Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Commentary

Identifying Customer Expectations is Key to Evidence Based Service Delivery

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As librarians and information professionals we share a common rationale: to deliver enhanced services for our customers. The importance of this is self-evident - if we don't have customers we don't have a job. We therefore put our services at peril if we don't put the customer at the heart of what we are trying to do.

The now-familiar description of evidence based library and information practice reminds us that we need "to integrate *user-reported*, *practitioner-observed* and research-derived evidence as an explicit basis for decision-making" (Booth, 2006). This begs several important questions – Who are our users? How can we best capture reports from these users regarding their expected outcomes? How might we as library practitioners observe (and act upon!) what our users require?

In attempting to answer such questions we discover potential value in methodologies with a business orientation; utilising tools from the commercial sector such as Customer Value Discovery research (McKnight, 2007a; McKnight & Berrington, 2008). We also need to recognise that customers don't come as "one size fits all". Indeed it behoves us as library managers to understand this.

Rather than attempting to deliver services to a single "amorphous mass" we need to recognise that there is no such thing as a "typical library user" (Booth, 2008) and thus to

identify the needs of particular customer segments. This Commentary focuses on the complex interactions of customer expectations, staff perceptions and appropriate methods of inquiry. It reveals that the classically-focused evidence based (population-intervention-comparison-outcome-[study type]) PICO[S] question (Kloda, 2006) faces challenges from the reality of multiple customers, conflicting desired outcomes and a bewildering choice of study methodologies.

Delivering a Customer-focus

If we are to put customers at the front of our services, instilling a true customer-focused culture amongst library staff, we must first identify the various customer segments for those services. To take as an example the University sector, with which the authors are most familiar, some of the customer segments include those itemised in Table 1. Such multiplicity of customers is also true for other sectors such as public libraries, school libraries and health libraries. Each customer segment may have different needs or, indeed, may possess similar needs that they express differently.

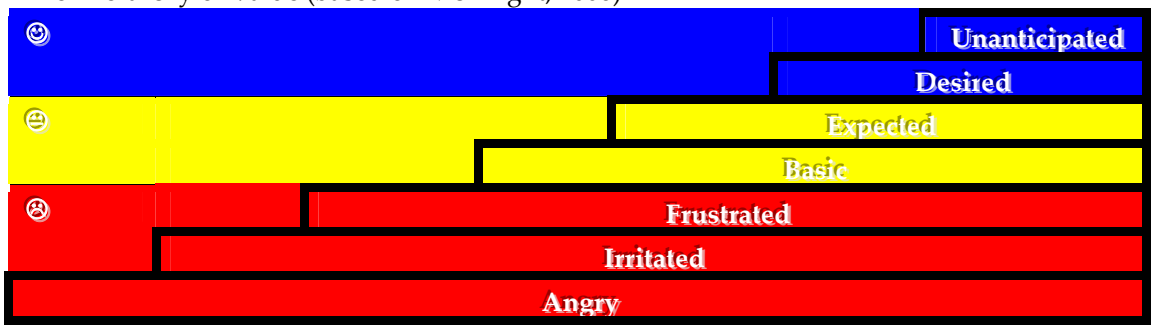
Furthermore, we should recognise that such needs do not remain static. Expectations for service provision constantly change as the environment, personal experiences of customers, and technology and other service delivery options evolve. This poses an ongoing management challenge to understand customer expectations, to see what is happening on the horizon that will impact customer service and the capacity of the service to respond to the changes, and, to engage proactively in service improvements, i.e., understanding what the customer expects.

