

Developing a Customer-Focus Approach to Marketing of Library and Information Services

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Abstract

Philosophically, users are the central entity in all types of libraries. The characteristics of the user body make up an essential and indeed central element in the development of library services. In ways that are now familiar from service industry contexts, we need to incorporate elements of client-or customer-centeredness in our approaches to serve users. Users also expect recognition, attention, and appreciation for their individual needs and have desire for self-expression. In such environment, the library system triumphs, which has more customer-focus approach in serving and meeting these needs and the library becomes market driven in the real sense. The customer-focus organisations accept that marketing issue is philosophical and also a strategic one. They are concentrating on developing customer orientation. Their focus is on distinctive competencies, value delivery, customer-defined quality, relationship management, and a customer-focused organisational culture. In the present paper an attempt has been made to clarify, what customer-focus approach is all about?; how quality, customer service and marketing are closely related to each other in customer-focus approach?; and how customer-focused culture can be developed in library and information centres?

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the most frequent, and certainly one of the most voluble pressures on management in all types of organisations is to focus on customer needs—to be customer-led, to be market oriented, to take care of customers, and so on. However, what is far less clear is how managers can evaluate and monitor, let alone change the performance of their organisations, in terms of achieving effective and productive customer-focus.²¹ That is, even if we are agreed on what we should be doing about this issue, there remains the problem of how we can actually do it. Even the library and information service professionals are quite aware of the need of their focus toward the user. Such orientation has been expressed in the library and information science literature widely,¹⁷ in the

name of user-centred, user-friendly, user-based, user-oriented, user-responsive, client-centred, human-centred, people-centred approaches/services, etc.

As such there is no longer an easy acceptance of the 'customer-focus' existence of a library and information delivery, simply because it is there. If we look for such focus in Ranganathan's philosophy, his approach to users heralded a new era of 'user-focus' services in the library world, and gave a hope and opportunity to all users for easy and expeditious access to pin-pointed information; and it is incumbent upon the library staff and information sources—through their collaborative efforts—to ensure such a system to meet users need exceedingly so that users are delighted.¹⁰ Now LIS professionals discuss quality, marketing, and

customer service in order to achieve customer-focus in libraries in their professional meetings, conferences and seminars. Various journals have brought out special issues on application of such customer-related concepts in libraries, besides many textbooks and large amount of literature published. Even various authors view customer-focus in libraries variously, e.g., 'customer-focus is an imperative for quality in library and information centres'⁸ (LICs), 'customer-focus is the starting point for the quality',¹ 'focus on library customers: revelation, revolution or redundancy',¹⁴ 'providing customer-oriented services in academic libraries',²⁰ etc. To understand the customer-focus approach, it is essential to understand who stands at the top of priority?

2. CUSTOMER COMES FIRST, ALWAYS?

Whatever the odds, one thing is clear-businesses of the 21st century will have to produce products and services which will provide the customers with the pleasure of self-help and do-it-yourself activities so that it will give them a sense of achievement and pride about what they can do. Twenty-first century service providers should ensure that their products and services enhance the customer's ability to adapt and survive under difficult conditions. These products and services should also increase self-esteem. This is possible only if the LIS community keeps up its mission to revise, criticise,

develop, synthesise, transform, and re-invest its philosophies, concepts, procedures and agendas, and constantly updates them to the century ahead as shown in figure 1:

We must always remember that:⁵

- ❑ Customers are the most important people to be served in LICs
- ❑ They are not dependent on the library rather the library depends on them
- ❑ They are not just tire some outsiders but part of the library
- ❑ They are not just statistics, but also they are human being
- ❑ They are the people who bring their wants and needs and we are there to meet such needs exceedingly.

If the libraries are clear about the place and role of the customer in library, the next question arises is what these customers want from L&I centre.

