.” (Walker, 2011). To be successful, the design and development of those services have to be shaped and informed by the customers. Services must also be under continual evaluation to measure impact on customers, assess customer satisfaction, and encourage the modification of service in response to evaluation.

Library and information professionals have in the past been guilty of designing library services based on what they think customers need rather than on what customers actually say they want. They have assumed a rather patriarchal role, deciding that customers don't always know what it is they want. Johnson describes how

.. the request to librarians to study what customers really need, want and perceive can provoke a vague sense of unease. It seems to place professional judgment and commitment at the periphery rather than at the center of library work. It appears to put more stock than may be warranted in a customer's ability to define what is wanted and needed. (Johnson, 1995, p.319)

Reluctance to engage with customers and find out what they really need may also be based on the concern about possibility of negative feedback.

This paper starts from the premise that customers are a good source of knowledge about their wants and needs and that libraries should engage with them if they genuinely seek to improve service. Even highly negative feedback is valuable because it highlights areas of need.

How then do libraries find out from their customers users what their information needs are and how those needs are being met? Libraries have in the last two decades been moving away from assessment based purely on traditional statistical measures such as collection size, circulation figures or gate counts – measures which do not require actual engagement - to measuring service quality. Libraries are looking for methods to assess the extent to which the library services they are delivering are meeting the needs of their client group, to measure value of library services by measuring impact.

To do so entails engaging with the client group and, like any other customer-centred organisation, the library has a variety of methods at its disposal to gather information from their customer, such as survey results, focus groups, and face to face opportunistic encounters. Few techniques provide the wealth of information gained from a conversation and popularity of online resource access and self-service options mean that there are now reduced opportunities for face to face contact with customers.

Survey research is very common in libraries (Kuruppu, 2007). A 2008 study by Hider and Pymm (2008) confirms that “the survey approach remains the predominant research strategy in both library science and information science.”(p. 108). They report that in 2005 survey research accounted for 30.5% (n=173) of the studies that they analysed to determine research methods.

Given that using survey instruments is currently the main way that libraries engage with customers. This paper looks at how librarians can ensure that their surveys are of the best possible quality by using an evidenced based library and information practise. It then presents two cases studies which illustrate firstly the importance of need to demonstrate to participants in a survey that their opinions are heard and have an impact and secondly an occasion when a survey was not appropriate engagement tool.

Engaging through surveys

Survey research is sometimes regarded as an easy research approach. However as with any other research approach and method it is easy to conduct a survey of poor quality rather than one of high quality and real value. (Kelley, Clark, Brown, & Sitzia, 2003 p. 261). Furthermore as all the different parts of the university are expected to be accountable for funding by demonstrating their value students are repeatedly surveyed – as many as 10 times each year according to some estimates (Lipka, 2011). Survey fatigue means that both the quantity and quality of responses can be low. The institutional response to this problem is often to curtail the authority of different parts of the university to conduct wider surveys and to implement one large survey to cover all aspects of student life. This causes its own problems for a library because it limits the number of questions available to the library and this can mean that they are quite high level.

How can librarians ensure that the evidence they gather is high quality?

‘Levels of evidence’ (or the ‘hierarchy of evidence’) is a key aspect of the evidence-based practice framework. The concept of a hierarchy makes explicit the criteria for judging the quality of research or other evidence used in evidence-based practice. In 2000 Eldredge listed the following nine levels of evidence-based librarianship evidence in a hierarchy. In this list ‘1’ is high, i.e. considered the most rigorous evidence available.

1. Systematic reviews of multiple rigorous research studies.

2. Systematic reviews of multiple but less rigorous research studies, such as case studies and qualitative methods.
3. Randomized controlled trials (RCTs).
4. Controlled-comparison studies.
5. Cohort studies.
6. Descriptive surveys.
7. Case studies.
8. Decision analysis.
9. Qualitative research (focus groups, ethnographic observations, historic, etc). (Eldredge, 2000 p. 292)

These levels of evidence have been developed to draw attention to the possible bias that is found in the lower levels of evidence. An evidence based practice approach states that you need good evidence, preferably from the higher levels of the evidence hierarchy. Good evidence has a transparent and reproducible method.

As the list above makes clear descriptive surveys are not highly rated in the hierarchy of library-related evidence. An issue of major concern is that response rates are often quite low (Burkell, 2003) which means the external validity, i.e. the extent to which the results can be generalized, will be low.

If librarians are going to use surveys to try to engage with students to determine their wants and needs they must ensure that they design the best possible survey instrument so that they gather reliable and valid evidence. By improving the quality of survey instruments as a method to engage with customers the quality of the evidence gathered will be enhanced and therefore the service decisions made using this evidence improved.

