

Marketing of Information Products and Services

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1. INFORMATION : THE INVISIBLE INGREDIENT

It is universally recognised that information, particularly scientific and technical information, is one of the basic but invisible ingredients for the success of any organisation or enterprise. As an ingredient, information is like electrical energy and the impact of a reliable, current and fast information service will be as great as that of electricity on the socio-economic and industrial development of the country. Information is also an essential ingredient of change, and change is nothing other than the transformation resulting from a new contribution of data or the re-interpretation of existing data. Under development, in the final analysis, is no more than the consequence arising from the inability to generate information, to handle it properly, to store it and to distribute it equitably.

Many advanced countries are said to have entered into a so called 'post-industrial society' in which the rise of GNP depends not so much on the production and distribution of goods and services but on the generation, distribution, and application of scientific knowledge and information.

2. FREE OR FEE-BASED INFORMATION PRODUCTS AND SERVICES

Since its inception, UNESCO has been advocating free flow of information across nations and peoples of the world. It is also initiating projects for the 'universal availability of publications' to facilitate easy access to and flow of information, overcoming barriers of distance, language, costs, etc.

Consistent with this philosophy of UNESCO, many libraries and their information centres were making available their information products and services free of cost to the users till recently. These free services included the following:

- (a) Reference and consultation of library resources
- (b) Loan of books
- (c) Supply of reprints of articles from journals
- (d) Distribution of library accession lists, bibliographies and reading lists
- (e) Distribution of other publications like technical reports, theses, conference proceedings, etc.

However, the position is changing now and the trend is towards fee-based information services. The reasons for this

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change are attributable to the following factors:

- The cost of books and journals is increasing year by year
- The library budgets for document acquisition are not keeping pace with the increase in the cost of the publications but, on the contrary, are subject to drastic cuts due to economic considerations, governmental policies, etc.
- The operational and service costs in libraries are increasing on account of labour, equipment and other infrastructural inputs.

In many countries, libraries which are supported by public funds are now required to be self-supporting and recover part of their maintenance costs through fee-based information services.

The British Council Libraries, the Library of Congress, the US Government Printing Office and many other information service centres abroad have switched over from the earlier policy of free services to one of fee-based services.

Some Government organisations in India, like the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research, New Delhi, have issued directions that atleast one-third of the expenditure on the upkeep of the libraries in the national laboratories/institutes should be earned through fee-based services.

These changed policies have cast a great responsibility on the librarians and information officers and are forcing them to publicise and market the fee-based services in order to earn adequate revenues, although, by tradition and by training, they are not well-equipped to assume this new responsibility.

3. INFORMATION SERVICE AS AN INDUSTRY

As pointed out earlier, information is now treated as a 'resource' and as a 'saleable commodity'. The business of generating, storing, retrieving and transmitting information is carried on under several garbs like the 'IT industry', 'telecommunication industry', 'knowledge industry', 'information industry', 'networks' and so on. In USA, all those organisations which are providing fee-based information services have come together and formed an 'Information Industries Association'.

4. MARKETING OF INFORMATION PRODUCTS AND SERVICES

In a broad sense, marketing, in the context of information products and services, may be defined as a concept of sensitively serving and satisfying the information needs of all those who are involved in education, scholarship, research and development, business, trade, industry etc. It connotes a function which has been hitherto peculiar to business firms in the task of finding and stimulating buyers for their products and services. It involves product development, pricing, distribution, communication and continuous attention to the changing needs of the customers and the development of new products and services to meet these needs.

Every library or information centre may be having some kind of information products or services to offer commercially. If there is a library which does not have any worthwhile product or service, now is the time for it to make a beginning, if it is serious enough to meet atleast some of its operational expenses.

The demand for information products and services will increase manifold thanks to the opening up and globalization of the Indian economy and industry. There are hundreds of thousands of information seekers working in about 180 universities, 1,000 professional colleges, 10,000 public and private limited companies, 500,000 medium and small-scale industries and 1,500 R&D centres in the country, constituting a vast and potential target population for marketing information products and services.

The kinds of marketable information products and services which most libraries and information centres could offer are described in the following paragraphs.

4.1 Physical Information Products

Physical information products are tangible items like books, journals, reports, patents, standards, audio-visual materials, etc that are normally held by most libraries as part of their document collections.

Till now, access to the document collections in almost all libraries is free to bonafide internal and external users. The documents may also be made available to other libraries under the traditional inter-library loan mode.

The facility of providing access to information may be marketed and revenues earned by following one or more of the following schemes :

4.1.1 Institutional Membership

The Central Library of the Indian Institute of Technology, Madras, has introduced a scheme of library institutional membership for the benefit of industries and other corporate sector organisations.

Interested organisations have to register themselves with the office of the Dean of Industrial Consultancy and Sponsored

Research of the Institute as a corporate member on payment of an annual membership fee of Rs 5,000 and above in a graded scale, depending on the size and business turnover of the organisation concerned. Upon registration, each member is entitled to make use of the Institute's laboratory and test facilities and also the library and information services by paying the prescribed charges.