3. CUSTOMERS' EXPECTATIONS FROM LIBRARY

Library and information professionals should strive hard to gain a vision of who our customers are, what they want, what are their social character, values, desires, aspirations, etc. The advancement in the technologies has phenomenally increased the self-help and do-it-yourself activities in libraries. It comes to occupy more of our time and energy, it too has begun to shape our lives and mould our social character. The 21st

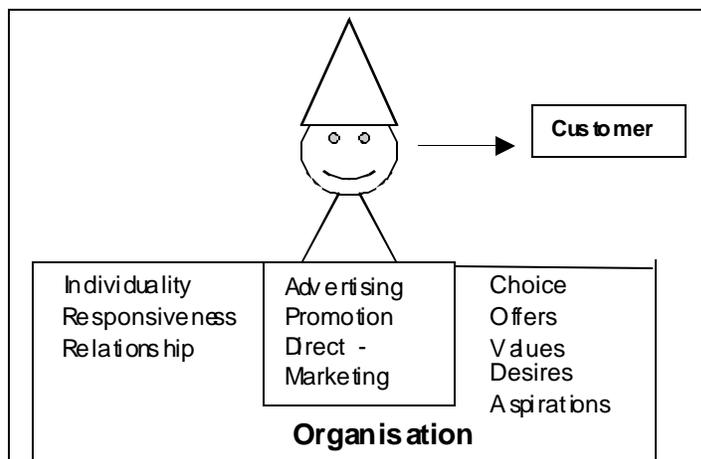


Fig 1. Role of organisation to satisfy the customers

century customer will definitely stress upon what he owns but he will also place high value on what he can do. He will place high value on self-reliance, adaptability and survival under difficult conditions and the ability to do things on his own. He will have a heightened awareness of his/her own individuality and the unique traits. He will demand to be treated as an individual. Hence new service delivery systems in libraries will require more specialised workers who are efficient in one-to-one service to customers.

◆ **Individuality:** The new generation customer is a global citizen who is more exacting and individualistic, change seeking and value conscious. He shares a consistent set of taste and preferences, and growing commonality of his taste across the globe.

◆ **Responsiveness:** It is the willingness to help customers and to provide prompt service. This dimension emphasises attentiveness and promptness in dealing with customers' request, complaints and queries. Responsiveness is demonstrated in terms of accessible employees, least waiting time and attention to problems. It also captures the notion of flexibility and ability to customise the service to customers' needs.

◆ **Relationship:** To measure customer satisfaction, the relationship between customer and the library must be understood. A customer relationship comprises a hierarchy of encounters through facilities, resources, services, and service providers.

Any service that must cause individuality, responsiveness, relationship and the like issues that are vital for the growth of a LICs in the time of faster changes has customer-focused view of marketing.

4. CUSTOMER-FOCUS: APPROACH FOR MODERN MARKETING

Marketing can be described in several different ways. It can be seen as a strategic thrust pursued by top management, as a set of functional activities performed by line management (such as product policy, pricing,

delivery, and communication efforts), or as a customer-driven orientation for the entire organisation. Most of the literature on marketing of library and information services has been geared towards the first two approaches. However there are evidences, which prove that the customer-driven approach has an important place in LIS marketing. Consider for instance, the following:

- Customer-focus is essential for libraries to remain and prosper in competitive arena
- Marketing is necessary to stay alive and thrive in 90's⁵
- Marketing is the application of some commonsense⁵
- Customer-driven service environment brings marketing into libraries¹⁷
- Integration of users (customers) into management creates customer (client)-centered library¹⁷
- To become successful, you must focus your activities keeping some end in mind¹³
- customer-focus is at the core of the marketing concept²²
- The notion of focusing on the customer and identifying and meeting community needs is only now emerging in library management circles²⁴
- Marketing focuses on customers, LICs strive to meet their needs⁹
- Library services should be customer-focused, this approach will help librarians to retain the attributes of librarianship as a service-oriented profession in the new millennium⁸
- 'Putting the user first', 'give them what they want', 'customer-centered approach', are now seen as a route to gain competitive advantage by library and information professionals because market-led services are striving to meet users needs. Customer-focus is considered as the single most vital factor for success.⁸

From these extracts it can be very well judged that the issue of customer-focus has a great influence in marketing of library and information services in the time of fast

changes to serve the users in an improved way.