There is plentiful literature to guide librarians in the design of good quality surveys (Booth, 2003, 2005; Charbonneau, 2007; Miller, 2004). The section below looks at that literature and suggests methods to maximise engagement and increase response rates.

As Pickard stresses, "Questionnaire design is a very serious business and can mean the difference between a high response rate that provides you with detailed data or a sad lack of data which puts you in the position of being able to say very little about your research question" (Pickard, 2007 p. 184).

Aims of surveys

The first step in designing a good quality survey is to clearly determine the reason for the survey and think about the research question to be answered.

Kelley et al (2003) states the following:

Good research has the characteristic that its purpose is to address a single clear and explicit research question; conversely, the end product of a study that aims to answer a number of diverse questions is often weak. Weakest of all, however, are those studies that have no research question at all and whose design simply

is to collect a wide range of data and then to 'trawl' the data looking for 'interesting' or 'significant' associations. (p. 262)

Survey method and delivery

Survey method and delivery will vary according to the purpose of the survey and the type and amount of information being sought. It will also depend on the resources, financial and human, that the library has for the project. Time may be another factor that will contribute to determining the method and delivery of the survey. However, despite these factors libraries should keep in mind the audience they are designing the survey instrument for and target the method and delivery to maximise the response rate from their intended participants.

Over the past 15 years, the expansion of Internet technology has changed the way libraries, like other researchers and organisations, conduct survey research. Web surveys have several advantages over traditional paper surveys: greater convenience, lower cost, faster transmission, more rapid response, and fewer data entry errors. The ease of transmission of Internet surveys allows researchers to gather information from geographically diverse samples, facilitating access to a wider range of individuals. Although online surveys have distinct advantages over their offline counterparts, some reasons for caution have been noted.

Differences in response rates have been reported for Web and mail questionnaires, with some investigations indicating higher Web response rates (Cobanoglu et al., 2001; McCabe, Couper, Cranford, & Boyd, 2006) and others reporting no differences (Gosling, Vazire, Srivastava, & John, 2004; Kaplowitz, Hadlock, & Levine, 2004) or lower Web response rates (Bachmann, Elfrink, & Vazzana, 2000; Weible & Wallace, 1998). (Yetter, 2010)

At this point it is useful to discuss that the customers with whom University libraries are engaging with are new generation learners (also description as net generation or next generation). For this generation technology is ubiquitous

"One of the most striking generational differences is that access to and use of technology is simply assumed by today's learners. Technology is invisible and intuitive; students don't learn technology", nor do they think of it as separate from the activities it enables" (Wager 2005 p.10.13)

This means that online surveys are likely to engage this customer group.

The next part of the paper sets out the key ingredients for the creation of a successful survey based engagement with customers.

Pilot or pre-test

A pre-test or pilot testing for survey instruments is important. Pickard stresses that it is particularly important when using open questions: "here it really is essential. Find out how a question performs before you even think about sending it off to participants" (Pickard, 2007 p. 197).

Choosing the pre-test group should also be done carefully. As Lee (2004) points out, "using library assistants for a pre-test may not be a good idea; these students typically

have a greater understanding of library jargon and may not be a good substitute for the general user” (p. 212).

Population sampling and exclusion

Sampling provides a way to gather information from a representative group of the whole population, as it is often not practical or manageable to administer a questionnaire to a whole population. In library surveys, non-probability or purposive sampling is the method used most often. It is not possible to generalise from non-probability samples as there is no assurance that the sample is representative. However, Powell and Connaway do acknowledge that “nonprobability samples are usually easier and cheaper to obtain than are probability samples, and for some purposes, such as where the focus is on the sample itself, may be quite adequate” (Powell & Connaway, 2004 p. 94).

Respondents to online surveys are likely to be self-selecting and this means that “there would be a strong possibility that these volunteers would not be representative of the entire population to which they belong” (Powell & Connaway, 2004 p. 95).

Survey presentation

Appearance and content are extremely important if you want to encourage responses: your questionnaire has to look good and read well, your instructions need to be clear and plausible. (Pickard, 2007 p. 184)

Burns (2008) makes recommendations for the presentation of online format surveys. Questions should be “presented in a single scrolling page (single-item screen) or on a series of linked pages (multiple-item screens) ... and the use of radio buttons may decrease the likelihood of missing data compared with entry boxes” (p. 247).

Surveys used to be designed on the assumption that there would be one mode of interaction and data collection eg phone or paper or online. Now an online survey could be used by a customer on wide variety of devices from the small screen of a phone to their laptop to their home gaming console. The design needs to account of these factors.

