

Exploring the shifting paradigms of librarian-client relationship

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This paper is an attempt to explore the relationship shared by library professionals with their users. Some popular models were studied to understand the basics of building long term relationship. Issues regarding continuing librarian-client relationship are discussed along with the measures to be adopted by the libraries to gain the loyalty of their users. Indian library scenario is discussed in the light of changing needs of their users.

Keywords: Librarian-client relationship; User satisfaction; User services

Introduction

Libraries are user centric organizations. A library user is the focal point to the 21st century library and information services¹. Whether it is framing of library policies or designing of library portal, patron satisfaction has been the primary influencing factor. The relationship between information provider and client is a crucial measure of effectiveness for library and information services².

A “for profit organization” acts in more specific manner by targeting utmost user satisfaction and gaining their confidence. This helps them to establish a long term bonding with their customers. Libraries are non-profit organizations which are supposed to provide “right information to the right user at the right time”. “Right information” sets the guideline for information acquisition policy to be adopted by the library. “Right user” mandates for developing user profiles and providing personalized services. “Right time” is crucial in selecting and designing of tools and techniques that are helpful in management and organization of information for the effective dissemination of information. As the technological advancement has revolutionized the way people act and communicate, it has become an indispensable tool for the libraries to build strong relationship with their users. Some important facts about librarian-client relationship and various existing models based on organization-client relationship are discussed.

Librarian-client relationship

A client is central to all the activities being performed by an institution or an organization.

Directly or indirectly, these institutions and organizations are formulated to serve their clients at the end. In an ideal situation the client totally relies upon a professional for their needs and the professional remains committed to satisfy the client demand, no matter how much ambiguous they are. Green³ emphasized on establishing personal relations between librarians and readers in public libraries, in which he stressed upon the fact that the librarian should give personal attention to the patron’s needs. He writes, “A hearty reception by a sympathizing friend, and the recognition of someone at hand who will listen to inquiries, even although he may consider them unimportant, make it easy for such persons to ask questions, and put them at once on home footing”. According to Gronroos⁴, existence of a relationship between two parties creates additional value for the customer and also for the supplier or service provider. Perng et.al.⁵ realized the active participation of library users in enhancing library services. They proposed a conceptual framework based on customer relationship management perspective. An on-going relationship may offer the customer security, a feeling of control and a sense of trust, minimized purchasing risks, and in the final analysis reduced costs of being a customer. Bunge⁶ proclaims trust as the crucial element in the professional-client relationship while considering ethical concerns for reference librarians. Cooper and Dempsey⁷ also advocated reliability and assurance as one of the prime factors while identifying customer service expectations from library staff and have identified two categories for customer service expectations:

- Service as an end result or outcome that involves reliability or the ability to perform a promised service both dependably and accurately; and
- Service process, which consists of the following dimensions--assurance (the ability of staff to convey a high degree of trust and confidence based on knowledge and courtesy), responsiveness (a demonstrated willingness to help customers and provide prompt service), empathy (providing caring, individualized attention to customers), and tangibles (the appearance of physical facilities, the amount of equipment and staff and the degree of communication that exists between the service provider and its customers).

While postulating his second law of library science i.e. every reader his/her book, Ranganathan⁸ writes

“One of the necessary conditions for social service institutions, such as the library, becoming popular is the fostering of a feeling of mutual cordiality and helpfulness between those who offer service and those who are served, together with a disposition to self-sacrifice. To this end, the library should strive to reduce formality to a minimum and make everyone feel at home.”

In recent years, collaborating with users has been emphasized in order to improve the library services. Many scholars have mandated for the crucial role of library users in devising new library services^{9,10}. Gashurov and Kendrick¹¹ write, “If we don’t join in creating the future, we may find that the future does not include us. We can make ourselves an integral part of the future by working together. Collaboration, as much as competition, is here to stay.”

Jayasundara¹² has identified a comprehensive list of service quality determinants in relation to customer satisfaction. Library professionals are expected to deliver and upgrade their services as per these determinants to achieve utmost satisfaction of their users.

Bender¹³ has divided the various transformational phases which the libraries information services has gone through in reference to special libraries:

- a. The “Just in case” approach where the objective was to acquire and shelve everything before hand in anticipation of a query.
- b. The “Just in time” approach where the library professionals respond after receiving a query.

