BARRIERS TO MARKETING OF INFORMATION PROUCTS AND SERVICES IN LIBRARIES

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Abstract

In the present information age, wherein information and knowledge are key to societal development, libraries and information centres are potential source of revenue generation if the resources of the libraries and information centres are marketed. Ever since the concept of marketing was introduced to libraries, certain barriers have prevented the libraries in implementing marketing programmes. This paper attempts to look at the barriers that impede the libraries and information centres from adopting marketing.

1. INTRODUCTION

That information is a marketable commodity and libraries and information centres can be revenue earning units rather than revenue consuming ones have long come to be accepted. In the present era of globalisation, subsidies are on the decline and libraries have to become self-sustainable. Marketing can enable self-sustenance and could even lead to profitability.

Marketing in libraries and information centres has been discussed for over three decades now. Library professionals are today aware of the advantages of marketing and the library literature is teeming with concepts of marketing, marketing strategies, marketing plans and case studies on marketing of library and information services. But libraries and information centres in India are yet to adopt the tenets of marketing. There apparently seem to be factors that still hinder marketing of information products and services in libraries.

Haravu[2] has noted that "there is no significant private sector profit oriented information industry as yet in India, and as such Indian libraries do not face the same threats that libraries in the west are facing".

The information industry in India has however undergone significant changes during the last one decade. There are many commercial firms that sell information products and services. Vyasamoorthy[8] gives the scenario of database industry in India and lists several private sector firms that are in the business of information products and services. Shah[7] states that "information service industry in India is a million-dollar business" and propounds the idea private commercial libraries (PCLs). These apart, in the unorganised sector there are information brokers who are selling information services. Information sector in India today thus is a profit-oriented business.

In such a scenario, it is surprising that the libraries, which are a storehouse of information, find it difficult to sell information or are not in the business of information marketing though infrastructure-wise they are well equipped to do so. This clearly indicates that there are barriers in libraries that prevent them to carry out marketing activities.

Kaur[4] has pointed out four hurdles obstructing transition from free information to fee information which include 'user's unwillingness', 'doubtful status of information

as a commodity', 'inability to make information customer-based' and 'lack of measuring standards'.

The first barrier relating to user's unwillingness to pay was foreseen even as the concepts of marketing were introduced in libraries in the early seventies. This unwillingness of user's to pay for information, referred to as the Carnegie's syndrome, and is one of the major obstacles in marketing of library and information services. The second hurdle is about the 'doubtful status of information as a commodity'. For a clear understanding, the difference between marketing of information and marketing of information products and services needs to be elucidated.

Information needs are specific to individuals and there will be no mass market for specific information. Therefore, information in itself may not be treated as a commodity, but information products and services are. The commodities in an information market are information products and services because these can be designed for mass information markets. Cornella's[1] theorisation of commoditisation of information in the form of information products holds true. What is required is identifying suitable markets and producing information products for the mass markets. The last two hurdles also may not hold true when it comes to marketing of information products and services, which are more defined and tangible than information per se.

Rao[6] also discusses four broad barriers to the adoption of the marketing approach in libraries and information centres. The four barriers are:

(a) **Attitudinal**—Information professionals are inward looking and for marketing an outward looking approach is needed

(b) **Structural**—Organisation and library structure does not permit

(c) **Systemic**—System in the library in general does not permit, and

(d) **Environmental**—Culturally, the giver and taker are not used to free-based services.

2. BARRIERS IN MARKETING INFORMATION PRODUCTS AND SERVICES

2.1 Carnegie's Syndrome

Carnegie's syndrome still exists. Users still view libraries as a place to obtain free services. Many libraries have a nominal membership fee which hardly amounts to any significant revenue generation. Very few private libraries have a charging policy for library use. Charging in Government supported libraries are considered sacrilegious even for external users.

Earlier studies in the case of information products and services have shown that as long as information products and services are free, users are interested in availing it. The moment a price tag is attached to the product or service, there is a significant drop in the users[3]. However, this situation is fast diffusing in the free market economy of today and consumers are now aware that information products come with a price and are willing to pay for it. There seems to be a gradual change and it is a matter of time when Carnegie's Syndrome will fade away from libraries.

2.2 Lack of Needs Assessment

Many times librarians are not able to assess the requirements of the users. The libraries are mainly involved in developing and managing resources in the library without realising what information product or service will be of value to the users. The libraries will have to carry out a needs assessment survey through formal and informal means. This will enable libraries to bring out products and services that are customer specific.