Number and type of questions asked

The type and quality of the questions used in the survey instrument can have a huge impact on response rate and also on validity. The two main types of questions used in surveys are “open” and “closed”. “Open” questions are ones where a free text answer is possible and “closed” questions have a structured response option. “Closed” responses include formats such as yes/no and they may also include a scale or ranking items in a list or choosing from a list of items. There is some debate about whether closed or forced questions should include “don’t know” options to cater for uncertainty. Miller in her 2004 article states that if “you wish to measure the level of satisfaction, respondents must have an opinion about the statement. They cannot be allowed to be fence sitters.” (Miller, 2004 p. 128). While the article by Burns (2008) acknowledges that an option for an indeterminate response could be seen as letting respondents “off the hook” it is sometimes important to provide an option for uncertainty and in certain cases, such as when measuring respondents’ knowledge rather than attitudes, it is crucial to provide that option. Burns (2008) also suggests providing an “other” or requesting “any other comments” as a way of providing for unanticipated answers and also suggests that during question testing the “other” option “can help to identify new issues or elaborate on closed response formats” (Burns et al., 2008 p. 247).

It may also be appropriate to give an option for “declined to answer” so that it is apparent that the respondent chose not to answer the question rather than leaving it blank so it could appear that the question had just been missed (Panacek, 2008).

Pickard warns that it is “notoriously difficult to encourage respondents to complete great sections of blank lines in their own words, it demands too much thought and therefore too much time” (Pickard, 2007 p. 186).

Question order can also have an impact on response and completion. Recommendations from several studies suggest putting less threatening questions at the beginning of the survey and leave possibly problematic questions until later:

The order of questions can be important. Questions that individuals might object to answering outright should be put towards the end of the survey. Start with questions that are less threatening or inflammatory and ‘warm up’ to answering more problematic questions. This increases the pleted (sic) most of a survey, there is a vested emotional interest in completing the rest, even if later questions are less comfortable. (Panacek, 2008 p. 64)

Avoiding jargon and abbreviations and keeping questions clear and simple is also recommended. Questions should also be phrased in a culturally sensitive, gender neutral way. Burns et al (2008) advises that “[q]uestion’s stems should contain fewer than 20 words and be easy to understand and interpret, nonjudgmental and unbiased” (p. 246). Avoiding absolutes such as “never” or “always” is also suggested.

It is extremely important that each question focuses on only one concept. When designing a questionnaire and being conscious of keeping it as short as possible (more on this later) it is tempting to cover two concepts with one question. Booth (2005) gives the following example of a compound question:

we encounter questions such as ‘do you require information or training on the MEDLINE database?’ Where a respondent completes the answer ‘Yes’ we are not able to discern if they are saying ‘Yes’ to information, ‘Yes’ to training or ‘Yes’ to both. (Booth, 2005 p. 230)

Pickard also recommends including a variety of questions to prevent respondents from getting bored — a mixture of open and closed questions works well. Taking into consideration the collection and analysing of the data is also important when planning the type of questions to use in a questionnaire. “In general close-ended questions are easy to tabulate and analyse because respondents must choose from among the offered alternatives” (Charbonneau, 2007 p. 49).

Number of questions is also important and this can have a significant impact on the response rate: “lengthy questionnaires are less likely to be completed” (Dillman cited in Burns et al., 2008 p. 246).

Response rates

It is well accepted that high response rates to survey questionnaires are a safeguard against low generalizability (Burns et al., 2008). Totten et al (1999) propose that “a desirable target response rate should be at least 75%”.

Follow ups are considered a crucial method to increase the response rates (Burns et al., 2008; Totten et al., 1999). The number of follow ups may depend on factors such as

budget for the survey but generally reminders are a cost-effective way to increase responses.

Incentives

Studies that have conducted research into the effect of incentives on response rates (Burns et al., 2008;) are in agreement that an incentive in most cases has a positive effect on response rates.

Clear evidence has been produced to show that offering modest monetary incentives at the time of the survey, rather than upon completion, has a positive impact on rate of response. Totten et al (1999) states “many researchers believe bias is minimized and response rates improved if the incentive is offered to everyone up front rather than providing it later as a reward for returning the survey” (p. 28).

At Victoria University of Wellington a survey asking for student feedback on newly launched discovery service aimed for over 100 responses over the Christmas trimester break when very few students were on campus. To encourage participation the Library offered to wipe up to \$20 from the fines of any student who tried the new service and then completed the online survey. This worked well.