4.1 Customer-focused Marketing

The satisfaction of a customer is primary concern in the marketing approach and the entire ethos and shared values of the library owe the responsibility of satisfying the customers. Everyone in the library, from top to bottom has a role to play in rendering maximum satisfaction to the customer. New efforts must be directed at working with customers to clarify their expectations. The marketing function must be substantially more than finding customers for existing products and services. Among other things, marketing people must now work with customers to form partnerships that will extend beyond the conventional exchanges so that customers are considered an integral part of the development team for new products and services. Marketing as an approach must become customer driven.¹⁸ By focusing on the customers means that marketing identifies your *raison d'être* - after all without customers you have no reason to exist.¹³ The issue of improving customer-focus concerns the relationship between the service organisation and its customers. This involves consideration of the relationship marketing approach, which brings quality, customer service and marketing together.⁶ The specific linkage

between these elements are shown in figure 2.

4.1.1 Quality Maintenance

Several years ago operational excellence was the dominant viewpoint of customer value. Operational excellence involves providing customers with reliable products or services at competitive price and delivered with a minimum amount of inconvenience. Operational excellence is still necessary but is not sufficient by itself. Today's customers expect convenience in purchase, after sale service, dependability, professionalism from employees, etc. Organisations that pursue operational excellence concentrate on making their operations lean and efficient. Alternatively, organisations that pursue a customer-focus strategy continually strive to fit products and services to everchanging customer's definition of value. Gaining knowledge of customer's needs, value, perceptions, and attitude can be expensive in short run, but customer-focused organisations are not seeking only short run success. They are looking to develop loyalty that will produce long-term relationships with their customers.² Therefore, it is possible to conclude that one fundamental factor for the quality management of information services is the focus on customer, which is also one of the fundamental principles of marketing.

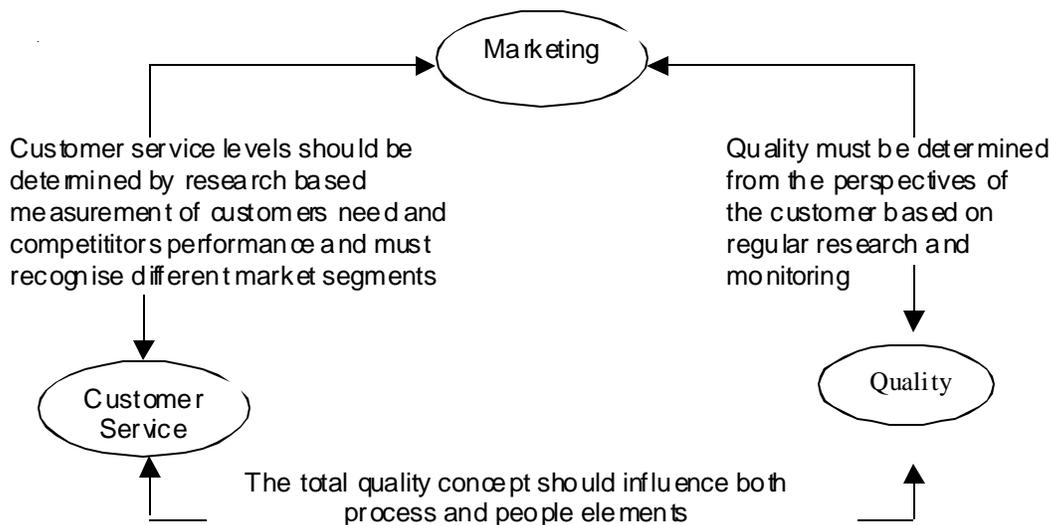


Fig 2. Customer-focused marketing

4.1.2 Customer Service

With the growing appreciation of customer service in business quarters, there might be confusion around the relationship between concepts of customer-service and customer-focus. The terms are not interchangeable.

- ✘ **Customer-service** is the quality of the treatment customers receive during points of contact with the service provider. Any kind of interaction, whether face to face, over phone, through mail, or via fax, qualifies a point of contact.
- ✘ **Customer-focus** considers the quality of the total customer experience. This includes not only the points of contact with customers but also the very nature of products and services on offer, the policies and procedures followed in conducting the business, the decor within the business premises, and an endless conglomeration of other elements that all have bearing on what customer will ultimately experience when he does business with organisation.
- ✘ **Customer-service** is the key component of customer-focus, but it is not the whole picture.