- c. Now, “Just for you” approach where the library professionals are actively involved in analyzing, interpreting, customizing, and providing information in response to a query.
- d. The futuristic “Just with you” approach where the library professionals are involved at the level of strategic planning of a research and actively participating in the decision making. This approach calls for a continuous support of the information professional throughout the research process.

With the changing dimensions of user expectation and straining resources, librarians are required to justify their roles. These transformational phases reflects the changing roles of library professionals from being a passive responder to the one who is actively involved in the research and teaching process of an organization.

Factors influencing library-user relationship

Administrative factor

Increasing quantity of library users to be served and decline in library budgets and availability of professional staff are some of the possible administrative concerns that may hinder effective librarian-client relationship. A library may not be able to continue an existing service or acquire a technological tool to start a new service due to financial constraints¹⁴. With increase in number of library users, there might not be immediate increase in the number of professional hands to deal with the information demands of the user. Thus, level of user satisfaction may decline.

Libraries are vested with the responsibility of catering with the changing needs of their users. Technological advancement has brought tremendous change to the approach of information seeking behavior of library users. They may seek for more customized support and services with an expectation of having information as soon as possible irrespective of their form, whether digital or print, to be available at a place of their comfort.

Conflict of interest

This may arise in a library when a single copy of the book is available in the library stack and two users may demand for it at the same time. It is important to have clear guidelines and policies in order to resolve such issues. This may help to retain the trust of the client/user.

Communication barriers

Effectiveness of communication process in building good public relation has been realized by Public Relations Society of America. They state “Public relation is a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics”¹⁵. Some barriers, nevertheless, exists that may cause loss/misinterpretation of the communicated message at the receiver’s end. Some of them are

Semantic barrier: Distortion in communication because of semantics underlying the communicated message. This may occur because of linguistic or cultural differences between sender and receiver. As per Katz¹⁶, language is a poor substitute to represent the real world which is more complex, colorful, fluid and multidimensional. Physical (External) Barrier: Physical barriers include:

- i. Interference – distractions, noise, problems with technology
- ii. Discomfort – circumstances which affect concentration such as being too hot or too cold, feeling ill, etc.

Psychological (Internal) Barrier

Self censorship: Self censorship by the librarians may occur subconsciously, sometimes consciously when potential personal threats are perceived, such as conflict in the workplace or community¹⁷ and also if they are prejudiced or unaware about their own biases and inclinations¹⁸.

Attitudinal Barrier: Attitudinal Barriers may occur from personality conflicts, poor management, and resistance to change and lack of motivation.

Stereotyping: Stereotyping implies that all people are the same. It makes a judgment and is inflexible. When we stereotype it means we make assumptions about people because of their race, culture or profession. Gender, physical appearance, sexual preference and age are other areas where stereotyping can occur.

Negative subtext: Subtext is the information that is implied instead of being directly stated. For example, if a reference librarian sighs away while a user is putting across his/her query, it gives an impression to the user that the librarian is not listening or interested in providing services to him/her.

Some studies focusing on strengthening library-user relationship

The relationship and interaction between service and user group lies at the heart of the matter while developing management models especially community based models¹⁹. Various models are discussed below that suggests methods to develop and strengthen the library user relationship.

Bayles Model

Bayles²⁰ had proposed Librarian-Client Relationship model based on the allocation of responsibility and authority for decision making.

Paternalism Model: In this model, the professional is superior and takes decisions on behalf of the client for his or her well-being. They need to depend upon the decision and perception of the professional for the required information. The information might be censored thinking of the well being of the clients.

Contract Model: Here, the allocation of responsibility and authority for decision making is equally distributed between the professional and the client. Though the model accord to the liberal values of freedom and equal opportunity, sometimes the professional gets an edge over the client because of their competence in finding information and the client has to satisfy themselves with the limited information provided by the professional.

Fiduciary Model: This model recognizes the professional’s knowledge and expertise as well as the importance of client’s competence, authority and responsibility. This model is taken as more acceptable and vests a responsibility on the librarian to be worth of his/her client’s trust.

The contract model represents two-way communication between librarian and library user. The user puts a query before the librarian and information is delivered to the user without any consultation. The user is responsible to redefine or rectify their query. In contrast, fiduciary model advocates better dialogue and active participation from both ends in defining appropriate query and finding required information.

The Integrated Service Framework

Wang²¹ proposes an integrated service framework, based on 4S elements formulated by Constantinides²² of Web Marketing Mix, for users from a CRM (Customer Relationship Management) perspective in order to implement marketing concept into library service and improve effectiveness and efficiency.