This paper has described methods for maximising customer engagement when using a survey instrument. Two case studies are now presented. The first illustrates the need to demonstrate to participants that opinions are heard and have an impact. The second gives an examples of a situation in which surveys were not appropriate and a face-to-face method of engagement was preferred.

First Case Study

Engaging customers to measure service quality or assess current and future needs is closely tied to communications and publicity work, not least because surveys and other exercises to elicit information and feedback from customers serve simultaneously evaluative and promotional functions (Kao et al, 81-2). By regularly consulting with clients, libraries can a) gauge their communities evolving needs and b) design publicity that shows how they are responding to these needs (Spalding et al, 497). Just as publicity increasingly thought of as a collaborative, conversational activity evaluation must be a two-way process as well. It builds trust in the library if the organisation is seen to responds to feedback. The need to respond to feedback is particularly evident when engaging with new generation learners whose “Expectation is for immediacy: they don’t understand why colleges are slow to change” (Wager, 2005 p. 10.13)

In 2010 and 2011, the Victoria University of Wellington Library committed to making informed decisions about the future of library service delivery and a review project (Library Services Review – Arotake Ratonga) was undertaken to achieve this. At the same time the Library was embarking on a 3 year programme of building and facility redevelopment. Critical to the success of both the review and the facility redevelopment was engaging with and gathering client feedback and then ensuring that the Library was transparent in its responses to that feedback.

The gathering of feedback in the Library Services for the Future review at Victoria was via 32 focus group sessions (held with a diverse range of people from across our community), through the Library website, through an online survey. The resulting report was widely circulated including by direct email to all those who had participated in the focus group

sessions. The report recommended wide reaching changes to the internal organisation of the library and a range of new strategic initiatives including the introduction of a tiered service model, significant change to the provision of audio-visual collections and facilities, integration of service delivery with other key university services and greater consistency across the different campus locations. As each of these pieces of work have been undertaken it has been very valuable to be able to clearly draw the line from the feedback gathered to the synthesis of ideas in the report to the action now being taken.

As part of the campus hub and library redevelopment project a large whiteboard was erected at the entrance to the main library. This provided a way to rapidly update information on daily disruptions caused by the building work and also was a space for customers to add their own ideas regarding changes that should be made as part of the redevelopment of the space. When customers used the whiteboard to ask questions (eg “Will there be water fountains?”) library staff used the same whiteboard to answer those questions. The questions and answers on the board were also recorded and transcribed into a more permanent and more widely available form of an online FAQ.

Although it will take more time to be able to say with certainty that that changes implemented as a result of the review and the redevelopment have had a measurably positive impact on the library customers a recent staff survey showed that the library continues to receive a high satisfaction rating which is pleasing given the amount of disruption.

Second Case Study

A review of Library services for Māori was carried out in 2008. The recommendations in this review included establishing a distinctive area within the library to house material with significant Māori content and this area would also be a study space that Māori students and staff could identify with. In order to ensure that the space was designed in partnership with Māori students and staff a process was set up to maximise engagement in the design planning.

Māori culture is high in collectivism, decision making is inclusive and all participants are given the opportunity to express their views. It is not culturally appropriate to state your personal view forcefully, rather this view is put forward using metaphors and narrative to illustrate the preference. Survey instruments do not give this opportunity.

Library team members formed the initial planning and consultation group Te Rōpū Whakamānawa (means group that encourages). The principles for how the group operated were established and these included using a “snowballing” technique where customers are asked to help identify other potential members. The initial group members were asked who else should be involved and invitations were sent to these individuals to be part of Te Rōpū Whakamānawa. These people were themselves also encouraged to invite others they thought should be involved. The size of the group was not limited to demonstrate the library’s intention to be as inclusive as possible as all stages of the project.

The consultation group ended up having between 30 and 40 members. A smaller sub-group of six were delegated to work more closely with the architect and this was very challenging for the architect who was more used to working where only one person had sign off. The shared decision making however meant that the space was designed in a way that gave ownership to those involved in the project and there was lots of engagement.

We also held a competition for students to design a spine label to distinguish the material shelved in this collection – this raised the profile of the space and collection and increased student engagement.

The impact of the space has been impressive with demand for it outstripping availability – in the current building project the space will be moved and expanded.

Conclusion

It important libraries are able to demonstrate the changes that have been made as a result of the feedback that customer have given. “The goal is to gain insight into the relationship between engagement and library outcomes “ (Gordon, Ludlum and Hoey 2008, 20) and to translate that insight into action. If surveys are conducted and reported with accuracy and rigour then they can be considered to be evidence of sufficient quality to use in evidence-based decision making.

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