

Efficient Customers Service: A Necessary Skill for a Proactive, Responsive and Relevant 21st Century Librarian

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to sensitize librarians on contemporary realities and the importance of inhibiting the principles of efficient customer service in dealing with library customers as a strategic tool in ensuring that librarians remain proactive, responsive and relevant in the ever changing information landscape. Literatures reviewed brought to the fore issues and trends that are challenging the conventional roles of librarians in the 21st century such as transition to digital content, computer that is almost replacing librarians' roles, and others. Possible solutions were carefully articulated such as provision of librarians with the requisite technological literacy needed for a 21st century library service. The paper concluded with the remark that, regardless of changes in technology which has adversely affected the library's capacity, and the dynamic change in the information seeking behaviour of our users which has redefined the concept of service provision, by cultivating and displaying the outlined skills for efficient customer service, library remains relevant and the role of librarians in the digital age indispensable

Keywords: 21st century librarian, library customers, proactive librarian and responsive librarian.

Introduction

The 21st century is undoubtedly acclaimed the technological age. With new technological developments and innovations cutting across academic, social and economic spheres, come new challenges and new expectations. There is no gain saying; new opportunities and challenges are confronting libraries in today's rapidly changing information landscape. Adigun, Kotso and Kolajo (2013) pointed out that empirical studies conducted by various authors showed that libraries are struggling to keep their place as the major source of inquiry in the face of emerging digital technology. Young people appear to share a voracious appetite for new technologies, new access methods, and new ways to get and use information. Adults are in no way immune to this trend. Digital technology has indeed immensely revolutionized the information landscape. As observed by Dukshinamurti and Satpath (2009) the role of a librarian in the 21st century has changed considerably in keeping with the changes brought in by technological applications that are now fully entrenched in libraries, particularly in academic institutions all over the world. Similarly Webstar cited in Hermon and Alman, (2010) argued that the only constant in the information landscape is uncertainty. Now more than in any proceeding era, libraries must change, but just how to make this transition is fundamentally the issue.

Library customers are more than a source for data collection; they are the reason for the libraries' existence. Business case studies Limited Liability Partnership (2016) argued that customers are crucial to the success of any business since they represent its fundamental source of revenue. Customer satisfaction is at the heart of the selling process. The relationship between the customer and the organization is, therefore, an important one. Going by this assertion, the library can never place too much emphasis on its customer if

the need of the customer is not met. The customer is the foundation of the library's success. According to the American Library Association (2013) an explicit function of the library is to organize, preserve, and make knowledge accessible. To achieve this, it is imperative to identify and meet the needs of the customer. It becomes very essential to listen to and learn from the library customers and to use insights gained to improve library services.

Unfortunately, a number of librarians and libraries have ignored customers because they perceive customers as a captive audience. In general, the library became an organization that served all customers not only with similar tools but in similar ways. The era when academic libraries enjoyed monopoly and custody of knowledge; incontestable administrative support and when librarians held sway the information landscape are long gone. It is important to understand societal trends and changes in information landscape. Libraries are predominantly a service-oriented organization and good customer service is the key to the library's image, growth and stability.

This paper intends to sensitize librarians on the importance of inhibiting the principles of efficient customer service in dealing with library customers as a strategic tool in ensuring that librarians remain proactive, responsive and relevant in the ever changing information landscape. To that end, the paper strives to help librarians understand, based on contemporary realities, the current answer to the question of 'how should librarians advance the course of librarianship in the 21st century?'

Concept of Customer Service

Customer service is about serving people. It is the genuine, compassionate, personalized, and or simply put, human

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approach to meeting the needs of customers. It is the tactical approach used to win customers loyalty. According to Salesforce.com (2016) customer service is the support you offer your customers both before and after they buy product that helps them have an easy and enjoyable experience with you. It's more than just providing answers: it's an important part of the promise your brand makes to its customers. And it is critical to the success of your business. Similarly, Investopedia (2018) defined customer service as the process of ensuring customer satisfaction with a product or service often, customer-service takes place while performing a transaction for the customer such as making a sale or returning an item. Customer service can take a form of an in-person interaction, a phone call, self-service systems or by other means.