The library membership scheme is a success story and so far nearly 500 corporate members are making use of its resources and services.

There are several other libraries in the country which have introduced similar institutional membership scheme, notable among them being the Libraries of the IISc and NAL in Bangalore, TIFR and IIT in Bombay, NCL, Pune, CFTRI, Mysore, CLRI, Madras and so on.

4.1.2 Access Fees

Some libraries like the St John's Medical College in Bangalore levy an access fee each time a user enters the library for reference and consultation. This example can be followed by other libraries too.

4.1.3 Coupon Scheme

The British Library Document Supply Centre, Boston Spa, UK, requires two pre-paid coupons (priced at £ 5.25 each) per document loaned from its collection of books, conference proceedings, technical reports, etc.

Indian libraries may also consider a similar scheme for loans of books etc to borrowers.

4.2 Information Services

Special libraries and information centres, which have all the necessary facilities, in terms of document collections, equipment, manpower, funds and management

support, should be in a position to offer several fee-based information services as discussed in the following paragraphs :

4.2.1 Reference Services

This would include the following services:

Bibliographical identification of documents; data on Indian and foreign manufacturers, business and trade organisations, associations, R&D centres, academic institutions, etc; reading lists; and referral service.

An hourly charge for providing the reference services may be fixed.

4.2.2 Photocopy Services

This is a bottom line service that every library and information centre should offer. The rates fixed by INSDOC may be followed uniformly to avoid unnecessary competition.

4.3 Literature Search Services

Many libraries have already set up, or in the process of setting up, facilities for information access and retrieval from CD-ROM and online databases or from their own specialised databases.

Taking advantage of these facilities, literature search services—retrospective and/or profile-based current awareness—may be marketed and offered to all bonafide users on certain uniform rates.

4.4 Translation Services

There are many scientists and engineers working in Indian R&D centres, laboratories, industries, etc who are familiar with some foreign languages other than English and who can undertake translations of documents in these languages.

INSDOC is already maintaining a Data Bank of Translators. Libraries and

information centres may also maintain a similar data bank of translators who are working in their own parent organisations .

With increasing collaborations between India and many non-English speaking countries, like Germany, Russia, France, Japan and several East European countries, the demands for translation services will increase and libraries must take advantage of the opportunities for initiating and marketing translation services.

Sometime back, NICNET announced plans for mass translations of selected Russian and Japanese documents and marketing them internationally.

4.5 Other Information Products

4.5.1 CD-ROM Databases of Indian Data

The opportunities for creating and marketing CD-ROM databases containing data relating to Indian business, trade, industry, finance, economy, etc are unlimited.

There will also be a good demand for CD-ROM databases of archival and library collections in the central and state archives, oriental libraries, manuscript libraries and so on.

4.5.2 Data Compilations

It is estimated that there are more than 100 specialised 'information analysis centres (IACs)' in several advanced countries, more particularly in the USA. These IACs collect, analyse, organise and supply 'numerical data', 'design data', 'properties data', 'theoretical data' etc. which can be distinguished from 'bibliographic data' to be found in many conventional databases.

There are also some international publishers (e.g. Noyes Data Corporation, ESDU—Engineering Sciences Documentation Unit, etc) who publish and sell data

compilations based on patents, published journal articles, technical reports, trade literature etc.

In India too, many data centres, mainly in the area of finance, economy and trade, have come up recently (e.g. CMIE—Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy, New Delhi). However, there is an urgent need to set up more and more data centres in many specialised fields and market their services.

Since IACs are generally attached to a special library, librarians have a critical role to play in creating and marketing data compilations.

4.5.3 Market Intelligence Reports

Information service companies like the Economic Intelligence Unit (UK), and Technical Insights Inc (USA), bring out and sell high priced market intelligence reports on specific subject areas or on a specific geographical area.

In India, such intelligence reports are not available as saleable publications as in other countries. One has to commission a market research bureau to undertake a market survey and produce a report on its findings.

Libraries should come forward and initiate action in producing market intelligence reports, since they have the advantage of having the necessary background documentary resources and also the services of experts working in their organisations.

4.5.4 Technology Forecasting Reports

Based on the available documentary resources and the services of subject experts within the organisations, special libraries and information centres are well-placed in the production, publication and marketing of forecasting reports, state of art reports, trend reports etc in specialised areas.

4.6 Marketing by Organisations Themselves

Many organisations attempt in marketing themselves and their services through advertisements and sponsoring cultural, social and sports activities etc. Universities see selling themselves as a prime marketing commodity in order to earn grants, endowments.

Similarly, libraries and information centres (e.g. INSDOC, DESIDOC, SENDOC, NISSAT Sectoral Information Centres, etc.) should also market themselves and their services to earn fees, grants etc.

5. MARKETING PLANS, TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

Libraries and information centres which are required to market their information products and services must necessarily develop suitable marketing plans, tools and techniques similar to those traditionally followed in the fast moving consumer goods sector, such as the following :

5.1.1 Product Definition

Business organisations recognise the value of placing a broad definition on their products that perform well and meet the basic customer's needs. Libraries too should define their information products and services emphasising the underlying concept of marketing 'information' as such, and not the products themselves.

