

Marketing of Library and Information Services at British Council Library Network in India

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Abstract

The paper outlines the marketing approaches used in the British Council Library Network in India. The market analysis is done in order to get a profile of the customers in these libraries. Excellent customer relations are maintained by delivering quality service. Customer interaction is a continuous process and this is ensured by conscious listening to the customers, meet the members programmes, questionnaires, surveys, and suggestion boxes. The libraries use promotional techniques such as mailshots, distribution of publicity material, publicity through press and advertising in order to increase the customer base. Extension activities such as lectures and seminars attract the target customers to the library apart from furthering the social cause.

1. INTRODUCTION

The objective of the British Council (BC) libraries is to make available the best of British materials in various areas of development. The libraries follow standard professional practices of Britain.

The network consists of four regional libraries in the metros namely, Delhi, Mumbai, Calcutta and Chennai and eight British Libraries in other cities namely, Ahmedabad, Bangalore, Bhopal, Hyderabad, Lucknow, Patna, Pune and Thiruvananthapuram. These libraries are primarily aimed at professionals, government officials, NGOs and English language students though the membership is open to everybody. For all premium services such as lending, photocopying, inter library loan and electronic information searching, there are service charges though these are highly subsidised. The Information Resources Unit at Delhi sets the yearly target for each library in terms of membership, loans, enquiries and other activities and monitors the overall performance.

BC libraries are highly market oriented. To put it in simple words, marketing consists of the following:

- (a) Offering a product or a service as desired by the customer;
- (b) Supplying the product keeping the supplier's interest in view; and
- (c) Ensuring a continuous demand for the product.

2. MARKETING TECHNIQUES

Certain marketing techniques tested in BC libraries are given below:

2.1 Customer Care

The best way of marketing the library products and services is by word of mouth publicity. It is said, one satisfied customer tells five other people, whereas the opposite, one dissatisfied customer tells 20 others. The library staff in the network gets both formal and on the job training in customer care. The training includes various aspects such as importance of

the customer; internal and external customers; economics of repeated customers; communication and interaction skills; telephone manners; handling difficult customers; customer feedback; importance of physical facilities and environment; customer friendly systems and procedures and so on. The senior library staff gets specialised 'Trainers' training'. The customer care aspects are monitored by the librarian and the regional librarian regularly. The customer care standards are being examined especially when the membership in any particular library goes down. The library staff in every library meets at least once a month in order to discuss the various customer care issues and sort out the problems faced by customers at service points. Such customer care meetings help in developing the customer care attitude among the staff.

2.2 Quality Service

Quality can be defined as the service standard exceeding the expectations of the customer. Ensuring consistency in quality is a difficult task indeed especially in a service sector such as libraries. No public relation exercise can substitute a quality service. The effort in the BC is a combination of various operations such as staff training, customer care meetings, written 'quality service standards', monitoring of service quality by the senior staff and finally staff motivation. Every library prominently displays a copy of Quality Service Standards which is a statement of performance level the customer can expect from the library. For example, all letters will be replied within five working days; library will not be closed more than five working days at a stretch and so on. Many library staff in the network are trained in Quality Improvement Processes (QUIP) which is a technique for systematic improvement of operations and processes in libraries. Libraries undertake short term QUIP projects. Some specific examples are: how to speed up book processing and how to reduce queues at the lending counter.

2.3 Market Segmentation

The membership is grouped into different occupational categories such as students, professionals, government officials, NGOs,

retired people, and so on. Further sub-categories are made depending on the subject interests of the member. The categories are coded and this is very useful in computer analysis. This sort of detailed membership categorisation helps the library staff to get a good idea of membership profile. Designing of library services, fixing of library timings, pricing of products and book acquisition programmes, are done on the basis of the market profile.

2.4 Market Research

The libraries conduct a variety of market researches. The automated circulation system has been of great help in this. The loan analysis of library materials provides an insight into the subject interests of customers. It is also possible to collect important market information such as: which subjects are more popular amongst the professionals, who is borrowing from a specific collection; identify areas for strengthening the collection; heavily used and least used stock; areas which need pruning in the stock; busy and lean hours, etc.