Needs and expectations of types of different customers groups are demonstrably different. Our expectations are shaped not only by our experiences of libraries – if I am located out in the provinces it is largely irrelevant to me what library services in the capital look like – but also by our day-to-day experiences of other services, be they supermarkets, bookshops or hotels. In a broader context we recognise that the latest talk within service industries about "delighting your customers" is not the complete story (Kalikaskis, 2009). Many of us will have experienced the hotel with the crisp sheets folded back and the chocolate on the pillow (Tisch & Weber, 2007) but will such "delight" stand the test of an unemptied wastepaper bin or undesirable detritus in the shower plug-hole? We therefore instinctively recognise the intrinsic truth of the Hierarchy of Value (McKnight, 2006) (Table 2) – we may be pleasantly surprised by unanticipated aspects of service provision but "irritants" have a much more profound effect in shaping our overall perception of service quality.

Table 1
Some Illustrative Customer Segments for a University Library

Staff	Students
–Teachers –Researchers –Teachers/Researchers –Tutors –Administrators –Support Staff –etc	–Undergraduates –1st years –Post graduates –coursework –Post graduate –research –Further Education –Part time –Mature age –School leavers –Off-campus –Off-campus international –On-campus International –Students with a disability –Those who don't use the service –etc

Table 2
The Hierarchy of Value (based on McKnight, 2006)



The Customer Value Discovery research methodology seeks to contextualise the library service for the customer and seeks the customers' perceptions of service excellence. For example, workshop participants are prompted by questions to visualise excellence: As a student you've just graduated; or As a principal investigator you've just secured a new research grant; or As an academic you've just received your professorship… and you're down at "the pub" with your mates and you are telling them that your success is due to the fabulous library service. They are asked "What was it about the service that helped you achieve success?" In this way you are not leading the customers towards a shortlist of pre-specified priorities. Instead you are letting your customers tell you what is important.

Recognising that there is not one single population for our classically focused PICOS-style question allows us to explore differences between customer segments in a comparative way. For example students may feel that the availability and reliability of photocopying facilities is a key determinant of service quality. For academic staff, however, such a consideration may be of lesser importance as they typically have ready access to such facilities in their department. In identifying such differences, we face the practical decision; Upon which target segment will we focus our energies and resources?

Incorporating the Staff Viewpoint

So much for the complexity of the user perspective. What though of the "practitioner observed" component of evidence based practice? Data collected at Nottingham Trent University (McKnight & Berrington, 2008) has powerfully demonstrated that library staff members are seldom as good at anticipating users' expectations as they think they are! In this context it has proved valuable to have library staff present as observers when users are prompted to share their expectations of the service. In this way they engage with the whole process of quality improvement from the start, understand why changes are necessary and have an incentive, and a commitment, to work on exploring and devising possible solutions. Such participation does require bravery if one is to listen to frank responses to a question such as: What really annoys (irritates) you about this service?

However, once this surprisingly cathartic process is complete one can move onto more constructive lines of enquiry such as those for the "success scenario" mentioned above. Library staff assumptions are challenged by gap analyses generated as both customers and staff members vote, in a managed workshop voting process, on those factors for a quality service that they think are important to customers. This helps library staff to "throw out some myths", or "make hamburgers of sacred cows" (Booth, 2006), and reveals how we often make assumptions about what customers want and how the data shows that often we can get this wrong! McKnight (2002) identified that:

> involving staff in this customer research, by seeking their analysis of the research findings on what adds value for the customer, by their

> participation in teams established to define what change is required within the organisation to deliver the customer value package, we create an internal environment that is not only ready for change, but which is driving the change from the ground up, rather than imposed from management above. In this way, there is a much greater chance of staff "buy-in" and the change process is much more likely to be successful and sustaining. (p. 268)

It should be recognised, however, that such a challenging, not to say potentially threatening, process needs to be accompanied by appropriate cultural and management frameworks in which to make it work. It must be clear to all how findings are to be used in deciding: What is it possible to deliver or to remedy? Over what time period? With what impact upon customers perceptions?

The importance of marketing and a customer focused culture among library staff for delivering service quality is well-recognised (Singh, 2009). Library staff engagement in the Customer Value Discovery process and its consequent actions helps foster this vital organisational culture. Nottingham Trent University captures customer values as objectives in annual operational plans, with actions undertaken each year to bridge the gap between service delivery and excellence as defined by the customers themselves. By using customer values in this way, bridging the gap between "desire and performance" is embedded within a public statement of intention.