4.1.3 Customer Satisfaction

The goals of the customer-focus approach are attraction, satisfaction and retention of customers. Even in traditional sense of marketing, a library can attract customers by having an appealing facility with an easy access that is organised properly. Amenities such as automation, specialised tangible services can aid in providing a higher level of satisfaction. If customers find the physical surroundings pleasant, and helping hands from staff they will be more inclined to return. The customer-oriented marketing approach in libraries and information services aimed at coordinating and planning the total effort of the organisation towards customers. The main purpose of such approach is to ensure that the efforts of different functions of the library, such as acquisition, organisation, analysis, dissemination, and utilisation are directed towards customers' requirements and those activities which have most closely

to do with customers, such as users services, references, stacking work, etc., are working closely together with the facilities and resources of the library.

The service is the heart of the librarianship, if integrated with the marketing and quality concept the customer-focus is certain to come in. Many people consider marketing and quality differently, if closer look is taken marketing is an organisation wide philosophy and quality is the heart of it; marketing brings customers and quality satisfies them; marketing makes promises and quality fulfils them; marketing attract the people to do business with the organisation, quality retains them.¹²

In service business it will not be fruitful on the part of service provider, if they consider each other different. They are very much linked. The customer-focused library needs to put this link into work.

5. MAKING A LIBRARY CUSTOMER (USER)-FOCUSED

As discussed in the previous section it is clear that user expects values to be gained from the money spent and choose the product or services of the library because it possesses attributes and strength that other libraries lack. They also expect recognition, attention, and appreciation for their individual needs and desire for self-expression. In such environment, only that library system triumphs, which has more user-focus approach and rely on direct marketing and/or relationship marketing.¹¹

Learning from the service strategies of the commercial organisations, many LICs are now concentrating and developing customer orientation. Their focus is on distinctive competencies, value delivery, customer defined quality, relationship management, continuous improvement and a customer-focussed organisational culture.

For such LICs the following issues become important:

5.1 Everyone Should Serve Customers/Users

The employees of the library service can be divided into two categories: Support personnel (technical staff) and contact personnel (frontline staff). The customer seldom sees support personnel. The quality of the technical component of the service quality is primarily determined by support personnel. Contact staff is the interface between the service organisation and its customers. These employees are the one whom customers see and interact. Customer contact employees primarily determine the quality of the functional component of the service.⁴ Both kinds of employees are responsible for the total service quality to customers. In truly marketing oriented LICs customer does not belong exclusively to the frontline departments. The technical service people are all involved in customer services, as they are getting directions from the customers in acquiring material, and preparing, and organising the material in the customer desired manner. The whole business of the library is oriented towards bringing the information sources and the customer together. Here the message is that the customer is everyone's responsibility.

5.2 Services are Inherently Necessary

Frontline people shape the customer's experience. Understanding this truth is the first step towards restoring service excellence. People at lower rather than higher organisational ranks make or break service strategies. No matter what strategy the chief librarian devises, the service to the customers at the frontline matters most. The library needs to re-examine the ways in which it serves its users. A good service is of little benefit to the community, if it is not made available in the most effective way. Part of this strategy will involve the careful presentation and packaging of services and facilities offered to give both the best individual service, and at the same time a clear and effective message about the total library services to customers. Good service is giving

customers a little more than they expect. Excellent service is enjoying giving them a little more than they expect.

5.3 Meeting Individual Needs Efficiently

One of the major problems libraries are facing is the conflict between what the customer might be led to expect in terms of service delivery and what the organisation will expect by way of response from the library. Customer-focused activity suggests that the customer should be treated as an individual and that the library should respond appropriately to each individually expressed need. This is at odds with an organisational culture, which is likely to want the library to deal with customers efficiently and quickly.³ The conflict for the manager is that of balancing individual demand against the need to offer good but 'mass' service to users.

5.4 Customisation

The fact is that all service strategies today is going to customisation. Customisation implies getting customers teach you what they want, remember it, and give it back to them.¹⁹ LICs tend to involve a high degree of customisation and have a strong component of face to face interaction. In fact quite often the degree of customisation is a measure of services quality- a will or trust agreement that was tailored to meet the client's specific needs. The creation and delivery of library and information services involve the participation of customers to a great extent. Every service activity must be taken as an opportunity to serve customers in an improved way, it is a lot easier to satisfy and please a person who already is in the library, than to go and find new customers to come to the library.⁸ It is the satisfied customers who will tell others about benefits from the library and bring new customers.