2.5 Customer Interaction and Feedback

In any market driven organisation, interaction with the customer is a deliberate and planned activity. The purpose is to come closer to the customer and to have a continuous dialogue with them. In the case of libraries, the interaction is very necessary in order to continuously evolve the library services in response to the customer needs. As customers change, so do their needs, library habits and their subject interests. New subjects also emerge and the library needs to be equipped with new materials. Fortunately BC customers are more than willing to tell about their requirements and also how they feel about the services. Many a time they even give ideas to the librarian as to how to make a thing work more efficiently. The libraries in the BC network keep in touch with the customers in various ways:

2.5.1 Listening to the customer

Gandhiji said, "A customer is not an interruption of our work. He is the very purpose of it". By talking to the library staff, the customer does a favour to them. Therefore, the

customer deserves their undivided attention when he or she has something to say. In this process, library staff is able to appreciate the customer's problems and also explain the constraints if staff has any. The process of listening to the customers is taken seriously in the BC libraries. A number of improvements have taken place because of customers' suggestions. The positive image the library projects by listening to the customer pays rich dividends in the long run.

2.5.2 Meet the members

Every library conducts four to six 'Meet the Members' sessions in an year. Members belonging to a particular group such as managers, doctors, engineers, architects, etc. are invited on an evening and the librarian solicits their views regarding various library aspects such as the book stock, periodicals list, staff assistance or any new service. This serves as an opportunity to have face to face interaction with the customers besides being a good public relation tool to show that the library cares for the customers. Each session is about an hour duration and about 20 customers participate in each session.

2.5.3 Questionnaires and surveys

The libraries in the network conduct a random sample customer survey every year. The sample is about 10 per cent of the library membership. The purpose is to obtain feedback from the customers in general. The questionnaire is deliberately kept short and simple. This encourages a better response from the customers.

2.5.4 Suggestion boxes

The libraries maintain suggestion boxes or suggestion registers. Replies are usually given within three working days. In case the comments given by the member need detailed discussion, the librarian invites the member for a meeting when he visits the library next.

2.5.5 Book suggestion cards

The book selection is done at the BC libraries entirely by the library staff and there

are no committees to screen the book orders. Indeed it is a challenging task and is done by adopting the best professional practices. However, there are occasions when important titles are left out. Members are encouraged to fill in the book suggestion cards and if the suggested books fit into the BC policy, they are procured on a priority basis. Naturally, the member who suggests the titles will be informed about the title as soon as it arrives.

3. CORPORATE IDENTITY AND IMAGE

Corporate identity aims at communicating an appropriate message about the organisation, its intent and purpose to the clientele. The corporate identity policy of the BC aims to project a reputation for quality. Visual presentation is crucial in that projection, since it is well established that over 80 per cent of what is learned comes to us through sight. The style, colour and type faces for posters, notices, external and internal environment, publications and communications in the libraries are considered carefully. In all the bigger libraries in the network, the advice of professional designers has been taken in order to provide a coordinated and consistent interior design. Apart from this, all the library support staff has been provided with quality uniforms and this also communicates the corporate identity clearly. The uniform cloth, it is believed, promotes uniform behaviour apart from projecting a positive image about the organisation.

4. PROMOTION OF LIBRARIES

Nowadays it is not enough if you just provide a good service. We need to 'broadcast' what we do and this message should reach the customer quickly. Libraries do have competition with various agencies such as the mass media, electronic media, internet, information brokers, and others. The aim of any promotional activity in libraries is to increase the customer base. Broadly speaking, the purpose are:

- (i) Creating a proper mindset among the customers favourable to the library;
- (ii) Telling the potential customers the availability of your service;
- (iii) Convincing the customers the benefits of using the service;

(iv) Prompt the customers to accept the service.