S1 (Scope): *Strategic Direction for users*

The S1 element is a primarily strategic character, which outlines the decisions to be made in library organizations. A library manager should create a CRM strategy focusing on the organization and customer instructional programs (library tour; developing research profile, etc.).

S2 (Site): *Providing suitable channel for users*

Good communication strategies are important for effective library- library user relationship. Hence suitable channels should be established such as websites (more suitably an interactive one), telephone service, e-mail, 3G mobile services, etc. Mohammed et al. (2002 cited in Wang Shiow-Luan) provide a 7Cs framework, through which a customer interface design can achieve success. The 7Cs refer to context, content, community, customization, communication, connection, and commerce. This stage stipulates for value added activities for users.

S3 (Synergy): *Gain loyalty of users; Increase satisfaction*

It is important to integrate library processes and establish an environment which can support one to one communication with the users. Organizations should have user centric approach and take all possible measures to get utmost user satisfaction. This will lead to loyalty and client retention.

S4 (System): *Support in library use*

System refers to technological capabilities and is widely considered as the main driving force behind the Internet growth. ICT has paved its way in the libraries to and has become crucial to handle library operations as well as user - centric activities.

The library activities become smoother and quicker at each stage of the framework. Each stage is correlated and works on the feedback from each other.

Principles of Human Centered Innovation

Harbo and Biegel²³ have proposed seven principles of human centered innovation in relation to libraries. These principles can be adopted by a library to

reformulate their services from library centric towards more user-centric:

Users run nothing

Librarians should think beyond what users need. Instead, they should focus on what they want and try to interpret it. This should be the starting point for initiating a new service by the library.

Remove the blinkers

To come out of their own biases and inhibitions and giving a fresh perspective on their thoughts is important for a librarian. For this they need to reach out to their library users through participation in study circles or faculty/student level programs to provide a rethink on their prevailing thoughts.

Focus on the question

Librarians should focus on the queries put across by the users and make continuous effort to refine the query. This should be done till they are sure that they have come to the right query which is important and relevant for their users. This helps in increase precision and saving of time during document/information search.

Meet ordinary people

It is important to have broader perspective on the kind of services that librarians are planning to provide to their users. For this, they are required to have feedback from the users falling beyond their target segment. Participation in orientation programmes and refresher programs will help them to know the changes occurring in their profession. Library extension programs can be organized

Focus on context

A qualitative study on the before and after effects of a library visit on the library user could be an influential factor while designing and developing a new service.

Improve people's lives

Objective of any library service should be to improve people's lives and it should not be compromised due to straining resources or any other factor.

Don't go to the zoo, go to the jungle

This principle calls for interacting with users in their own niche rather than in a predefined set up of the library. This makes the user more comfortable and open with the librarian about their needs and requirements.

Suggested measures to build long term relationship

Library users are pivotal for any library while developing their policies and procedures. It is important for the libraries to work continuously to improve their services. As the technology has become indispensable influencing the need and requirement of the scholarly community, librarians are compelled to give a fresh perspective on user based services so that they can enhance their performance. Straining resources also makes it imperative to continuous revisit and re-evaluate library services.

Various studies discussed in the above sections provide an insight about how a library can improve their performance. Some suggested measures to build long term relationship with the users are:

1. Librarians need to emerge out from the role of a mere gatekeeper for the information created and generated by someone else and redefine their role as a facilitator in creation and effective dissemination of scholarly information. It is important to introduce specialized courses and training programs for library professionals which can enhance their skills to effectively deal with their users so that they become an active part of their academia²⁴.
2. Focusing and investing in developing collaboration between the librarian and library users are suggested to be effective measures to establish long term relationship^{25,26}. The collaboration could be on library blogs, developing content for library websites, and online and in-person services. This will encourage library administrators to focus on providing the content and services users want as opposed to what librarians think users need. They should collaborate with the scholarly community to propagate their very own idea of "Open Access" by establishing institutional repositories. This kind of collaboration will help to elicit constant, effective feedback from library users, as well as those who currently do not use libraries.
3. Librarians should participate in extending support and assistance in the development and updation of homepage of active researchers. Many European (e.g. Ghent University Library) and American Libraries (e.g. Cornell University) has developed Academic Profiles and implemented tools for effective collaboration between the researchers.
4. Deale²⁷ emphasizes upon participation in campus activities such as student sponsored events, supporting departmental or faculty level activities are some of the ways through which the librarian can dispel stereotypes and other kind of socio-psychological barriers. Rodwell and Fairbairn²⁸ advocated on giving a rethink over intensifying the role and sustainability of the Faculty liaison librarian with the changing information and research needs. A faculty liaison librarian should be active participant in the research, teaching and learning functions of their organization. It would be beneficial to have some kind of social platforms where a library user can feel privileged and comfortable while their interaction with the library staff. Many a times, library users feel uncomfortable to interact with library staff in the open area of the library. Shyness, more inclination towards privacy or the feeling that he or she may be disturbing the librarian could be the possible reasons behind the user's discomfort. Organizing book club²⁹ and other types of social gatherings will help to break across these kinds of socio-psychological barriers. As the social networking sites have emerged as one of the strongest media for interaction and information sharing, it becomes pertinent for the libraries to make their presence at social networking sites. Library services can be communicated through these sites and library and information professionals will look more approachable.
5. User manuals providing information about online and offline searching can be included as part of library website so that a user can access the information from his/her workplace. Developing a one stop search portal, developing ask-a-librarian interface and library blogs are some of the ways to cater the information needs of user.
6. Participating in library consortia can bring significant change to a library's user services. Some of the benefits of being part of a consortia are :
 - Reduction in the costs of e-resources
 - Ability to negotiate favorable terms and conditions of use with the vendors
 - Expansion of services and resources
 - Sharing of staff skills and expertise to strengthen library leadership

- Increased effectiveness of advocacy for policy change
- Promotes cost effective, customer driven services

Conclusion

The services of a library are taken as successful only when they are essential and crucial to their clients. Thus, libraries need to formulate effective measures to ensure that they stay ahead of their client expectations. A library staff is supposed to know their library users, their library collection and should be active in finding required information. Also, they need to re-assert their role from information providers to information educators.

As far as personalized services to the users are concerned, it is understood that in large libraries, it is difficult for the library staff to deal personally with many readers. If, however, of such a temperament that he takes pleasure in associating with the users of the library, he can, by only giving a few minutes in a day to the work, do a great deal to make visitors and students feel that an air of hospitality pervades the institution. The more freely a librarian mingles with readers, and the greater the amount of assistance he renders them, the more intense does the conviction of citizens, also, become, that the library is a useful institution³⁰. However, Ranganathan³¹ points it out that the librarians need to find out how much help could be given to a reader to find his/her required information without going beyond the limits of common sense and without becoming private secretaries or private tutors.

Libraries in western countries have already taken a move and are redefining their role as community centers. In one of the policy documents of ALA³², they claim that “a number of libraries have been emphasizing on redefining their role as community centers with creative spaces suitable for a number of activities, only one of which is seeking and accessing information”. They continuously thrive to adopt new tools and techniques in order to meet the changing demands of their users which in turn give them the confidence of their users. Considering the Indian library scenario, the influence of “user” factor is witnessed as far as the policy framing is concerned. However, this factor is much neglected when it comes to development and devising of methods for effective delivery of services. In fact, a sincere approach is missing towards enhancing the library services which are more user-centric. The concept of

“Faculty Liaison librarian” or virtual reference librarian, that has emerged as essential services within western libraries, are still in their nascent stage as far as Indian research libraries³³ are concerned and non-existing in the academic environment. Straining resources and increasing number of users physically visiting the library are the reasons behind lack of milestones regarding strengthening of bond between library and library users. Most of the libraries are bereft of basic infrastructures that are required to enhance the reference services. Reference librarians are mostly entrusted with the job like of a traffic inspector to direct their users towards the library catalogue/OPAC or to the document stack area where the user is left to explore and find the required information. In spite of the fact that there have been focused studies^{34,35} to enhance library services, Indian librarianship has a long way to go to derive proper justification of their presence and relevance in research and education. To start with, they need to devise new services that are innovative, attractive, useful and cost-effective and can ensure utmost user satisfaction. Specialized training programs can be organized for the library professionals to provide insight about strengthening their companionship with library users so that they can deal with them effectively. Also, there is an urgent need to evolve and incorporate information technology to improve reference services. However, intervention of information technology should not lead to depersonalization of the service process. It is important to continuously thrive for deriving tools and techniques where the individual user gets the feel of connectivity with their information providers.

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