5.1.2 Target Group Definition

A product definition may result in encompassing a wider market. If so, it may be necessary for limiting the product offering to certain clearly defined groups within the market. To give an example, the document delivery service offered by the NAL, Bangalore, may encompass a wider

market because of the strength of its document collections but it has to restrict the target groups to the aerospace and defence user communities in accordance with its basic charter of functions.

5.1.3 Product Differentiation

When a business organisation sets out to serve more than one target group, its marketing plan can be effective only by differentiating its products and targeting them to the appropriate user segments.

Applied to marketing of information products and services, this concept would mean that many differentiated products and services have to be developed keeping in view the needs of disparate user groups like R&D scientists, engineers, consultants, managers, academicians, technicians and so on. For instance, a 'patent information service' can be developed primarily for pharmaceutical scientists, chemists and chemical engineers, while a 'standards information service' has to be targeted at mechanical, design and production engineers in factories and other manufacturing establishments.

5.1.4 Pricing

The pricing of information products and services should be such that the potential users are in a position to bear the cost and it does not serve as a deterrent.

5.1.5 Promotion

Market promotion is essentially an activity of continuously communicating with the users in a way that appeals to them and projects the right images of the products and services. Libraries fail to recognise the dictum that 'everything about an organisation must talk'. In other words, every section in a library—the circulation desk, the reference section, the book stacks, the services and the publications

group—must advertise and market its services.

In the opinion of the author, who had a long and personal experience of marketing information products and services in the Information Centre for Aeronautics in NAL, Bangalore, and in the Central Library of IIT, Madras, libraries should consider several promotional measures, as under:

- Printing and distribution of library brochures—one for each product or service
- Printing and distribution of library newsletter
- Mailing samples of information products to all potential users
- Organising a series of seminars, work-shops, demos etc on regular and continuous basis on various aspects of information products and services
- Displaying samples and/or illustrations of information products and services in a prominent place in the campus e.g. lecture hall, reception, exhibition area or in the library entrance
- Showing round all visitors to the library and explaining to them about the information products and services
- Sending responses to enquiries received from the customers immediately
- Visiting customer's offices and giving presentations on the products and services offered
- Putting on display samples of information products and services in professional conferences, exhibitions etc.

5.2. Success in Marketing

The secret of success in marketing is the ability to attract and retain satisfied customers. Achieving this success is difficult and needs to be worked out by going through the following processes:

- (a) *Assessment*: Looking at the market place and identifying opportunities.
- (b) *Planning*: Setting achievable objectives, defining tasks and resources

- (c) **Implementing:** Actioning the plan, getting and allocating resources
- (d) **Monitoring:** Comparing the achievements with objectives and justifying any difference and getting feedback and evaluating it and changing plans, when necessary.

5.2.1 Marketing a Service Versus a Product

There are some differences between selling a product and selling a service, as summarised below, and these have to be borne in mind in planning and marketing information services:

- (a) **Consistency:** An information service cannot be standardised in the same way as consumer product, since it depends on several variable factors like coverage, accuracy, reliability, timeliness etc.
- (b) **Perishability:** Most information products and services are ephemeral in nature and have a short life-span.
- (c) **Pricing:** Here again, there is no standardised pricing for information services; the pricing has to be flexible depending on the nature of the service.

5.2.2 Market Feedback

Feedback from the market is an essential information input for modifying information products and services to suit the changing requirements of the users.

If the libraries are casual in gathering information and feedback about the users' perceptions, the information products and services are bound to become stale. It is for the purpose of getting feedback that librarians ought to conduct user surveys periodically.

5.2.3 Review and Appraisal of Marketing

Change is a fact of life, although it may proceed invisibly and imperceptibly. Over a

period of time, it might be so fundamental as to threaten the very foundation of organisations that do not re-examine periodically their goals and objectives.

Libraries and information centres must be aware of this inevitability of change and review and modify their products and services, marketing tools and techniques accordingly. They may have to move over gradually from marketing print publications to machine readable products like CD-ROMs, magnetic media, etc and develop their own in-house information services rather than marketing the services of foreign libraries and information centres.

6. CONCLUSION

Generally 'marketing' has different connotations in the minds of people. One covers the concept of 'selling' 'persuading' 'influencing' or a 'ruse' to dump things on people who do not want them. The other is a more broader and philosophical concept of 'serving and satisfying human needs'.

Whatever be the perceptions on marketing, its ultimate goal is to develop customer loyalty and satisfaction and to focus on customer's needs.

Marketing is a vital function in libraries and information centres to keep themselves in constant touch with the customers, to understand their needs, to develop products and services that meet these needs and, finally, to build up a regular channel of communication with them. The choice before librarians and information centres is not whether to market their products or services because none of them can avoid marketing, if they have to become self-supporting eventually, but to do it well. This is the fundamental principle on which marketing is based.