Some of the methods of library promotion at the BC network are:

4.1 Mailshots

BC libraries send mailshots regularly to potential customers. Each mailshot contains a customer friendly introduction letter and the relevant library brochure. The introductory letter needs to look personalised and this is possible now with mailmerging facilities. The letter is kept short and simple. The addresses of the potential customers are obtained from various sources such as directories, membership lists of professional bodies, etc. Librarians contact the various local institutions and collect the lists of faculty members, staff and students. These address lists are used for sending the mailshots. Similarly the membership renewal notices are sent to members whose membership has just expired.

4.2 Personal Visits

Senior staff from the BC libraries make personal visits to customers. Such visits help establish personal contacts with key contacts in various institutions, professional bodies and corporates. The visits could be used either for getting a new customer or for getting feedback from the existing customer.

4.3 Presentations at Institutions

Educational institutions are potential places for catching new customers. Librarians occasionally make brief presentations at local institutions and professional bodies. Small library displays are also arranged on such occasions and this enables the audience to pick up the library brochures.

4.4 Brochures, Leaflets, Posters

The design of brochures, leaflets and posters is very important. Nowadays the mail received by library is flooded with attractive product literature. Therefore, unless the brochure is well designed, it will not catch the eye of the customer. The wording should be carefully coined, the presentation interesting and the final product attractive in order to stand out. The brochure should highlight the benefits to

the customer and should keep the customer absorbed till the end. It should finally prompt the customer to act. There are number of good books available to help libraries design good quality brochures and posters. With the availability of easy-to-use software, reasonably good quality brochures can be designed in house.

4.5 Newsletters

Library Newsletter serves as a media to let the member know the range of library activities, either those that have already taken place, or those that are being planned for the future. Newsletters can serve as excellent marketing tools apart from being PR material. Some of the BC libraries have newsletters brought out quarterly. These contain information about important titles added, events held, new services, fee changes, etc. *Their importance can be enhanced by putting some pictures, snippets or humour.*

4.6 Extension Activities

It is essential that our libraries project an image of active centres of academic and cultural activities. *It is useful to organise periodic activities* such as special book displays, lectures, quiz programmes, debates, seminars, poetry reading and so on to project the library as a social organisation. Social impact is the spin off. Libraries in the network hold such programmes regularly. Often displays are organised at outside institutions on the occasion of high profile conferences and seminars. Collaboration with other organisations is often found useful and this ensures good participation and improves the impact.

4.7 Cultivating the Press

Press and media play an important role in creating a positive image for BC libraries. Newspapers carry items about new products, success stories, interviews with the library staff and so on. It is fortunate that the media always have a close association with libraries and information centres. Therefore, cultivating the press does not require much effort for librarians. One needs to understand that press people have some constraints. They will not be interested in boring topics which are not

special. On the other hand, they are on the look out for interesting stories and unusual happenings. BC libraries make good use of press contacts for publicising the different events and library services.

4.8 Media Advertisements

Media advertisements are to be inserted in case BC libraries need to publicise a product or a programme quickly. Newspaper advertisements are by and large expensive and therefore, BC libraries resort to media advertisements only occasionally. The advice of professional advertisers are being sought in order to design the advertisement. This ensures high impact and value for money.

5. MARKETING PLAN

Every library has a marketing plan which is prepared at the beginning of the year. The marketing plan has the following aspects: mission statement; strengths and weaknesses; targets for the year; services offered; pricing policy; place reaching the customers; and Promotion- how to plan to increase the customer base. The plan has a set of action points; a time scale and a 'who does what' schedule. The action points serve as a checklist. Inputs from all the library staff are taken in the preparation of the marketing plan. The plan

itself is worked out in the light of major policy implications discussed at the Annual Meeting of librarians held in February every year and librarians review their individual marketing plans every month. The marketing plan serves both as a strategic planning document and as a working tool.

6. CONCLUSION

Professional marketing techniques have been of great help in the success of British Council and British Library network in India. Customer care continues to be the main method of retaining the customers and it fetches new customers too by word of mouth publicity. At the same time, library staff have developed the proactive marketing skills too which help in market penetration. Quality service coupled with customer touch goes a long way in the continuous evolution of library service in tune with the customers' requirements.

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