5.5 Customers Seek Benefits Not Product or Service

Customers seek benefits or solutions, not products. It is important therefore that any product or service created offers the benefit

that customers seek. What benefits do customers seek from a library service? Ready and convenient access to information, a good stock of recent books for loan, a reliable reservation service, lively and engaging environment, etc.²² It is the basket of benefits or utilities, which a customer gets while consuming a product or a service. His rule is simple: if he does not get value he expects from the products or services offered by an organisation, he/ she is not interested in the offer.

5.6 Interaction between Service Providers and Customers

The contact between the customer and the service provider is the heart of the service interaction. Whatever the business or organisation, it is ultimately the person-to-person contact that will make or break the relationship between the customer and service provider. The catalogues, letters, newsletters, bulletins, telephones, e-mails, and the like will help, but sometime the people at the service and the customer will have to come in direct contact and most 'moments of truth' occur when they interact. Face-to-face contact offers the best way to exchange information, of weighing up to other party, of negotiating, of solving problems and establishing a long-term relationship. It grows and prospers with the delivery of result, time after time.⁸ The willingness of the people at service is the heart of the customer-service provider interaction which is a constant disposition to serve the customer.

5.7 Helping Customers

Most LIS managers believe simply putting library resources at customers' disposal is sufficient. But all too often library users do not make use of these resources. Indeed, they do not even ask for help even when resources exist for their use. Many a times library users are reluctant to admit incompetence, inferiority and dependence on others, although they are in need for the help. The key, therefore, is to anticipate situations in which customers might need help and make sure that they can get it from the library staff

in order to make effective use of the resources available.

5.8 Staying Close to Customers

Probably the most important management fundamental that is being ignored today is staying close to the customer, to satisfy his needs and anticipate his wants. In too many libraries, no attention is given to user's wishes, likings, and preferences in services. Customer can intimate service provider to discover how to provide complete solution to customers' needs. In doing so, they become indispensable partners, often merging their operations with those of their customers. They take a major share in their customers' ultimate success. When two organisations move from a simple-and-buy relationship to the technical and operational complexities of a customer intimacy, the unique responsibilities of each become unmistakable.²⁵ They develop a new mindset—a new way of doing business—with new structures, new strategies, and a new vision.

5.9 Communication from Monologue to Dialogue

Communication with customer is shifting from monologue to dialogue. LIS managers are climbing down from the position of all-knower and are trying to learn from customers. The 'push system' of communication, contrasted with a 'pull system', teaming with customers to determine what they need and then as early as possible, creating it—a dialog approach to solve the problems of both customers as well as service providers. We need to equip frontliners to answer user questions in a proper way so that they do not hesitate to continue the dialogue. The real value is not something you hold in your hand, but rather a strengthened relationship—a prerequisite for changing the way frontline employees communicate. Even in cases where the primary purpose of the communication is to 'inform' to the customer, the emphasis should be on 'get informed', so that information gap between both parties minimises.

5.10 Developing a Service Culture

Successful businesses are driven by the need to make profitable sales to their customers. Customers can generally choose their suppliers. You therefore have to earn the right to service your customers if you wish to retain them and attract new business. You can only do this by providing products or services your customers want, at a price they will pay; ensuring target customers understand the benefits of your services; delivering what you promise; and anticipating future needs. Developing a 'customer service culture' embraces all these objectives, is the hallmark of any organisation which is prepared to invest the effort it takes to be successful.¹⁶ In an organisation where individuals and departments internally are not being treated with respect and dignity, one can be pretty certain that their external customers are not being treated with respect and dignity either.¹⁵ Employers, employees, department, vendors are all customers to each other.

6. CONCLUSION

Various authors have advocated the user-focused philosophy for managing libraries for a long time. Arguments in favour of managing customers are persuasive, and framework exists that describe conceptually how librarians should develop user-focused services. But, this philosophy, at best, has been slow to work its way into practice. Although there are many reasons for the gap between philosophy and practice, one may be that we are slow in adopting marketing attitude in our strategies and every day operations. There is an urgent need to get rid of such an attitude so that we can face the challenges of change more boldly and confidently, then only one will survive in the coming years.

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