2.3 Lack of Trained Manpower

Libraries in India lack trained marketers. Normally, the library staff holds qualifications in library and information science along with graduation or post graduation in other subjects. With the application of information technology (IT) in libraries and information centres, library staff have been quick to acquire the necessary skills for working in a

computerised environment. However, marketing management skills, which are essential for a commercial approach in the library are lacking in library professionals. Therefore, inculcation of a marketing orientation to the library staff is very essential. Library science curricula should be suitably changed to widen the subject of management in greater detail giving importance to topics on marketing, PR and quality management to equip future library professionals.

Who in the library is to be trained on marketing or, will hiring a marketer solve the marketing problem is a debatable issue. In the case of applications of IT, staff members who have been identified to look after IT issues are trained. However, customer orientation applies to everybody in the library and staff members at all levels have to be trained on marketing. The situation perhaps is not so today. It is the head of the library or the other senior staff members who are sent for such training programmes and the lower level staff members who many a times are the frontline staff interacting with the customers are left out.

Therefore, short-term training for all levels of staff is required for imparting marketing capabilities in library staff.

2.4 Pricing

Pricing of information products and services has been a much discussed issue. There is no one standard way to price information products and services. International online services, for example, though available in India come with prohibitive costs that most users cannot simply afford. This is particularly true of databases that are available from abroad, which sometimes even libraries cannot afford to procure though they are of value. An alternative would be to develop more indigenous databases at relatively lower costs.

2.5 Low Library Budget

When library budgets are pruned, librarians fret about the strain on the library and its resources. However, libraries have learnt to live with budgetary cuts and in fact the libraries expectantly gear up to the

adversity by compromising on much-needed journals and books. Libraries have to learn to take up the adversity as a challenge and use the situation to turn around the library as a revenue-earning centre.

2.6 Photocopying: Is it Marketing?

Many libraries render photocopying which is an invaluable service to the users. The libraries charge a nominal fee for the service and claim that the library is involved in generating revenue. Mere providing photocopies hardly amounts to marketing. In a larger perspective, this activity is done to dissuade users who would otherwise queue up for free photocopies.

2.7 Lack of Management Support

This is perhaps the most serious barrier in the marketing of information products and services in libraries. If a marketing programme has to be introduced in the library, the top management's support to the programme is of utmost importance. Administrators and the top management in the organisation generally look upon the library as an ancillary activity and due attention is seldom given to the library. With an active and interested management, it will not be difficult to implement the marketing programme in the libraries.

2.8 Poor Quality of Service

Quality is a key factor that determines the use of the service by the customers. A product or service that has a high degree of quality is likely to be used by customers. Information products and services have to meet all the requirements of the users. Factors such as delay in rendering the service, poor response to customers, not meeting the customer requirements, etc., can turn away prospective customers.

2.9 Lack of Sharing Touch

Some special libraries do not want to part with information. This is especially true for many media libraries and libraries of specialised nature, like defence institute libraries. Though such libraries are a rich repository of information, as a policy the

libraries do not provide services to external users, even though users are willing to pay for the information. Information seekers are sometimes even turned away from these libraries or fees are exorbitantly high that common users such as students cannot afford to use these libraries.

2.10 Librarians Lack PR Skills

Public Relations (PR) is simply a matter of doing good and telling about it[5]. Librarians are innately service oriented and are in the habit of 'doing good'. The problem is the habit of not talking about the 'good work'. Librarians need to carry out PR work not only externally but also internally. Internally, a PR exercise is the best defence against budget cuts and to convince the management that the library is indispensable. For this the library has to primarily become an indispensable source of information. In addition, the library should involve in special activities such as providing training programmes, bringing out newsletters and taking part in activities outside the library.

3. IMPACT OF IT ON MARKETING

The impact of IT applications in libraries has been very profound. Computerisation of library facilities, access to remote information sources and faster communication have augmented the use of libraries. It is easier and quicker to provide information services with the help of computers. At the same time, users also now have access to computers and internet. This will enable the user to go global from behind his desk for the best performance in reliability, ease and timeliness and the lowest price[9]. The user can obtain information directly from publishers and database hosts rather than obtaining the same from the libraries. This will have a impact on the users of the libraries. Therefore, the IT has both a positive and negative influence on the marketing programme. To bring the users back to the libraries and retain them, libraries have to produce innovative products and services that are designed to meet customers needs.

4. CONCLUSION

Libraries have enormous potential to earn revenue by marketing of information products and services. A systematic approach to adopt marketing practices in libraries and information centres is essential. Identifying and overcoming the barriers to marketing can facilitate implementation of marketing programmes in libraries.

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