Which Methodologies?

This Commentary is not intended to suggest the innate superiority of one methodology over other alternatives. "One size fits all" is no more appropriate an assumption for methodologies of inquiry than it is for customer segments. However we do need to be aware that methodologies frequently make assumptions (e.g. the inclusion of "Library as Place") about what is important to our customers. We should therefore resist the tendency to be too high-minded about the academic rigour of methodologies. It is far more important to understand why you need the evidence and how you are going to use it. A methodology for exploring customer needs is only as good as the questions you ask. If you ask the wrong questions you inevitably get the wrong answers.

For example, standard satisfaction methodologies used nationally by universities may reveal that customers are very happy with the services that a library provides. At the same time comparison with findings from the Customer Value Discovery methodology may reveal that that same library is only delivering at 50% against value propositions (McKnight, 2008). Satisfaction is not only about service delivery it is also about expectations. If customer expectations increase yet service provision remains the same, satisfaction will invariably go down. Conversely if customer expectations remain low, rates of satisfaction may appear consistently high. The customers may simply be grateful that they have a service at all!

A related point, that the delighters or "wow services" of today easily become the basic taken-for-granted components of tomorrow's services, is well-illustrated within the familiar context of electronic journals. In 1999 the provision of digital full-text services by an academic library was widely regarded as being a "wow" factor. Six years later, in 2005, digital full text journals were expected. They no longer excited nor warranted a perception of excellence for a library service. Indeed one could go further and say that if they were not provided this "irritant" would seriously annoy an academic library customer

An increased awareness of the complexity of such interactions has helped library staff to realise that achieving satisfaction is not the end-game. Libraries cannot, and should not, rely upon customer satisfaction alone! Whatever methodology they use must also factor in the pivotal role of customer

expectations. Only such a perspective can help library staff appreciate why, despite considerable investment in library services and against an ever-shifting backdrop of increasing customer expectations, student ratings of satisfaction remain surprisingly constant.

Conclusion

Such detailed exploration of customer expectations is closely allied to "narrative based librarianship" as described by Brophy (2004, 2007). Library staff observe, and then actively participate in, the *telling of stories* within the library service; the linking of actions to the defined values and irritants of customers; the positioning required for a change of culture placing the customer at the centre of the library service. They begin to acknowledge that customer experiences and perceptions are their *reality* (McKnight, 2007b). Customers' narratives thus become powerful enablers in imbuing hard data with context, significance and meaning to inform library decisions on the development of appropriate services (Brophy, 2004).

By embedding within the organisation an appropriate management framework that requires customer consultation, staff engagement, and constant feedback, evidence is gathered to inform decision-making. It is thus feasible "to integrate *user-reported*, *practitioner-observed* and research-derived evidence as an explicit basis for decision-making" (Booth, 2006). Furthermore this approach provides the basis for two-way communication between customers and stakeholders and the service provider. Success breeds success…and we will never become either bored or complacent!

Implications for Practice

- Focusing on customer expectations allows library managers to identify "low hanging fruit" and more challenging targets upon which to focus their energies and resources.
- Customers compare a library service with their life experiences, not just other library services, so managers need to broaden their horizons when considering how to improve customer experiences.
- Reconsidering established library services against the backdrop of customer expectations helps to identify "sacred cows" and get rid of them.
- Purposeful inquiry must be accompanied by a feasible and realistic programme of change - if you don't make changes you have expended an awful lot of time and energy for no reason.

Implications for Research

- Investigation of customer satisfaction is not sufficient if a mechanism for factoring in changing customer expectations has not been identified.
- Those using standard methods for exploring library service quality must be cognisant, and wary, of implicit assumptions built into most of the existing methodologies and instruments.

Acknowledgement

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