Customer Service in the Library

Libraries are institutions that focus on creating unique products such as knowledge, information, and ideas. These intangibles are highly valued by organizations and customers (Kotler & Keller, 2016). The bricks-and-mortar personal experience cannot be replicated by a Google search, Yahoo Answers, or watching a YouTube video. It is incumbent for library managers to build an interesting and enjoyable venue to attract users for their information needs. Libraries can shape the future as to accessing, providing, and disseminating information and knowledge in a globally competitive service-led economy. Libraries have always been integral to the communities they serve (Department for Culture, Media, & Sports-UK.gov, 2016a). As public sector and not-for-profit organizations, libraries are extensively distributed across the globe. The emergence, however, of powerful competitors including search engines; technology-information and data storage or retrieval companies; and social media sites loaded with content,

information portals, and webpages, have steered millions of former and potential users away from libraries. Some libraries in the United States, especially those in rural and underfunded cities, have had to shut down or have become almost desolate except for the occasional few visitors because they have not kept up with the pace of change on both a marketing and technology basis.

Characteristics of Good Customer Service in the Library

Good customer service in the library can be characterized by the following:

Promptness: This is the quality or habit of arriving or being on time. As members of a professional society, librarians are charged with a weighty responsibility. IFLA (2011) posits that the core mission of library and information professionals is to facilitate access to information for all for personal development, education, cultural enrichment, economic activity and informed participation in and enhancement of democracy. In recognition of this fact, when attending to library customers, promptness should be the watch word. Unnecessary delays should be avoided.

Politeness: This is the practical application of good manners or etiquette. Politeness is almost a lost art. Saying a warm greeting, addressing customers respectfully (sir/madam), "how may we/I be of service, using good manners is appropriate whether the customer makes a purchase or not (salesforce.com, 2016. Librarian is expected to show the highest level of politeness to all library customers through appropriate courteous responses.

Professionalism: This means that all customers should be treated professionally, which means the use of competent

hands and appropriate technology where applicable. Professionalism shows the customers that they're cared for. Librarians protect each library customer's right to privacy and confidentiality with respect to information sought, received and resources consulted, borrowed, acquired or transmitted.

Personalization: is a tailored means of meeting the customer's needs more effectively and efficiently, making interactions faster and easier and, consequently, increasing customer satisfaction and the likelihood of repeat visits. Using the customer's name is very effective in producing loyalty. Customers like the idea that whom they do business with knows them on a personal level (salesforce.com, 2016)

Importance of Customer Service

Nowhere is change more evident than in the librarian profession. On the one hand, understanding of the library has grossly undermined the capacity of the library; while on the other the library is experiencing stiff competition for information access and information service delivery arising from new technology. The dynamic change in the information seeking behaviour of the younger demographic library customers and being inundated with technology beyond capacity to keep pace is making ineffective attempts to serve members of our constituent.

Most successful businesses recognize the important of providing outstanding customer service. A courteous and empathetic interaction with a trained customer service representative can mean the difference between losing and retaining a customer. When problems arise, customers should receive timely attention to the issue. Prompt attention to emails and phone calls is critical to maintaining

good relations. Requiring customers to stand in long lines or sit on hold can sour an interaction before it begins (Business case studies LLP (2016).

Skills of Efficient Customer Services Staff

Patience: This is the capacity to accept or tolerate setbacks, problems, or pressures from customers without becoming annoyed or anxious when the need arise. If you deal with customers on a daily basis, be ensuing to say patient when they come to you confused and frustrated. Take the time to truly figure out what they want. It pays the customer and the library in the long run when competent service is provided patiently than when customers are hurriedly rushed out the door.

Attentiveness: The ability to really listen (being alert, observant and attentive) to customers. It means assiduously attending to the comfort or wishes of library customers in a very polite or courteous atmosphere. This is fundamental in providing great service. Why the need arises being attentive to customers is the best barometer to gauge quality of service. It is very important to be mindful and attentive to the feedback that you receive.

Good Communication Skills: This implies being able to convey information to customers clearly and simply, in a way it is easily understood. Librarians distinguish between personal and professional convictions and professional duties and do not allow personal beliefs to interfere with the provision of access to information resources. There is need on how to take cautious of some personal communication habits to customers. When it comes to an important message that needs to be relayed to customers, it must be conveyed clearly; keep it simple and leave nothing to doubt.

Knowledge of the Library Services: This is essential in matching the right service with customer's need. when the need arises. With proper knowledge of the various library divisions/ extensions and their services, suitable services can be recommended highlighting their features and benefits thus saving customer's time and reducing the chances of information anxiety and frustration. Adequate knowledge of library services is a key to overcoming objections, boosting confidence, enthusiasm and persuasion.

Ability to use "Positive Language": Being positive is one of the most important customer service skills. Language is a very important part of persuasion. Why the need arises. customers create perceptions about you and your library based on the language that you use. It is therefore imperative that helping a customer should start from a sincere and positive position. In that position, the customer is "the king", 'always right', using positive phrases enhances customer engagement.

Ability to "Read" Customers: Ability to "read" customer is a valuable skill in business. This is an important part of the personalization processes as well, because it takes knowing your customers to create a personal experience for them. What to take NOTE OF. Look and listen for subtle clues about their current mood, patience level, personality, e.t.c. and you will go far in keeping your customer interactions positive.

Ability to Work under Pressure: Ability to stay calm and even influence others when things get a little hectic is critical for effective service delivery. What to take note of. It is unacceptable for a librarian to allow a heated, rude or unruly customer, force them to lose their cool; in fact it is

their duty to take charge of the situation and pacify the customer.

Tenacity: A great work ethic and a willingness to do what needs to be done is a key skill when providing the kind of service that people talk about. To most customers, what is considered memorable service created by a single employee who goes beyond the "status quo" when it comes to helping them out. What to take note of. Bearing in mind that putting in that "extra effort" is priceless in value should be the driving motivations to never "cheat" your customers with lazy service.

Willingness to Learn: Seek feedback from customers and colleagues about how to improve your customer services skills. This is because to succeed in the librarian profession, there is a need to be learning constantly because of the rapid changing nature of the information seeking behaviour conditioned by advances in digital technologies. Learn from successful colleagues. seek mentorship.

The Proactive Librarian

According to Dictionary.com (2016) proactive can be defined as creating or controlling a situation rather than just responding to it after it has happened. In the light of the significant changes occurring in the librarian profession, Dukshinamurti and Saphathy (2009) asserts that, the very fact that technology allows the users to have direct access to the products of information has paradoxically made it all the more necessary for the librarian to reach out to the users in a proactive manner. Below are some practical areas librarians can demonstrate proactiveness in the discharge of their duties.

- **Punctuality to work:** The official resumption time prescribed by the federal civil service is 8.00am.

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Punctuality is the most obvious form of proactiveness you can display to your organization. It is a clear indication of preparedness for service provision.

- Empathy to library customers: According to Dictionary.com (2016) empathetic is the psychological identification with the feelings, thoughts, or attitudes of others. It is the ability to understand someone else's feelings, emotions and experiences. As librarians you demonstrate empathy when you are able to put in the situation of the library customer. It will lead to greater success personally and professionally. Here is a paraphrase of 5 vital steps as put forward by mind tools Ltd (2016).
 - Pay attention, physically and mentally, to what's happening. Put aside your viewpoint, and try to see things from the other person's point of view. When you do this, you will realize that library customers most likely are not being inconsiderate, stubborn, rude or unreasonable- they are probably just reacting to the situation with the knowledge they have or experiencing a mood swing.
 - Listen carefully, and note the key words and phrases that the customer uses. Once you understand the customer's perspective, acknowledge it. Remember: acknowledgement does not always equal agreement. You can accept that people have different opinions from your own, and that they have good reason to hold those opinions.
 - Respond encouragingly to library customer enquiries. To be effective, you need to discern the customer's viewpoint. Some questions are like icebergs. The most substantial part lies hidden beneath the surface. Even when the inquirer is eager for the answer, before you respond, consider why the question was asked, whether you should give a direct answer or direct the

user to a reference material or give a referral. Express yourself kindly and respectfully.

- Take initiative in developing active partnerships with library customers. This require communicating in the user" language, understanding their concerns and being part of their team.(Brophy, (2007).
- Provide library signage to facilitate access to information: It is important to have an attractive and effective sign system that is consistent throughout all public areas of the library. Great signage communicates your competence understanding, and care for the people using your library (Santy, 2012).

Types of Signs

- Directional signs guide people to areas or services within the building. These signs use arrows pointing to specific locations.
- Identify access difficulty areas, offer possible solutions before they are requested using identification signs to facilitates access to resources, specific areas or functions within the library.
- Use information/ instruction signs which are explanatory in nature to briefly explain library functions or instruct patrons on how to use certain resources example; OPC, Wi-Fi e.t.c.
- Use current awareness signs posted in high traffic areas to draw attention to very important information, information resources and services. Examples: changes in library hours, new arrivals, library rules/ requirements of library workshops/seminars.
- The Library Ambassador: Generally speaking, an ambassador is a respected official acting in a representative capacity on behalf of his nation or organization. The role of an ambassador is to reflect the official position of the sovereign body that gave him authority. Library

ambassadors represent the library as professional, knowledgeable and courteous advocates for our services, spaces and resources. Ambassadors provide active support to facilitate research and information literacy. They provide comprehensive reference and instruction, provide feedback about library services and create, participate in, and reflect on existing and new library programs and services.

- Getto know faculty personally and actively engage with faculty and students in assigned department or institutes in order to develop strong working relationships.
- Take initiative to identify, meet, and facilitate ingoing communication about faculty and students information needs and service expectations.
- Acquaint users with the Ahmadu Bello university Institutional Repository interface, subscribed database and seek opportunities for collaboration in areas of collection development (e.g creating digital collections; contributing to institutional repository).
- Knowledgeable expert on the library's division and services they provide as well as open sources of information. Guide users on open source download and upload.

The Responsive Librarian

Customer responsiveness is the ability to deliver customer requirements in timely and satisfactory manner. Customer responsiveness is used to ensure the capacity of a business to organize and respond to changing customer needs. According to Godsell et al (2006) knowledge of and engagement with customers are the only sustainable competitive advantages an organization can have. A responsive librarian uses technology to learn more about customer needs to deliver the highest standards of customer service. Being responsive is critical for successful customer

development. It requires that one:

Embrace Digital Technology. Ability to keep up with new ideas in technology and librarianship is crucial to our responsiveness as librarians. Librarians need to do so much online these days, way beyond basic catalogues and database searching. Librarians have to be able to use search engines and use them well. They need to be able to find quality open source resources. They need to help patrons set up e-mail and teach basic internet skills. They need to be able to troubleshoot problems users are having accessing online library resources, atleast to the extent where they can figure out if the problem is on the library's side or the side of the users' side (Farkas, 2006)

Keep up with new technology. This is often not an explicitly listed part of one's basic weekly job duties, but its importance cannot be overstated. Farkas (2006) explained that Five years ago, few people were talking about blogs and Information Management in libraries, but now so many libraries are using these tools to provide services to patrons. We need to be able to keep up with what's new in technology and what libraries are (or could be) doing with it. Reference librarians are now providing reference service online via e-mail, synchronous chat blogs and Information Management. When customer responsiveness is a priority, opportunities to serve library customers will increase, while problems and service issues will decrease.

Areas Librarians can Demonstrate Responsiveness.

Use of technology. This includes library website, email, phone calls, short message service (SMS), social media platforms, e.t.c. to help ensure customers get the information they need quickly and/or their concerns promptly. This is critical because, failing to meet deadlines

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or ignoring inquiries can increase client dissatisfaction with your service.

Use of current awareness service. The purpose of a (CAS) is to inform library users generally about new acquisition and development. Most libraries use notice boards and designated shelves to draw attention to recent additions, while some libraries produce complete or selective lists for circulation to patrons

Use of selective dissemination of information. Sometimes referred to (SDI) is a form of CAS, whereby librarians conduct regular searches of databases to find references to new articles or other materials that fit a particular customer's interest profile and forward the results to these searches to the customer. It is important to create and maintain library customers profile and information resources consulted or requested.

Monitoring usage statistics. Compile statistics of information resources consulted and align accordingly. This means that the research focus of lecturers, departments, and courses offered are adequately taken into consideration.

Use of library orientation and workshops effectively. Identify potential topics for workshops or events that can be used to promote library services and collections. Work with Kashim Ibrahim Library, deans and head of department to plan and organize library orientation and workshops.

Use of opening and closing hours effectively. Responsiveness often comes down to adjusting your schedule to peak times. Keep track of when you receive the most patronage. Example, before and during examination. Adjust opening and closing time accordingly so as to

demonstrate your level of responsiveness to your library users.

The Relevant Librarian

What is the role of librarians in the digital age?" -Why should libraries spend money for books and journals when everything is online?" -Why do we need a well equipped faculty/departmental library when students can do their assignments and research on the internet or at the comfort of their home?'

It is undeniable fact that technology has greatly revolutionized the way information is accessed. Library advocacy have a critical role to play in answering these questions. Library advocacy is the activity that librarians engage in which aims at garnering public support and influencing decision makers in their institutions. On the job or off, librarians have countless opportunities to build both public understanding and support for the library, its information resources, services and personnel. However, for library advocacy to be effective, identify a need, set a goal, come up with a plan of action, get stakeholders involved and ensure proper coordination.

Practical suggestion for planning a library advocacy (excerpts from " I Love Libraries" an initiative of the American Library Association, (2015) includes:

- Set Goals: Determine what you want to accomplish. Does your library require a bigger space, more information resources (books, computers and accessories e.t.c.) Once you have identified your goals, you are ready to organize. Bear in mind, library advocacy should be tied to the library's overall goals and on going public awareness program. In Identifying critical tasks - important areas include;

developing a budget, recruiting volunteers, coordinating of activities with the deans, head of departments, university librarian and the state chapter of Nigerian Library Association and fundraising.

- Plan a library event: Any event during the year is an opportunity to showcase your library. Create an event or promotion that will get friends of the library, administrators or alumni involved. You can host the event at the library or immediate department/ faculty hall or any strategic campus venue and invite the media to attend. Develop a communication plan. Critical elements include: Defining the key message and targeting key audiences.
- Make and distribute | Handouts: important information about the library, its services and needs can be distributed in writing for people to read later or pass on to others. If you have desktop publishing skills, or know someone who does, work to build written materials that can be passed along to others. These can include the library's hours and services, a wish list of things the library needs, information about upcoming events or any pertinent library information.
- Involve the press: Are you good at public speaking? Call your local radio talk show or TV news. Speak publicly about the specific value of your library. Write an op-ed piece for your local paper, or ask students / faculty to write editorials for the campus paper. Write a one page newsletter or library bulletins.

Conclusion

The case made above of the need for librarians to imbibe the principles of efficient customer services that when librarians take a proactive role in advancing teaching, learning and research, are responsive in embracing digital technology in services delivery and are prepared to seize opportunities to

build both public understanding and support for the library, they will increase their visibility and appreciation, an appreciation that can translate into goodwill and tangible benefits. Regardless of changes in technology which has radically transformed the information landscape, dwindling budget which has adversely affected the library's capacity, and the dynamic change in the information seeking behaviour of our users which has redefined the concept of service provision, by cultivating and displaying the outlined skills for efficient customer service, library remains relevant and the role of librarians in the digital age indispensable.

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